

Instituto de Enseñanza Superior en Lenguas Vivas

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**TRABAJO FINAL DE ADSCRIPCIÓN:**

**THE BENEFITS OF LITERATURE FOR STUDENTS WITH**

**DYSLEXIA IN THE EFL CLASS**

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## Síntesis

### **Los beneficios de la literatura para estudiantes con dislexia en la clase de ILE**

Ser disléxico es una condición de por vida y, aunque los niños pueden progresar enormemente en la lectura, pueden continuar luchando con sus síntomas a lo largo de sus vidas. Es fundamental que la sociedad, en particular toda la comunidad escolar, tome conciencia de la existencia de dificultades de aprendizaje como la dislexia para apoyar, integrar y en consecuencia empoderar a quienes luchan con ellas. Al informar y capacitar a los educadores y padres, los estudiantes disléxicos o con otras NEE (Necesidades Educativas Especiales) pueden recibir equidad en las oportunidades educativas, lo que les permite participar productivamente en la sociedad.

El objetivo de este trabajo es demostrar los numerosos beneficios de la Literatura para alumnos disléxicos en base a mi experiencia con alumnos de primaria superior a partir de 2004. Además, mi propósito es concientizar sobre las necesidades que pueden tener los alumnos disléxicos en la clase de inglés como segunda lengua. Aunque me centraré principalmente en los desafíos que surgen con los niños disléxicos, mi intención es mostrar cómo, al final, todos los alumnos de una clase con habilidades diversas se benefician de la enseñanza de la literatura y de una metodología de enseñanza adaptada a los alumnos con necesidades educativas especiales.

To Griselda, my mentor and a strong advocate of inclusive education, who has inspired me with her vast knowledge of literature and captivating teaching skills to delve into all sorts of diversities in the classroom.

Thank you for your patience, constant motivation and generosity.

## Table of Contents

Abstract .....	6
Introduction.....	10
PART I: THEORETICAL BACKGROUND .....	14
I.1. Argentina's National Law N°27306 passed in 2016 on an integral educational approach for SEN students.....	14
I.2.1. Dyslexia.....	16
I.2.2. Dysgraphia.....	17
I.2.4. Auditory and Visual Processing Delays .....	18
I.2.5. ADHD and Executive Functioning Disorders .....	19
I.2.6. Dyspraxia .....	19
I.3. Identification of Dyslexia .....	19
I. 3.1. Behavioural Level.....	21
I. 3.2. Biological Level.....	23
How does the brain work when reading?.....	23
How does the dyslexic brain work when reading?.....	26
I. 4. Familial Risk for Dyslexia.....	31
I. 5. Neurodiversity in the EFL classroom: building on strengths and fostering inclusion .....	33
I. 6. Teaching strategies.....	38
I. 7. Dyslexia and Foreign Language Learning .....	41
I.7.1 Enriching the EFL experience through multisensory teaching .....	45
I.7.2. Enriching the EFL experience through assistive technology.....	48
I. 8. Reading and Dyslexia: Home and Summer Reading .....	49
PART II: TEACHING PRACTICE .....	52
II.1. Valuable teaching experiences with SEN students in the Literature and ELT class .....	52
II. 1. 1 Approaches used for teaching Literature in ELT .....	54
II. 1. 2. Advantages of using literary texts in ELT .....	58
II. 2. Poetry .....	59
Paul Cookson .....	63
Michael Rosen .....	64
A.F Harrold .....	69
II. 2. 1. Found Poetry.....	70
II. 2. 2. Bio Poems.....	75
II. 2. 3. Poetry Competition .....	80
Rationale behind holding a poetry competition .....	81

II. 3. Prose .....	81
II. 3. 1. Lending Library Strategies.....	82
Rationale for incorporating a lending library in the classroom .....	85
II. 3. 2. Short Stories.....	86
Rationale for reading and writing short stories.....	89
II. 3. 3. Novel: <i>Kensuke's Kingdom</i> by Michael Morpurgo .....	89
II. 3. 4. Elements to take into account when choosing a novel: relevance, relatability and realism .....	90
II. 3. 5. In class reading .....	93
II. 3. 6. Fostering metacognition and critical literacy .....	97
Conclusions .....	99
Appendix .....	102
References .....	105

## Abstract

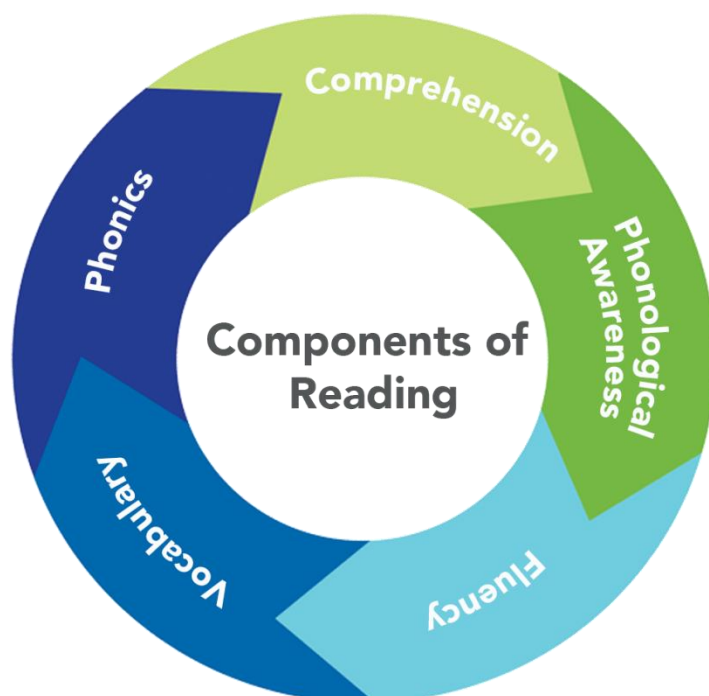
### **The Benefits of Literature for Students with Dyslexia in the EFL Class**

Being dyslexic is a lifelong condition and even though children can make enormous progress in reading, they may continue to struggle with its symptoms throughout their lives. It is crucial for society, particularly the whole school community, to become aware of the existence of learning difficulties such as dyslexia in order to support, integrate and as a result, empower those who strive with them. By informing and training educators and parents, dyslexic or other SEN (Special Educational Needs) students can receive equity in educational opportunities, thus allowing them to participate productively in society.

The passing of the national law 27306 in Argentina in 2016 has brought learning difficulties to the forefront and entitled SEN students to claim for their long-deserved rights. The law guarantees that SEN children, adolescents and adults will receive the suitable accommodations and assistance at any educational institution to help them overcome their hurdles and receive comprehensive healthcare. Before this law, middle class and affluent families were the only ones who were able to afford the time and money to identify and treat dyslexia or any other learning difficulty. The law aims at ensuring equality for all SEN students who would otherwise be likely to fail at school if they did not compensate for their shortcomings. Unfortunately, the Ministry of Education still needs to take effective action to ensure law enforcement.

Sarah Sayko, literacy-related disabilities expert, explains in *The Literacy for All Conference 2020* that reading is an unnatural, complex process that involves various

skills (see graphic below) and that exposure to books is not sufficient.<sup>1</sup> Learning to read requires explicit and systematic instruction. SEN students, particularly dyslexic ones, struggle with all the mechanisms involved in reading: phonological awareness, fluency, understanding and recalling vocabulary, phonics (letter-sound relationships/decoding) in order to reach comprehension.



Florida Center for Reading Research, Essentials for Reading Success: Components of Reading

If teaching literacy (the ability to read and write) in EFL to SEN students may already seem an overwhelming challenge, teaching literature and what it entails (grasping figurative language, interpreting long texts, developing critical thinking) could be considered an unattainable endeavour. Early identification of students' specific literacy difficulties is essential to the successful teaching of written literature. Adequate intervention to improve striving students' literacy skills will allow them at the same time to understand and take pleasure in the reading of literary texts. The teaching of literacy

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<sup>1</sup> <https://youtu.be/mwCtnhsCsVk>

skills and of literature must be integrated in lower primary. Students can only become truly literate when they have gained critical literacy, i.e., being able to uncover the implications of a text. This can only be attained by exploiting its full potential in class, going beyond its literal meaning, questioning and transforming it in order to understand it thoroughly. These techniques, among many others, will be discussed later on in this paper.

It goes without saying that the teaching of literature both in the mother tongue and in a second language starts well before the acquisition of literacy in kindergarten. However, once having achieved relative literacy in the first years of primary school, teachers should not confuse the development of literacy skills with the teaching of literature even at its most basic level. It is common practice among teachers to call their literacy activities “literary” ones, when actually what is being done in class is more akin to reading comprehension activities which have little to do with creativity.

But in order to succeed in the pleasurable teaching of literary texts to SEN students and specifically to dyslexic students we should first delve into how the brain of a child with dyslexia functions from a neurological perspective. We should also explore other realms of knowledge regarding learning difficulties. Are children born dyslexic? Is the teaching of a second language an obstacle or an advantage? Does limited comprehension of a second language hinder a dyslexic student from enjoying and appreciating a literary text? Are we EFL teachers qualified to provide SEN students with the necessary tools to overcome their obstacles? Do we plan our lessons bearing in mind that about 10% of our students may have learning difficulties? Can SEN students benefit from doing Literature in the EFL class without falling behind? Do they disturb the regular pace of the lesson? The aim of this paper is to answer these



questions and prove the numerous benefits of Literature for dyslexic students based on my experience with upper primary students as from 2004. In addition, I intend to raise awareness of the needs dyslexic students may have in the EFL class. Though I will be mainly focusing on the challenges that arise with dyslexic children, I intend to show how, in the end, all students in a mixed- ability class profit from the teaching of Literature and a teaching methodology accommodated to SEN students.

