
Book reviews

SUPPORTING LEARNERS WITH DYSLEXIA IN THE ELT CLASSROOM

Michele Daloiso

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Specific learning differences (SLDs) affect a much larger proportion of the general population than previously thought. It is now estimated that around 10% of people are affected by SLDs (Butterworth & Kovas, 2013), although the American Psychiatric Association predict it to be as high as 15% in English-speaking countries. The literacy development disorder commonly known as dyslexia comprise around 80% of SLDs (American Psychiatric Association, 2019). In the Australian English Language Teaching (ELT) context, this translates to between roughly one and three learners per class affected by this neurodevelopmental disorder. It should then come as no surprise that Daloiso's *Supporting Learners with Dyslexia in the ELT Classroom* – part of the *Oxford Handbooks for Language Teachers* series – fills a much-needed void in the literature pertaining to teaching learners with dyslexia who are studying English as a(n) Second/Additional/Foreign Language (ESL/EFL/EAL – henceforth used interchangeably in this article).

Daloiso's book is structured very practically over six chapters, allowing ample opportunities for the reader to process the information presented and reflect on how they support learners with dyslexia in their own practice. It moves from a theoretical overview of the existing body of work on literacy and dyslexia (Chapter 1) and in the EFL context (Chapter 2) to providing clear methodological guidelines for making language teaching more accessible for learners affected by dyslexia (Chapter 3). Chapters 3-6 then offer applicable strategies and approaches to developing activities and lessons around phonological and orthographic work, developing communicative skills, and accessible language testing and assessment.

After providing a synopsis of the processes involved in learning a first language and reading acquisition, Daloiso provides an approachable definition of dyslexia and thus neatly avoids the dialectic trap of combining and redefining perfectly acceptable existing definitions (with the end result often leaving the reader more confused than before a definition was provided). The definition of dyslexia that underpins this book is the one provided by the British Dyslexia Association which states that it is a specific learning difficulty “characterised by difficulties with phonological processing, rapid naming, working memory, processing speed and the automatic development of skills” which generally are not at the same level as the individual’s other cognitive abilities (*British Dyslexia Association*, n.d.). From this definition, it is evident that dyslexia can affect an ESL learner in a very impactful way. In fact, the author points out that, due to its high orthographic depth (the degree to which sound-letter correspondence differs), the English language has a much higher incidence of dyslexia than orthographically “shallower” languages, such as Japanese.

As Director of the DEAL Research Group “studying the linguistic processes related to the education of pupils with ‘Specific Language Needs’” (*DEAL*, n.d.), Daloiso draws heavily on his previous work in this area to effectively break down a number of the assumptions, myths, and stereotypes related to learners with SLD. An example of one such stereotype is the belief that “learners with dyslexia have comprehension problems”, which is not generally the case. Furthermore, the author delves into other factors which can affect EAL learners, including motivation and foreign language anxiety. Daloiso admits that, while these individual factors affect all EFL learners, they should be considered more carefully by the teacher in the presence of a SLD. To illustrate, test anxiety tends to be exaggerated in learners with dyslexia, partly due to the time-constraints involved in test taking and partly because of the need to process varied information simultaneously.

Perhaps one supposed area of individual learner differences which the author needs to research further and provide an updated section on is that of the well-known but now-debunked area of “learning styles”. The book provides a section, including a checklist, on how teachers can support learners according to their learning styles. However, as Willingham, Hughes, and Dobolyi (2015, p. 267) and other researchers demonstrate, “Educators’ time and energy are better spent on other theories that might aid

instruction.” Nevertheless, the book offers such an amplitude of examples and practical advice that this is focus on learning styles is a minor oversight.

The sections on accessibility (Chapters 3 & 6) are especially useful in terms of practical applications and general principles for accessible teaching practice and assessment which teachers of all experience levels will find of use. One such example is the recommendation to use a “spiral teaching approach” in classes that have learners with dyslexia. This approach includes “frequent recapitulations” (p. 75), or specific activities for reinforcement, and opportunities for extra practice with a specific and systematic focus on mastery. It also includes advice on lesson planning, multimodality, as well as rearranging language content and activities to best suit learners with SLDs.

All in all, considering that we now know how prevalent specific learning differences are amongst the general population, coupled with the fact that EFL/ESL students are often included in mainstream classes with little or no special needs support, this book is highly recommended for all TESOL teachers and researchers in this area. *Supporting Learners with Dyslexia in the ELT* provides the reader with a solid yet accessible theoretical foundation regarding how best to teach these learners. It then builds on this by providing a number of practical considerations regarding supporting learners with SLDs. Additionally, each chapter provides reflective activities for the reader to complete, a variety of adaptable classroom materials, as well as chapter summary maps and a number of recommended resources for further reading. One of the more thoughtful touches in the book is the section entitled “Once there was a boy...”, which follows the story of an Argentinian learner, Marco, affected by dyslexia. Each chapter provides a snapshot of a specific period in his life – from birth to graduating high school – which exemplifies a specific facet of dyslexia and its impact on the EFL learner. Marco’s story not only serves to connect the theory behind dyslexia with a concrete, real-life example and the psychological consequences of his SLD, but also reinforces the importance of supporting learners with dyslexia in the ELT classroom.

References

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