## Introduction

Reading in the mother tongue and even furthermore in a foreign language is such a daunting task for students with dyslexia and other language-based learning difficulties that, in most cases, they tend to avoid it, thus falling behind with the rest of the class. Psychologist Keith Stanovich coined this phenomenon the “Matthew Effect” to describe how the gap between less and more competent readers broadens as the former evade reading.<sup>2</sup> Students’ frustration increases while their comprehension skills and language use become impoverished.

This is exactly what I have witnessed teaching Literature to preteens for the last sixteen years, which is why, at the beginning of my teaching career, I turned instinctively to poetry for its brevity, striking imagery, musicality, playfulness and thought-provoking themes. It is this latter feature which often paves the way for students to express their feelings and discuss controversial or sensitive topics in class. Once having taken pleasure in reading and playing with poetry, SEN students can pass on to longer literary texts.

When Argentina’s national law in education N° 27306 was passed in 2016 I was asked to adapt my exams and teaching practice to comply with its requirements: to guarantee the education of children, teens and adults with SEN. However, at teacher training college we had barely become acquainted with these difficulties, and at school, had received only very few guidelines from educational psychologists. As I felt unprepared for the task, I began doing research and it struck me that through all our

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<sup>2</sup> [www.opencolleges.edu.au/informed/features/the-matthew-effect-what-is-it-and-how-can-you-avoid-it-in-your-classroom/](http://www.opencolleges.edu.au/informed/features/the-matthew-effect-what-is-it-and-how-can-you-avoid-it-in-your-classroom/)

teaching experience at teacher training college we had hardly taken these learners into consideration when planning lessons. However, it was when specialising in the teaching of Children and Young Adults' Literature that I came across TPR (Total Physical Response) and multisensory teaching techniques, both of which started to throw light on SEN students' needs for learning, as they widened my scope of kinaesthetic tools to use in the literature class.

So did Gardner's theory of Multiple Intelligences (1983) which is still in vogue among educationalists, though it does not answer all the questions on how to cater for SEN students as it tends to fragment children's intelligence instead of having a more holistic view of the human being. Besides, critics of the theory state that with overcrowded classrooms, it is utopian to believe that teachers can plan tailor-made lessons to suit the needs of each individual. Moreover, they believe that MI are mere 'abilities', and question the lack of scientific evidence behind this theory. What is more, as a result of technological development, new realms of knowledge will always emerge, making the list of intelligences forever inconclusive. In a few words, the theory was branded as impractical and unrealistic. However, MI theory's contribution to education and neurodiversity remains undeniable. Raising awareness of students' many and various strengths has helped educators prepare creative learning activities to develop more than one ability at a time.

Thus, I decided to venture into finding out the most student-friendly methodology for teaching Literature in the EFL mixed-ability class; for which I firstly needed to go deeply into the phenomenon of dyslexia, as will be seen below, in order to understand how their dyslexic minds work to accommodate the methodology to their needs.

Multi-sensory teaching is one of the most important recommendations of SEN experts. For this reason, it has been precisely with these students that poetry has proved enormously effective in my preteen and teen classes. It is the purpose of my thesis to show how poetry, as to prose, can turn these students' learning experience into a theatrical and playful activity by reducing their anxiety and maximizing their potential while empowering and integrating them with all sorts of learners.

After incorporating poetry into my lessons in a systematic manner for only some months, I discovered that children became gradually more motivated to learn English. I began by exposing them to spellbinding performance poetry by Michael Rosen, Paul Cookson and A.F. Harrold, using body language to act out each line and doing choral repetition. I focused on making recitation multisensory and selecting meaningful subject matter connected to their interests. This helped ease their anxiety about learning a second language while receiving rich exposure to new vocabulary and spoken language. Poetry's musicality proved useful for memorizing new words and structures, especially for students with information processing delays whose short-term memory is compromised and have a hard time retrieving information.

The playful and emotive frame I endowed the teaching of poetry with allowed students to enjoy the lessons by lowering Stephen Krashen's affective filter. The tables were turned: children spontaneously encouraged me to teach them more poetry by pleading for more rhymes. My main objective has always been to trigger their intrinsic motivation so that they can develop a genuine and lifelong interest in learning a second language as autonomous learners.

The purpose of this paper will be twofold. Firstly, it will examine how the dyslexic brain works when reading and when learning a foreign language. Once having done

so, it will suggest teaching strategies for SEN students to enjoy and benefit from the use of literary texts in the EFL class. Secondly, in the light of my own teaching practice, I will be sharing my experience through videos recorded in class and pictures of the material produced by my own students during 2019-2020.

All my research and practice concerning teaching Literature to SEN students led to my participation in FAAPI's (the Argentine Federation of English Teachers' Associations) annual congress in Salta in 2019 under the heading: 'Literature in ELT: Connect, Create, Collaborate.' Together with special education teacher María José Boladers, we gave a presentation on Literature and Inclusion after having exchanged ideas on our teaching experience with SEN learners for six months. María José is an expert in differentiated learning and has been working over more than five years teaching English to students with severe cases of LBLDs (Language-Based Learning Disabilities). Her deep understanding of the most suitable EFL teaching strategies for SEN children inspired me to take a keen interest in applying them to the teaching of Literature. This paper is based on some of my findings and practices included in the 2019 FAAPI presentation.

Important note: Students' parents have given me their consent to feature their children in the videos that accompany this paper for academic purposes only. They cannot be distributed or shown elsewhere.

## **PART I: THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

### **I.1. Argentina's National Law N°27306 passed in 2016 on an integral educational approach for SEN students**

In the enumeration that follows, the contents of the law will be analysed according to what is already done in class and to what teachers need to incorporate as new.

Regarding law N° 27306, teachers have to:

a) *prioritise oral over written work and evaluation.* This is not difficult to carry out in the EFL class since most of the lessons involve speaking.

b) *allow SEN students to take longer to do tasks and exams.* This is common practice in international exams as SEN students are entitled to extra time.

c) *make sure students have understood instructions.* As EFL teachers we are used to doing so by paraphrasing, highlighting key words, providing examples, among other means.

d) *avoid making students feel exposed when asking them to read in a loud voice in class.* Reading aloud should be done voluntarily.

e) *avoid copying long texts from the board and having dictations.* This is one of the most interesting elements in the law since it highlights the enormous difficulty SEN students have when handling long chunks of texts.

f) *allow them to use technology and other learning aids.* Students may use speech recognition and/or text-to-speech software. The first converts speech into text whereas the second allows the student to listen to written texts, for instance, read aloud devices

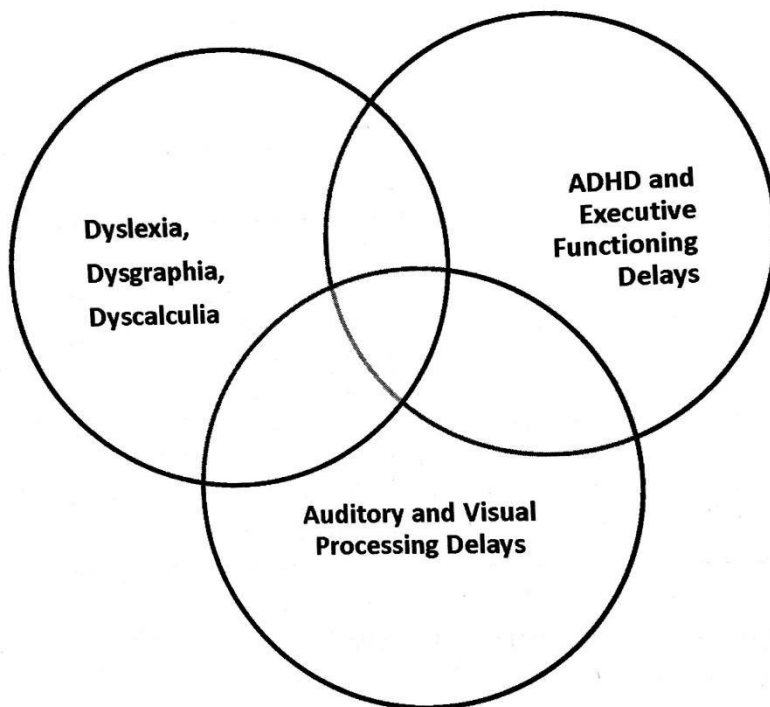
such as the smart reading pen. Moreover, they can resort to tablets, computer programs and applications specifically designed for them.

g) *provide testing and tasks' accommodations* such as presenting activities one at a time or reducing their number, reading instructions aloud for them, providing an example of what the students are expected to do, highlighting key words, providing a glossary of key words.

h) *make sure that SEN students don't receive additional learning benefits but, by meeting all the requirements above, equal learning opportunities.*

## **I.2. Language-Based Learning Difficulties**

It is pertinent to begin by defining what Language-Based Learning Difficulties are. The term describes “challenges with written and spoken language, mathematics, and attention deficit/ hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). The term has also been applied to deficits in skills required for organization, planning, memory and many related capacities collectively known as *executive functioning skills*.” (Franklin, 2018, p.9). As the diagram below shows, very often these disabilities coexist causing students to struggle hard at school.



Co- Occurrence of Language- Based Learning Difficulties (Franklin, 2018, p.10)

### **I.2.1. Dyslexia**

The International Dyslexia Association (IDA) in 2002 provides the following definition: "Dyslexia is a specific learning disability (SpLD) that is neurobiological in origin. It is characterized by difficulties with accurate and/or fluent word recognition and by poor spelling and decoding abilities. (...)Secondary consequences may include problems in



reading comprehension, and reduced reading experience can impede growth of vocabulary and background knowledge.”<sup>3</sup>

The British Psychological Society (1999) considers that:

Dyslexia is evident when accurate and fluent word reading and/or spelling develops very incompletely or with great difficulty. This focuses on literacy learning at the “word level” and implies that the problem is severe and persistent despite appropriate learning opportunities.

Some experts reserve the term dyslexia for individuals who have difficulties when reading only. Other experts consider that it can “impact a wide range of capacities, including listening, speaking, reading, writing, sequencing, and remembering” (Franklin, 2018, p. 13). If undiagnosed at an early stage the gap between a student with dyslexia and their peers broadens exponentially in very few years. Therefore, it is paramount to detect dyslexia if possible as early as preschool when literacy begins to take place.

### **I.2.2. Dysgraphia**

Students with dysgraphia have mainly difficulties with writing. Often individuals with ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) and executive functions deficits also have dysgraphia since writing entails well-developed executive functions skills. Moreover, though dyslexic students may progress in decoding, they can continue

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<sup>3</sup> [www.dyslexiaida.org/definition-of-dyslexia/](http://www.dyslexiaida.org/definition-of-dyslexia/)

struggling with encoding, i.e., turning sounds into print. They may have poor spelling and handwriting as well. They can omit words or write slowly. Consequently, it can be difficult for students to concentrate on content when writing. They may either drift off the point or their pieces be too short. Self-organization problems make planning and writing long pieces hard.

### **I.2.3. Dyscalculia**

It often occurs together with dyslexia for in both cases individuals have difficulties following rules. Students with dyscalculia find math hard and struggle with key concepts like bigger vs. smaller, counting, recognizing numbers, forming numbers, understanding money, and telling time. Older children are challenged by basic mathematics such as adding, subtracting, multiplying and dividing. Everyday tasks like cooking, going shopping or arriving on time can become problematic for individuals with dyscalculia. It is estimated that 5 to 10% of people have it. <sup>4</sup>

### **I.2.4. Auditory and Visual Processing Delays**

In a few words, students with auditory and visual processing delays have trouble processing, retaining and recalling information that is heard or seen.

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<sup>4</sup> [www.understood.org](http://www.understood.org)

### **I.2.5. ADHD and Executive Functioning Disorders**

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder is a behavioural syndrome characterised by the core symptoms of hyperactivity, impulsivity and attention. There is evidence that children with dyslexia often also show characteristics of ADHD. According to Daniel Franklin, students with attention deficit/ hyperactivity and executive functioning disorders struggle to maintain focus, organize school materials, and manage their time (Franklin, 2018. p.15). For this reason, they fail in complying with their academic responsibilities.

### **I.2.6. Dyspraxia**

Developmental co-ordination disorder (DCD), also known as dyspraxia, is a condition affecting physical co-ordination. It causes a child to perform less well than expected in daily activities for their age, and to appear to move clumsily. DCD co-occurs with dyslexia but there are also dyslexic children who are good at activities involving art and physical education.

## **I.3. Identification of Dyslexia**

Though educational psychologists are the ones who are fully trained to detect students with dyslexia, teachers need to be able to identify the main characteristics of this

learning difficulty. Sir Jim Rose and his team (2009, p. 29) developed the following definition of dyslexia:

- It primarily affects the skills involved in accurate and fluent word reading and spelling.
- Individuals have difficulties in phonological awareness, verbal memory and verbal processing speed.
- Dyslexia occurs across the range of intellectual abilities.
- It is best known as a continuum, not a distinct category, and there are no clear cut-off points.
- Co-occurring difficulties may be seen in aspects of language, motor coordination, mental calculation, concentration and personal organisation, but these are not, by themselves, markers of dyslexia.
- A good indication of the severity and persistence of dyslexic difficulties can be gained by examining how the individual responds, or has responded, to well-founded intervention.

### I. 3.1. Behavioural Level

#### Developmental phases of dyslexia in children and young people learning to read

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The chart below can be used as reference for identifying or predicting whether a child may be dyslexic. By no means should a teacher diagnose a student with dyslexia but be aware of the signs and inform educational psychologists about this possibility. Teachers ought to be trained to be able to recognise typical profiles for learning difficulties as early identification can lead to more effective intervention. The process of determining whether a person may have a reading problem is called screening. It may lead to further diagnostic assessments (The Literacy for All Conference, 2020).<sup>6</sup>

Developmental phase	Signs of dyslexia
Preschool	Delayed or problematic speech  Poor expressive language  Poor rhyming skills  Little interest/difficulty learning letters
Early school years	Poor letter-sound knowledge

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid 4.

<sup>6</sup> *The Literacy for All Conference* content is provided by the National Center on Improving Literacy (NCIL), Decoding Dyslexia Maryland and St. Mary's County Public Schools. <https://www.decodingdyslexiamd.org/events>

	<p>Poor phoneme awareness</p> <p>Poor word attack skills (decoding skills)</p> <p>Idiosyncratic spelling</p> <p>Problems copying</p>
Middle school years	<p>Slow reading</p> <p>Poor decoding skills when faced with new words</p> <p>Phonetic or non-phonetic spelling</p>
Adolescence and adulthood	<p>Poor reading fluency</p> <p>Slow speed of writing</p> <p>Poor organisation and expression in work</p>

Dyslexia and Literacy expert Kate Ruttle states that dyslexia is now seen as a spectrum and that 8% or more of the population are affected by dyslexia to some degree, although only 2-3% of students are likely to need specialists' intervention. Some students have mild dyslexia whereas others have a profound case of it. The percentage is considerable enough to take action and create a dyslexia-friendly classroom.

### I. 3.2. Biological Level

#### How does the brain work when reading?

The cognitive neuroscientist Stanislas Dehaene emphasizes in *Reading in the Brain: The New Science of How We Read* (2014) how unique the human brain is. Our species is the only one that can exceed its own biological condition and create new skills such as reading. What is more astonishing and bewildering at the same time is the fact that the mechanisms for reading are located in all human beings in the same identical region. This area is known as *the brain's letterbox*.

"In 1892, the French neurologist Joseph-Jules Déjerine discovered that a stroke affecting a small sector of the brain's left visual system led to a complete and selective disruption of reading. Modern brain imaging confirms that this region plays such an essential part in reading that it can aptly be called "the brain's letterbox." Located in the same brain area in readers the world over, it responds automatically to written words. In less than one-fifth of a second, a time span too brief for conscious perception, it extracts the identity of a letter string regardless of superficial changes in letter size, shape, or position. It then transmits this information to two major sets of brain areas, distributed in the temporal and frontal lobes, that respectively encode sound pattern and meaning." (Dehaene, 2014)

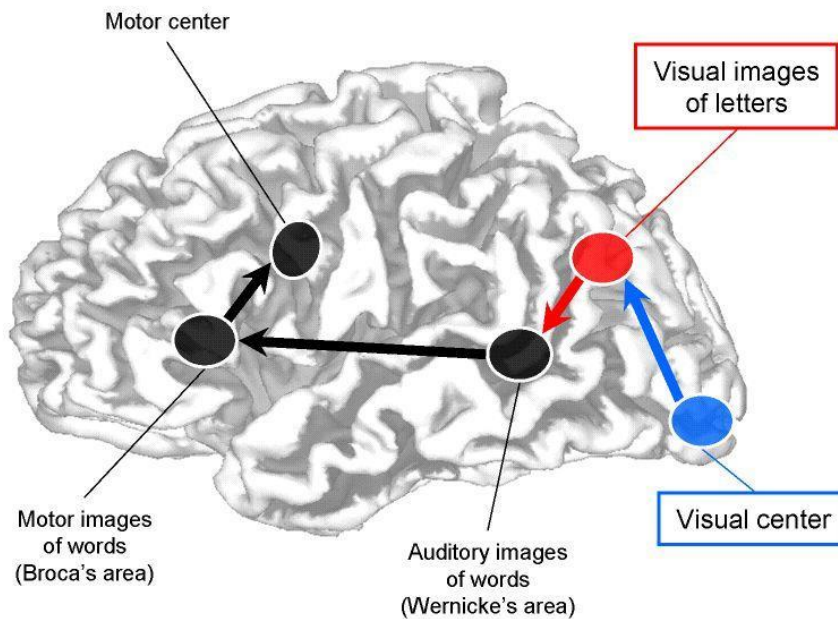
No matter the language or the individual, the very same brain regions activate when decoding a written word. Even people who are born blind and read Braille have a letterbox that is in the same area of the brain as in seeing people.

The following images show the difference between how the reading brain was conceived in the past by Dejerine and subsequent neurologist Norman Geschwind and at present. The belief that reading is a simple linear processing chain has been replaced by a "bushy" vision of the brain in which several functions work in parallel

simultaneously. Notice the interconnection between visual and language areas that reading entails. Connections are bidirectional, not unidirectional as once thought. The brain's letterbox or visual word form area, as Dehaene refers to it, has been marked in red. Anatomists refer to it as the left temporo-occipital region. Nowadays, visual recognition of letters is not believed to be located on the top rear of the brain but on its lower side. Dehaene clarifies that the second image he sketched is by no means conclusive as many areas and connections are probably still missing. He is convinced that the reader's brain's circuitry is far more complex than what is known up to now. (Dehaene, p.86)



**The old neurological model of reading**  
(After Déjerine, 1892; Geschwind, 1965)



**A modern vision of the cortical networks for reading**

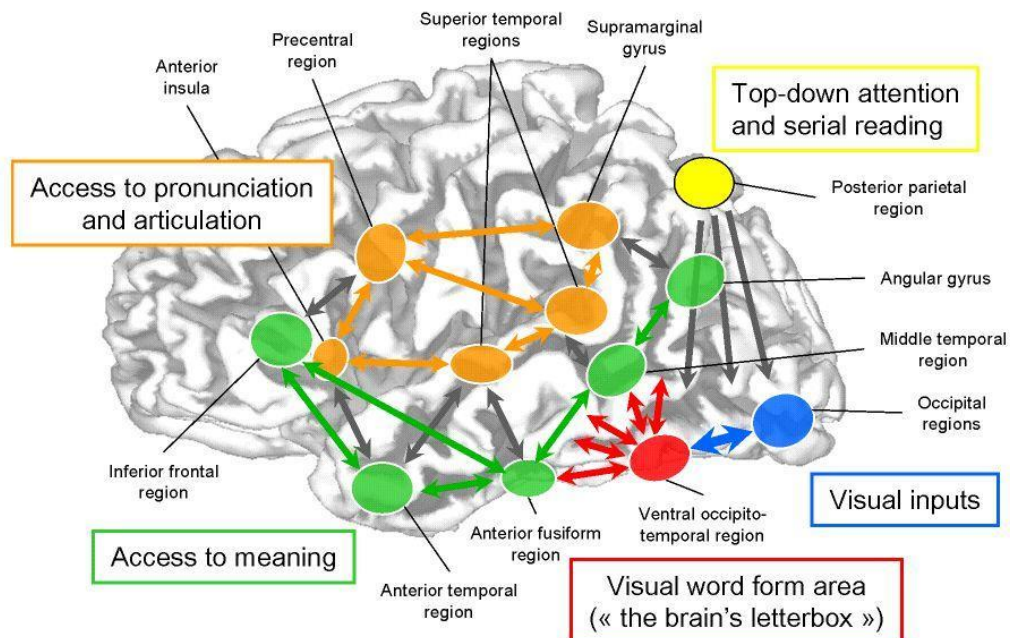
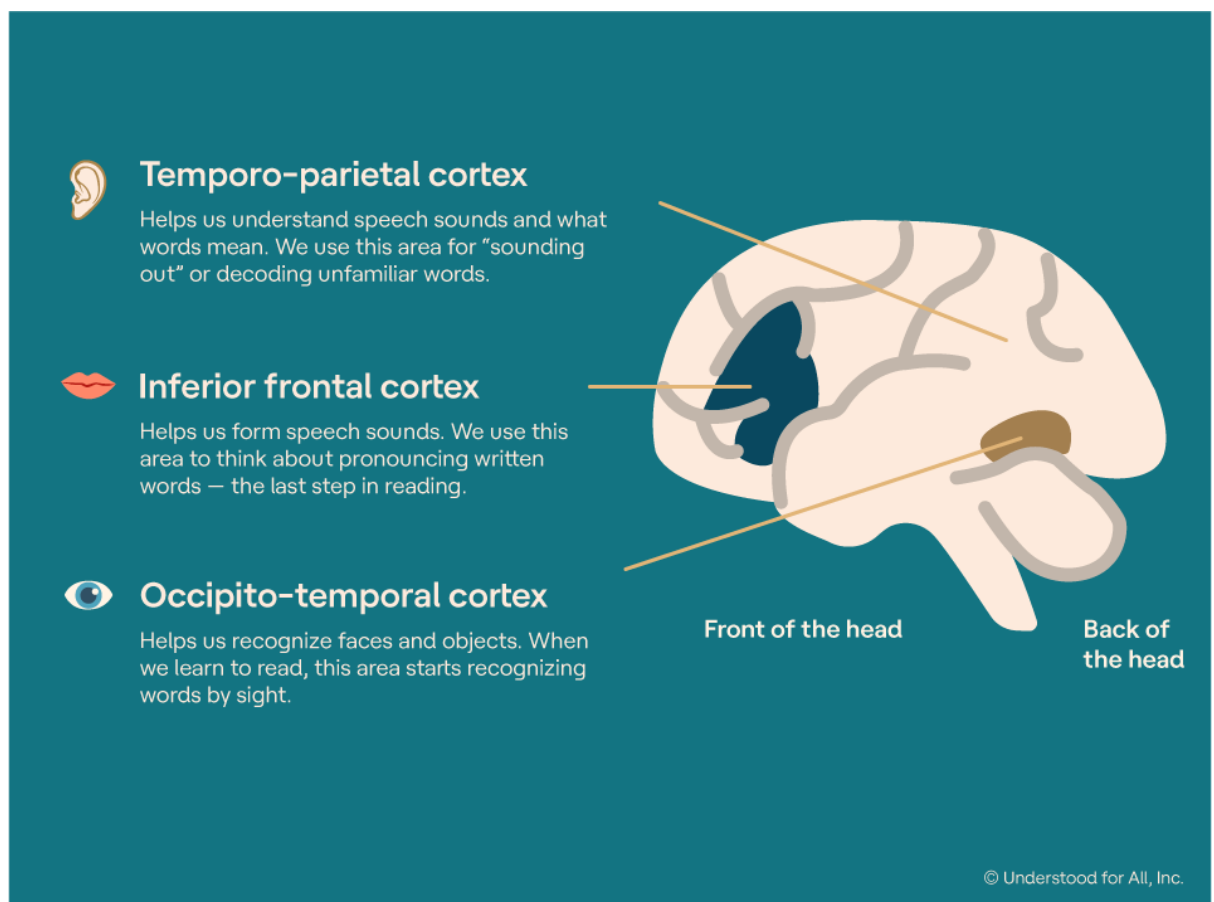


Figure 2.2. The classical neurological model of reading (top) is now replaced by a parallel and “bushy” model (bottom). The left occipito-temporal “letterbox” identifies the visual form of letter strings. It then distributes this invariant visual information to numerous regions, spread over the left hemisphere, that encode word meaning, sound pattern, and articulation. All the regions in green and orange are not specific to reading: they primarily contribute to spoken language processing. Learning to read thus consists of developing an efficient interconnection between visual areas and language areas. All connections are bidirectional. Their detailed organization is not yet fully known – in fact, cortical connectivity is probably much richer than suggested in this diagram.

## How does the dyslexic brain work when reading?

In a video from Understood.org, leading dyslexia expert, PhD Guinevere Eden explains very clearly what parts of the brain are used for reading. The different components that make up reading are the following:

- **the temporo-parietal cortex** that helps us *sound out or decode* unfamiliar words
- **the occipito- temporal cortex** that *recognizes* words by sight
- **the inferior frontal context** is used to think about how to *pronounce* words

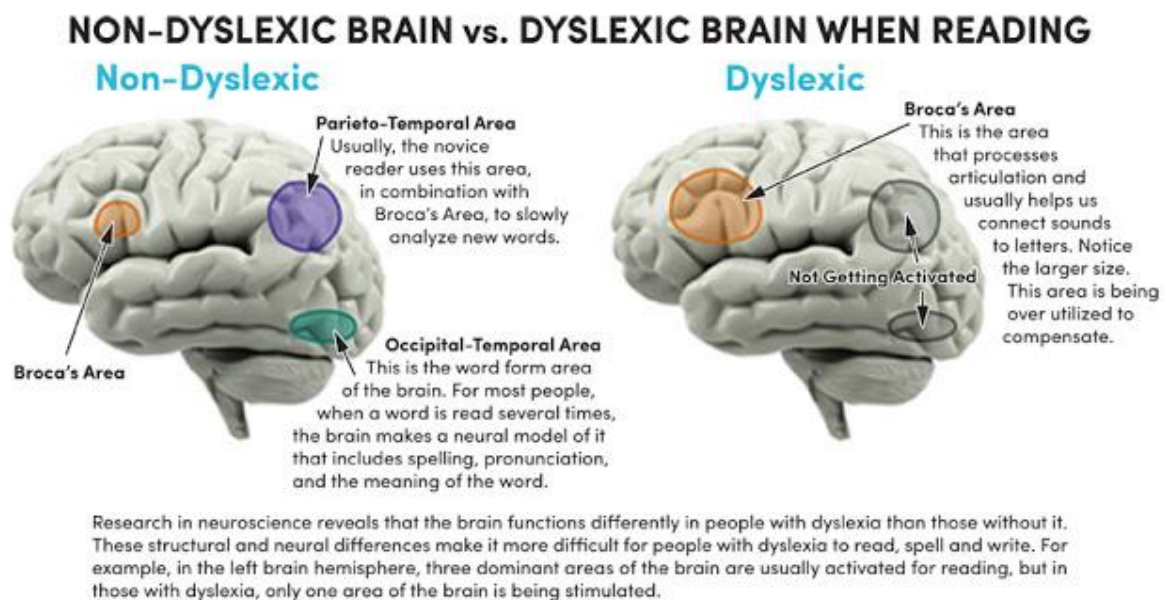


Some of these areas remain inactive in individuals with dyslexia. The illustration below reflects how the brain of a struggling child or adult reader differs from the one of an ordinary one. Different areas are engaged in both brains when reading. Guinevere Eden uses brain imaging techniques to study what's different in the brain of someone with dyslexia. She believes in the potential of the use of MRI (magnetic resonance imaging) scans to study the biological signs of dyslexia and the importance of diagnosing it early in young children.

Intervention helps children make up for those difficulties they encounter when reading. She describes that effective intervention takes place when dyslexic children receive intensive tutoring and are instructed about the rules of phonics (the relationship between sounds and letters) in a very explicit and structured way, when they are helped to recognize words they have seen before, among other strategies. Literacy intervention allows them to become skilled readers as some areas increase in brain activity and other areas compensate and help out inactive ones. What is more, it has been studied that phonemic awareness triggers not only reading outcome but also math outcome proving that intervention allows the individual to become holistically a better learner.

There is a physical and physiological mechanism taking place during intervention that shapes the brain to allow the dyslexic child to improve their reading skills. Brain imaging research shows how malleable the brain is. Brain anatomy and its functions differ in literate and illiterate people. Reading is a process itself that changes the brain. These changes occur in adults as well. They can also become better readers as a result of successful intervention.

Furthermore, according to Guinevere Eden, it is interesting to point out that researchers are beginning to study visual-spatial skills and other strengths that may be linked to dyslexia. The question is do those heightened skills come with dyslexia or does living with dyslexia produce those heightened skills?



7

A TED-Ed video from Dr. Kelli Sandman-Hurley on Dyslexia also clarifies how the brain of a person with dyslexia functions. Our brain is divided into two hemispheres. The left one is mainly in charge of language including reading. On the other hand, the right hemisphere tackles spatial activities.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.neurodiver-city.org/about-dyslexia>

## LEFT HEMISPHERE

## RIGHT HEMISPHERE

Analytic thought

Holistic thought

Language

Creativity

Science

Intuition

Logic

Music

Math

Art

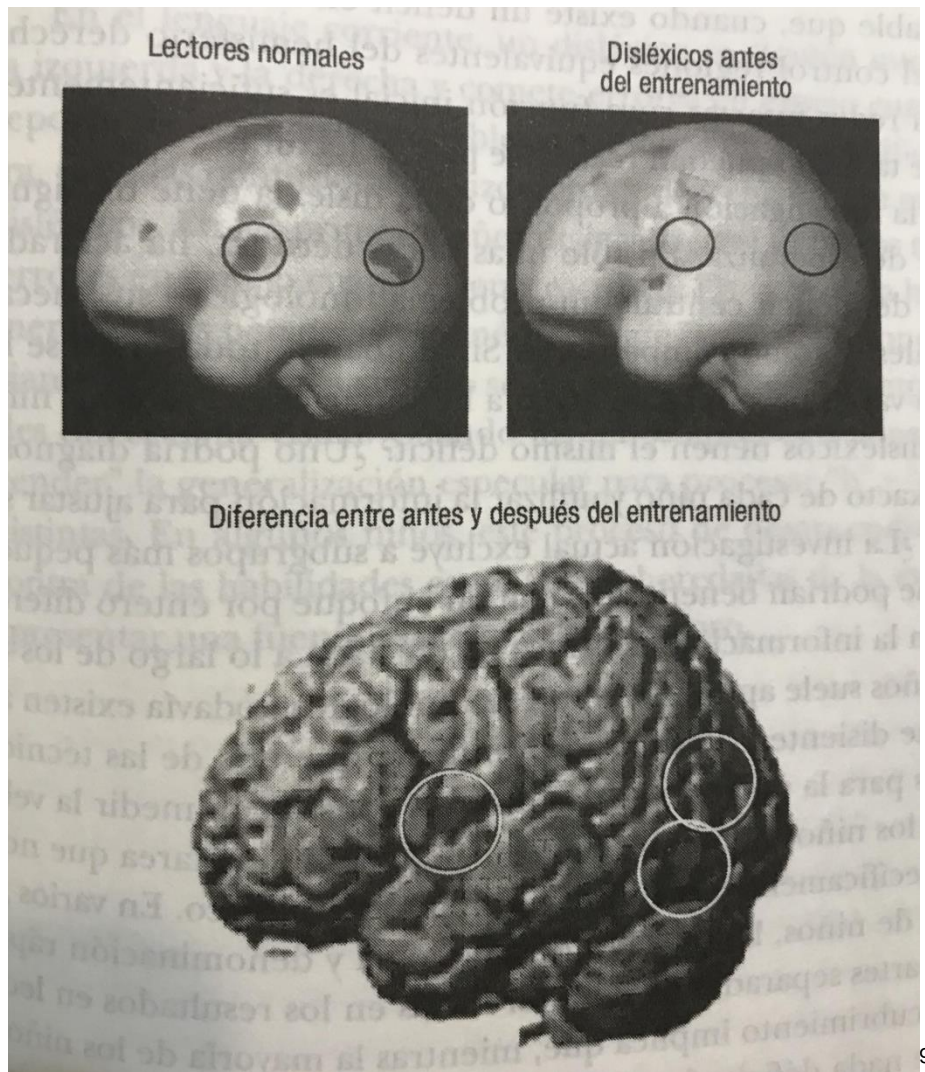
Functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) studies have shown that individuals with dyslexia rely more on the right hemisphere and the frontal lobe than the brain of the ones without it. That is to say, that when people with dyslexia read a word, it takes a longer trip through their brain and can get delayed in the frontal lobe. As a result of this neurobiological glitch, they read with more difficulty. Nevertheless, those with dyslexia can maximize their brains' plasticity and improve their reading with an intensive, multisensory intervention that breaks the language down and teaches the reader to decode based on syllable types and spelling rules. Their brains begin using the left hemisphere more efficiently while reading, and their reading skills improve. Intervention may reduce the under-activation in the left hemisphere temporo-parietal region.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> //youtu.be/zafiGBrFkRM

As the cognitive neuroscientist Stanislas Dehaene states in *Reading in the Brain: The New Science of How We Read* (2014), the brain's plasticity allows it to change and rebuild. It has been proved that intensive cognitive intervention has a positive impact on the brain. The reduced activity in the dyslexic brain's left hemisphere temporo-parietal region can be partially recovered. It is also extremely important to involve the child's motivation, attention and enjoyment. What is more, by taking these aspects into account, progress in learning can speed up. The images below show brain activity when children decided whether words rhymed. After training, activity in the temporo-parietal region in dyslexic kids increased though not in the same areas as children without reading difficulties. Other areas in the right hemisphere, which are not shown in these images, also reflected an increment of activity. This demonstrates that recovery takes place in nearby areas but not the same as ordinary readers.





#### I. 4. Familial Risk for Dyslexia

If a parent has dyslexia, the chance of having a child with dyslexia is between forty and fifty percent. Though numerous studies prove the heritability of dyslexia, there is a gene-environment correlation “making it difficult to disentangle the contribution of genetic versus environmental factors on reading behaviour.”<sup>10</sup> Parents who are more

<sup>9</sup> (Dehaene, 2014)

<sup>10</sup> (Sir Jim Rose et al. 2009. p.29)

competent readers will probably encourage reading more actively than parents who have dyslexia or any other learning difficulty. Therefore, literacy experiences at home together with genetic endowment will affect the child's reading capacity accordingly, either positively or negatively. For that reason, family and social background will play a significant role in the individual's long-term educational achievements. Unless they receive full support from their families and school, students with severe dyslexic difficulties are far less likely to read for pleasure and can experience disengagement from education.

As PhD Guinevere Eden reflects, "when children start school, parents are asked questions like whether their children have allergies but generally are not asked whether there are members in the family with learning difficulties because if there are, then it is likely to stay in the family." If schools could gather this information, pro-active intervention could take place early on and dyslexic children could get the help they need as early as possible. Furthermore, a screening process before entering primary school would also be highly beneficial so that at the first sign of difficulty, appropriate intervention is carried out.

"Even if dyslexia cannot actually be prevented, its effects can be minimised with subsequent positive effects on self-esteem and motivation. At this stage, as indeed later, learning should be fun, and children must not feel they are being forced into doing things they cannot do. For this reason, it is important to find the child's strengths and give constant praise and encouragement for positive efforts or success."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> (Reid et al. 2002, p. 230)



## **I. 5. Neurodiversity in the EFL classroom: building on strengths and fostering inclusion**

Magnetic resonance imaging has contributed to the understanding of the reading brain and the brains of people with dyslexia and heightened awareness. It helps those who have dyslexia understand that their brain is different and it is not their fault, and that everybody's brain is different. It is important for students to know that dyslexia, as other learning difficulties, is a functional variation in the brain. There are all sorts of variations from one person's brain to another. This is known as "neurodiversity."

Judy Singer, an Australian sociologist, coined the term neurodiversity on the autism spectrum in the late 1990s. She rejected the idea that people with autism were disabled and believed their brains simply worked differently from other people's. The term was quickly embraced by activists in the autism community and beyond. Advocates have used it to fight stigma and promote inclusion in schools and in the workplace. "The movement emphasizes that the goal shouldn't be to "cure" people whose brain works differently but to provide them with needed support so they can fully participate as members of the community."<sup>12</sup> Judy Singer proposes that neurological differences should be recognised and respected as much as any other human variation.

Therefore, all classes are in fact mixed-ability classes because we all are neurologically different. Streaming students based on their ability could be detrimental to them as academic diversity also makes the class more enriching. This practice may

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.understood.org/>

encourage labelling students according to their performance and polarisation between high and low achievers, thus affecting their confidence and self-esteem in the long run. Each student has different skills to contribute to the class and it is important that they interact and do collaborative work with all sorts of children to profit from this pluralism. Having said this, the ample spectrum of dyslexia should be considered. This paper refers to mild or moderate cases only. Severe dyslexia requires constant, personalised and professionalised attention that is out of a teacher's scope.<sup>13</sup>

Discussions can be held in class on appreciating and celebrating differences. There are several inspirational videos online in which prominent celebrities like actors Keira Knightley, Orlando Bloom or writers like Benjamin Zephaniah or Sally Gardner describe their life experience being dyslexic. Students will be surprised to learn that famous people they look up to have been diagnosed with dyslexia such as Jennifer Aniston, Tom Cruise, Cher or that great achievers like Thomas Alva Edison, Henry Ford, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Pablo Picasso also struggled with it.

Unfortunately, in most schools, emphasis is placed on competence in traditional skills and subjects such as reading, writing, spelling, science, social studies, and math. When SEN students fall behind with the curriculum, if remedial work and accommodations centre on their deficiencies and not on their assets, lessons run the risk of resulting demotivating and unappealing.

“Since special education is based on deficit, there doesn't seem to be much of anything really dynamic going on in the room. Kids aren't creating rain forests or acting out Shakespeare. Mostly, it's students sitting at tables or desks filling out workbooks

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.studyinternational.com/news/streaming-students-in-school-is-a-long-standing-practice-but-is-it-effective/>

or worksheets or doing exercises that belong to some spiffy special education program like the Orton-Gillingham method, or the Lindamood-Bell Learning Processes, highly structured programs designed to remediate specific reading and writing skills.”<sup>14</sup>

In a neurodiverse EFL class teachers have the advantage that they can resort to a whole array of ludic activities to encourage speaking as the focus is generally on the orality of the language. Needless to say, role-plays, storytelling, chants, poetry, games are recurrent ingredients in language teaching. For these activities the lesson can easily take place in a playground or assembly hall. This playfulness and frequent use of enjoyable literary texts that characterize the EFL class create a perfect, pleasant atmosphere for learning. “Appropriate teaching, however, does not mean restricting the student to speaking and listening. This will actually deprive them of two channels of learning. Seeing the words and writing them will help establish connections in memory and give the student further opportunities to overlearn and reach automaticity. As in every other area, innovative methods of teaching to give repeated presentations of what we want the student to know will give greater likelihood of success. The use of gesture, movement, mime, games, etc. can add greatly to enjoyment and can make learning much more interesting.”<sup>15</sup>

As mentioned before, dyslexic students’ strengths may lie in their use of lateral thinking, creativity, intuition, musical and artistic skills as a result of greater reliance on their right hemisphere of the brain. The psychologist David Grant considers that dyslexics are not intrinsically creative but it is their life experience that leads them to

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<sup>14</sup> Armstrong, Thomas. (2011). *The Power of Neurodiversity: Unleashing the Advantages of Your Differently Wired Brain*, Da Capo Press.

<sup>15</sup> (Reid, Wearmouth. 2002. pp. 237-238)

become creative. It is no wonder that they are inclined to choose subjects such as art, design and technology, which are more practical and require less reading and writing than most other subjects. These decisions in turn will eventually influence their career options.

Regardless of the motives for dyslexic students' talents, it is the teacher's duty to highlight them in order to build their self-esteem, allow them to make use of these abilities, recognise their achievements and not to pinpoint their shortcomings. Above all, teachers should capitalize on students' strengths. In addition, taking into account their learning styles and preferred approaches to learning will result in more motivated and confident students.

As PhD Thomas Armstrong states, neurodiversity in the ESL class benefits all its members since each student is given the chance to shine and share their talents with their classmates. "Research suggests that students who learn in inclusive classrooms construct a more positive image of themselves compared with students who learn in "segregated" classrooms. In many cases, it is the non labeled kids who benefit greatly from the experience." Each diverse student should not be considered as a liability, on the contrary, as an asset whose potentiality should be exploited in the mixed ability class.

According to Armstrong, a truly inclusive class:

- welcomes all sorts of diversities related to physical and learning disabilities, high-capacity students, culture, race, gender, and sexual orientation.
- allows students to express themselves cognitively, emotionally, artistically, creatively, and spiritually.

- uses multiple intelligences instructional strategies and other universal design methods for learning. In the classroom, universal design refers to removing barriers for kids with disabilities in ways that also enhance everyone's ability to learn. The theory of multiple intelligences is a good example of a universal design tool, which offers many different approaches to learning that benefit both kids with and without learning difficulties.
- pays attention to the environment, the use of space, and other ecological considerations. The neurodiverse classroom capitalizes on the available space to create a number of environmental enhancements and minispaces that enable kids with different instructional needs to learn more effectively.
- contains a rich network of human relationships that support each individual's journey of learning and development. The neuro-diverse classroom has many teachers, including a special and a regular education teacher, who work together (coteaching), tutors, helpers, parent volunteers and specialized personnel.
- believes in the natural, organic development of each individual. Rather than measuring each student by the "adequate yearly progress" they make on standardized test scores, the neurodiverse classroom believes that every child is on a unique journey that is not unlike the growth of a flower.

Unfortunately, the learning environment in a classroom tends to be very restrictive, dated and cramped even for regular students. Classrooms are generally crowded, they have uncomfortable furniture, uninviting decorations, inappropriate heating, ventilation and sound insulation and inflexible seating arrangements. Making classrooms welcoming and inclusive structurally could be beyond a teacher's reach

but there are a number of strategies that could be taken into account to create a dyslexia-friendly environment.

## **I. 6. Teaching strategies**

Though each student is unique, there are teaching strategies that are likely to help all learners. Teaching should be structured, cumulative and sequential, that is to say, it should be systematic. The following list is not an exhaustive one but these tactics have been of great help in my Literature class and may be of help to other teachers. However, these strategies could be applied to all subjects and, of course, to ELT and EFL.

Structure and reinforcement:

- Break tasks into small steps. Instructions should be short and clear, preferably using bullet points. Give SEN students one task at a time if possible. They become easily overwhelmed when given too many instructions at once.
- Present information in small amounts with frequent opportunities for repetition and revision and provide visual aids to make sure students fully understand concepts.
- Use a dyslexia-friendly font. (Dyslexie, Open Dyslexic, Arial and Comic Sans as letters can appear less crowded. Alternatives include Verdana, Tahoma, Century Gothic, Trebuchet, Calibri, Open Sans. Font size should be 12-14. Some dyslexic readers may request a larger font. Do not crowd the page. Space

out information. (1.5 spacing) Avoid underlining and italics as this can make the text appear to run together and cause crowding. Use bold for emphasis.<sup>16</sup>

- Recycle vocabulary. Reuse it in as many different contexts as possible. Use games to consolidate vocabulary.
- Use charts and diagrams to highlight the bigger picture.
- Add mime and gesture to words.

#### Multi- sensory

- Make sure learning becomes a multisensory experience by including combinations of visual, auditory and kinaesthetic learning opportunities. Physical movement promotes memory.
- Model the reading aloud, have the pupil follow along. (Learning tools such as ***Immersive Reader- Balabolka*** may be used).
- Record students and teacher to analyse productions or for students to study at home.

#### Metacognition

- Encourage the student to think about what strategies would be best for them to use in each circumstance.
- Teach useful skills rather than too much information.
- Brainstorm with drawings and without penalizing spelling.

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<sup>16</sup>[www.bdadyslexia.org.uk/](http://www.bdadyslexia.org.uk/)

- Use different colours for different purposes.

### Grouping

- Allow individual thinking time or discussion with a partner before whole class discussions.
- Students with dyslexia can sit near the teacher and next to well-motivated pupils or a “study buddy” who they can ask to clarify instructions for them.
- Teacher or more proficient students can become scribes as spelling can be a daunting task for students with dyslexia.
- Ensure all students are facing you when you are giving instructions.
- Vary seating arrangements.
- Plan for movement during the lesson to help maintain blood flow to the brain and concentration.

### Lowering the Affective Filter

- Recognise and reinforce strengths.
- Praise work for effort and content, not accuracy.
- Have an agreed signal so that a learner can indicate when they want to participate, or when they need clarification (e.g., green/red card).<sup>17</sup>

All students’ emotional barriers when learning a second language must be

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<sup>17</sup> Adapted from (Ruttle, Kate. 2018. pp. 34-35), (Reid, Wearmouth. 2002. p.261) and [https://www.britishcouncil.mk/sites/default/files/making\\_classrooms\\_dyslexia\\_friendly.pdf](https://www.britishcouncil.mk/sites/default/files/making_classrooms_dyslexia_friendly.pdf)



taken into account. In the case of SEN students, the emotional obstacles are even bigger and overcoming them may be a daily task. Their low self-esteem, as a result of repeated failure and growing anxiety when faced with a new challenge, hinder appropriate language learning. The “affective filter” is a theoretical construct in second language acquisition introduced by linguist and educator Stephen Krashen that attempts to explain the emotional variables associated with the success or failure of acquiring a second language.<sup>18</sup> When learning a second language, lowering the affective filter is key for language acquisition to take place. Using the strategies above may help create a supportive learning environment that will help all students feel at ease and thrive in the EFL class.

## **I. 7. Dyslexia and Foreign Language Learning**

So far we have analysed dyslexia without taking into consideration second language acquisition. Since dyslexia is a language disorder, one would presume that when dyslexic students learn an additional language, they are bound to experience difficulties. Is learning a foreign language an extra burden on dyslexic students who are already struggling to read and write in their mother tongue? Is it feasible for them to learn an additional language?

First and foremost, it should be noted that in spite of the national law 27306, in Argentina there are no clear school policies on how to offer dyslexic students compensatory tools specifically in foreign language classes. Teachers of English may

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<sup>18</sup> [www.collaborativeclassroom.org/](http://www.collaborativeclassroom.org/)

attend some sporadic training courses on dyslexia, on their own initiative or encouraged by well-intentioned school heads, but they are generally left to their own devices since courses are not aimed at second language teachers. Though educational psychologists or specialists in the matter may suggest some useful strategies, thorough training would be needed at foreign language teacher training colleges in order to integrate dyslexic students into foreign language classes efficiently.

Dyslexic students may encounter considerable obstacles in differentiating words in the foreign language, storing and retrieving new words from long-term memory. Foreign language learning relies a lot on memorization. In order for words and phrases to be memorized, they first have to enter short-term working memory, so they can be transferred to long term memory. Later, they need to be recalled into working memory to make use of them.

Furthermore, dyslexic students might have phonological awareness problems when learning the pronunciation of foreign words, difficulty to discriminate between similar sounds and learning the phoneme-to-grapheme-correspondences, the syntactic structures and the grammar of the foreign language. Moreover, their slow reading rate may result in poor comprehension of written materials and problems writing in the foreign language (Sparks et al., 1989; Sparks, 1993; Sparks and Ganschow, 1993).

Peer and Reid (2016, p.140) report studies of dyslexic children carried out in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. These children who spoke Portuguese as a first language at home and knew little or no English when they started attending school at age 5 had higher scores than the L1 dyslexic children. Having an additional language seems in

some cases to help dyslexics with the difficult task of learning the sounds of letters and letter combinations. Studies indicated, contrary to expectations, that being educated in an additional language is not a disadvantage for dyslexics and may even reduce the reading and spelling difficulties that they experience in L1.

On the Woodcock–Johnson academic achievement and cognitive development tests, there is one worth commenting on: the word identification test. In it, children were asked to read a long and complicated series of words, gradually increasing in complexity. It was discovered, contrary to expectations, that the EFL children with dyslexia had higher scores than the L1 children with dyslexia. Peer and Reid (2016, p. 142) explain that the EFL children may have increased their phonological awareness skills as a result of the exposure to more than one language. In decoding i.e., using letter-sound relationships to pronounce written words, all EFL dyslexic students scored considerably higher than L1 dyslexics.

Furthermore, EFL dyslexic children also scored higher in spelling than the monolingual dyslexics. Though dyslexics generally have less developed sound awareness skills, early intensive exposure to at least one other language may improve their skills.

The main objective of reading is being able to understand a text and this may seem one of the greatest difficulties for EFL students since they may lack richness of vocabulary, grammatical structures and cultural knowledge of the target language. In spite of this, once again, results showed EFL children who were dyslexic performed in a similar way to dyslexic children whose first language was English, demonstrating that their knowledge of EFL in no way was an impediment to their reading comprehension.

In conclusion, it is feasible for a dyslexic student to learn an additional language as long as they receive adequate literacy intervention and early phonological training. Many dyslexics who studied a foreign language demonstrated better reading, spelling, phonological, and syntactic awareness skills than monolingual dyslexics. It is as if exposure to a second language helps dyslexic children develop advanced language skills, which then they transfer to learning to read and spell in both their own language and the second one.

Owing to the fact that English is not a transparent language, students learning to read in English as a foreign language, develop additional strategies, such as paying closer attention to the visual or orthographic characteristics of the word that they are reading. As dyslexics have poor phonological skills but perhaps better visual memory and orthographic skills (Siegel, Share, & Geva, 1995), and reading in English encourages the development of these skills, dyslexics are not at a disadvantage in English. This observation does not negate the importance of their developing phonological skills in English or any other language. (Peer and Reid, 2016, p. 145)

It is interesting to point out that due to the orthographic transparency of Spanish, symptoms of dyslexia may become more evident when students learn English as an additional language. No wonder EFL teachers are generally the ones at school who realise earlier that a student may have dyslexia since word reading accuracy may be less of an identifier of dyslexia in more transparent orthographies. Goswami (1999) concluded that children learning a relatively transparent orthography develop an awareness of phonemic units at a very early stage of learning to read, and much earlier than expected based on data from studies of less transparent scripts. A dyslexic child generally has a weakness in phonological awareness so he will find learning a

relatively transparent orthography easier than a less transparent one. Nevertheless, as stated before, this should not be an impediment for second language acquisition.

Finally, according to Stanislas Dehaene, neurolinguistic research has proved that learning a second language actually changes our brain by making it more flexible. English is a phonologically opaque language, thus it may present further difficulties in second language acquisition than grapheme-phoneme transparent languages. Nevertheless, students suffering from mild to moderate dyslexia could benefit from learning a second language such as English by increasing their phonological awareness, improving their spelling, decoding and word recognition skills even in their own language.

### **I.7.1 Enriching the EFL experience through multisensory teaching**

A teacher should take every opportunity to enrich the language-learning experience by offering additional channels of input and output to exploit students' strengths. All specialists in dyslexia agree that it is important that the teaching approach should be structured, sequential, multisensory and full of repeated positive feedback. Multisensory techniques are highly recommended in EFL teaching. Many EFL teachers resort to Orton and Gillingham-type strategies.

The Orton-Gillingham approach relies on a multisensory phonics technique which has proved to be very effective for teaching literacy to dyslexic students or to the ones with learning and attention difficulties. The approach consists of tracing the letters of a word with your fingers (kinaesthetic activity) while trying to pronounce the

word (auditory stimuli) by using your knowledge of letter-sound correspondence (visual stimuli).

All students in the EFL class benefit from multi-sensorial teaching. The more senses involved in the lesson, the higher the chances students will recall the information. Willis (2007) discovered that multisensory lessons can stimulate the growth of more brain connections. Moreover, “neuroimaging studies have shown that there is a greater amount of activity in the brain's information processing areas following a multisensory input than there is following a single sense input.”<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, a multisensory approach does not necessarily involve stimulating all senses at once but making learning accessible to all sorts of students and learning styles through varying sensory input.

As mentioned in the introduction, trying to customize the lesson to meet all individual students' learning preferences or a particular intelligence is truly unfeasible. Thus, if each member of the class learns differently and has unique talents, it is important to create well-rounded lessons that stimulate students through various sensory pathways to meet their diverse needs. In that way, not only will we be reaching more students but also helping them enhance memory and learning. Multisensory teaching increases students' engagement and participation by making learning fun and therefore, memorable.

The visual and auditory senses are very much used in class, but kinaesthetic and tactile instruction is generally missing. A multisensory approach does not entail just adding body movement to teaching but engaging more senses simultaneously.

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<sup>19</sup> <https://ortongillinghamonlinetutor.com/three-reasons-why-multisensory-learning-is-food-for-the-brain/>

For example: when performing the cumulative poem “There was an old lady who swallowed a fly”, students can be following the reading (visual input), using body language to interpret each line (kinaesthetic input) and repeating it in a loud voice (auditory input). In second readings, they can be tapping each word on the desk (tactile input) and clapping whenever they encounter a rhyming word (auditory input).

Including more hands-on activities in our lessons such as drama, role-play, choral repetition or singing and dancing increases students’ engagement and intensifies learning. (Baines, 2008). Even olfactory stimuli can be a great source of inspiration for a creative story. A teacher of mine took spice jars and scented candles to class for students to imagine the perfect setting prior to writing. The sense of smell is connected almost exclusively to the limbic system, the centre of emotions and behaviour. That is why a fragrance usually elicits a reflex action rather than a thought. An appalling smell instinctively makes us move away from it whereas a pleasant one may evoke cherished childhood memories.

Graduate students of mine still remember their Ancient Egypt lessons with me at the age of ten thanks to the use of taste input. When learning about farming, I offered them pomegranates and dates for them to taste, play and count their seeds. They enjoyed the experience so much that they can still recall the fruits’ names more than ten years later.

In addition, Baines (2008) calls the sense of play the sixth sense. Engaging students in academically challenging and enjoyable activities through games helps them become willingly involved in their learning process. The EFL class is characterised by the use of games and hands-on activities. This creates a relaxed atmosphere for learning and an appropriate context to use the language meaningfully

while reducing students' anxiety of using a foreign language, all of which is mandatory when teaching SEN students. The Multisensory techniques mentioned above will be exemplified in the second part of this paper when describing my teaching practice.

### **I.7.2. Enriching the EFL experience through assistive technology**

Other useful tools for dyslexic students learning a foreign language are screen readers or 'talking pens.' Assistive technology such as these or computer programs can help them when reading, facilitate writing or train them to raise phonological awareness. "The computer is a very systematic and patient 'teacher' and the dyslexic student will be able to repeat the exercises until he or she has mastered the skill involved." (Reid, et al., 2008, p.453)

The following programs, for dyslexic native speakers, follow the Orton-Gillingham principles and are effective even for dyslexic children learning English as a foreign language:

- Nesy (Net Educational Systems Ltd, [www.nesy.com/uk](http://www.nesy.com/uk)): computer-delivered games and activities to develop phonological awareness, word patterns and spelling rules. These are dyslexia-specific materials.
- Rapid Reading (Pearson Heinemann): interactive ebooks with a 'Read to me' function and other useful resources. <sup>20</sup>

In 2020 the COVID-19 pandemic gave rise to remote teaching during lockdown.

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<sup>20</sup> [www.pearson.com.au/educator/primary/browse-resources-online/english/rapid/](http://www.pearson.com.au/educator/primary/browse-resources-online/english/rapid/)



Since orality became the focus of distance EFL learning due to synchronous online classes, SEN students may have profited from this form of education. Content subjects were delivered this way and were based on students' participation and oral production rather than carrying out writing activities. The latter, unless done under the teachers' watchful eye, could not reflect the students' performance accurately as they may have resorted to external help: classmates, relatives or plagiarism.

## **I. 8. Reading and Dyslexia: Home and Summer Reading**

Furthermore, children with dyslexia undergo a cyclical phenomenon known as the "Matthew Effect," a term adopted by psychologist and reading expert Keith Stanovich (1986) originally from the biblical Parable of the Talents in Matthew 25:14–30 in which "the rich get richer and the poor get poorer." In education, more competent readers develop their reading skills further through reading whereas less competent readers who shun from reading become more frustrated and their reading skills more impoverished. The amount of reading a child does affects other cognitive skills such as their vocabulary and syntax development, reading and writing skills and general knowledge, among others. Consequently, the undiagnosed or untreated student with dyslexia will be at a greater disadvantage compared with their peers.

For this reason, it is of extreme importance that dyslexic students not only read at home but also during the summer holidays to avoid falling further behind. Faculty members Richard Allington and Anne McGill-Franzen from University of Tennessee, Knoxville, have completed a three-year study showing a significantly higher level of

reading achievement in students who received books for summer reading at home and a regression in academic proficiency from those who did not have access to reading due to summer break. This latter phenomenon is known as the "summer slide." It was introduced in 1996 when one of the first comprehensive studies on the phenomenon was published in the U. S: The Effects of Summer Vacation on Achievement Test Scores: A Narrative and Meta-Analytic Review. The study showed that students lose significant knowledge in reading and math over summer break, which tends to have a snowball effect as they experience subsequent skill loss each year. A more recent study of children from 3rd to 5th grades entitled "NWEA 2015 MAP Norms for Student and School Achievement Status and Growth" also showed that students lose, on average, about 20 percent of their school-year gains in reading and 27 percent of their school-year gains in math during summer break. Since younger children are at a crucial stage in their development, they are prone to greater learning loss.<sup>21</sup>

Allington compares this reading setback to an athlete's fitness: "Just like hockey players lose some of their skills if they stay off their skates and off the ice for three months, children who do not read in the summer lose two to three months of reading development."<sup>22</sup>

Not having access to reading materials over the summer has a detrimental effect on all children. Summer reading helps students maintain the progress they gained throughout the school year. According to Jen Robinson, (the Digital Initiatives Manager for the Marin County Free Library,) educators together with parents can keep

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<sup>21</sup> <https://www.scholastic.com/parents/books-and-reading/raise-a-reader-blog/summer-slide.html>

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2010/07/100721112234.htm>

the summer slide at bay by encouraging children to devote as little as 20 minutes a day to reading during the holidays.

In 2012, Paul B. Yellin, MD, FAAP, Director of The Yellin Centre for Mind, Brain, and Education, and Learning Specialist Beth Guadagni conducted research on literacy and how reading skills are affected by the summer recess. They noted that the severity of summer learning loss was also correlated with family income: children from less affluent families return to school even further behind than their wealthier peers. In other words, a summer slide is most damaging to those who are already at a disadvantage. Without continued language and skill-building over the summer, struggling students returning to school face the demoralizing prospect of finding themselves even further behind their peers. Regardless of their childhood exposure to language, students with reading disorders such as dyslexia are also at great risk of summer slide.<sup>23</sup>

In my own experience, dyslexic children whose parents agreed with me in the need to keep them reading during the summer holidays, experienced great progress in their reading skills. On the contrary, those dyslexic children who, for various reasons, interrupted the reading routine, took two months and half to reach the level they had achieved at the end of the former school year whereas non-dyslexic children caught up in a month.

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<sup>23</sup> <https://learningally.org/Blog/summer-reading>

## **PART II: TEACHING PRACTICE**

### **II.1. Valuable teaching experiences with SEN students in the Literature and ELT class**

I work at a private all-girls Catholic school in the city of Buenos Aires. Students have three periods of English four times a week. Among those, three of them are devoted solely to the teaching of Literature. In 2019 and 2020, I had two 7th form groups of 25 students per class. In each group there were three or four students who had been diagnosed with mild to moderate dyslexia, ADHD and/or Executive Functioning Delays. Nevertheless, there generally are more students who, although undiagnosed, seem to have some traces of the same disabilities. This often results in quite disruptive groups of learners with very short attention spans. Therefore, I realised that all sorts of students would take advantage of adapting and planning lessons taking SEN students into account. “A good teacher meets the learning and developmental needs of all the children in the class. All interventions aimed at dyslexic children will benefit any child in the class who is not making appropriate progress in reading and writing.”<sup>24</sup>

Since 2019 I have been struggling to deconstruct assumptions and prior notions I had about teaching. At teacher training college, I was taught how to cater for students' differentiated learning styles based on Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences but LBLDs (language-based learning difficulties) were unknown to me. Limited understanding of dyslexia and the difficulties it causes in foreign language learning can have an extremely negative impact on teaching practices. Providing

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<sup>24</sup> Ruttle, Kate. (2018). *Differentiating for Inclusion, Target Ladders: Dyslexia*. UK: LDA. p. 27.

educators with adequate training can reduce the sense of frustration both teacher and student can get due to successive failed attempts at teaching/ learning a foreign language.

It has been hard for me to adjust my mindset in order to become more inclusive. Teaching should embrace students' uniqueness, fostering a more humanizing world in which differences are appreciated and celebrated hard as it may seem for us teachers without specific training in LBLDs. There cannot be a standardized or a one-size-fits all model of education. Differentiated instruction is essential and its fundamental objective should be contemplating and meeting the diverse learning needs of all students.

In 2020, due to remote teaching, our lessons became necessarily more inclusive. Shifting to online learning and devoting most of our classes to oral work benefited SEN students enormously. As explained earlier, these students profit considerably from the use of technology and having extra time for written activities. In remote learning, owing to the pandemics, SEN students gained from digital teaching and more flexible deadlines. It is hard to predict whether in the long run SEN students will have actually improved their academic performance, regressed or simply come to a standstill as a result of distance learning. What is beyond doubt is that all teachers have resorted, as from 2020, to teaching students more metacognitive strategies than usual, since students have had to become autonomous learners and do many tasks almost without the teacher's immediate assistance.

## **II. 1. 1 Approaches used for teaching Literature in ELT**

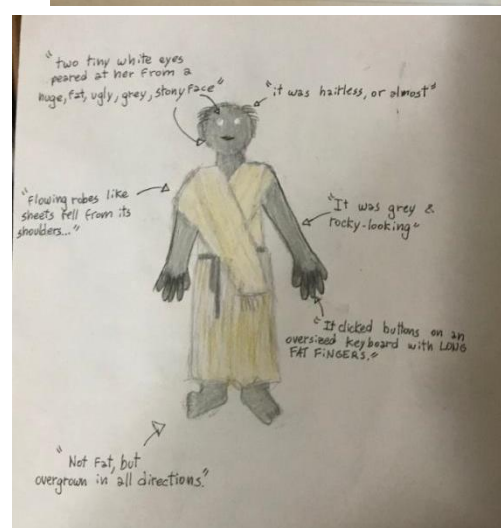
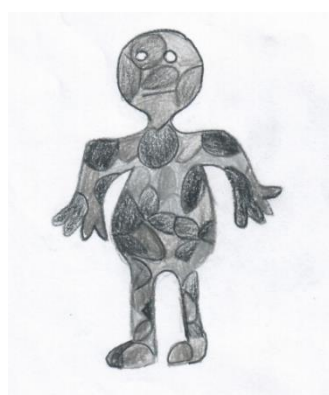
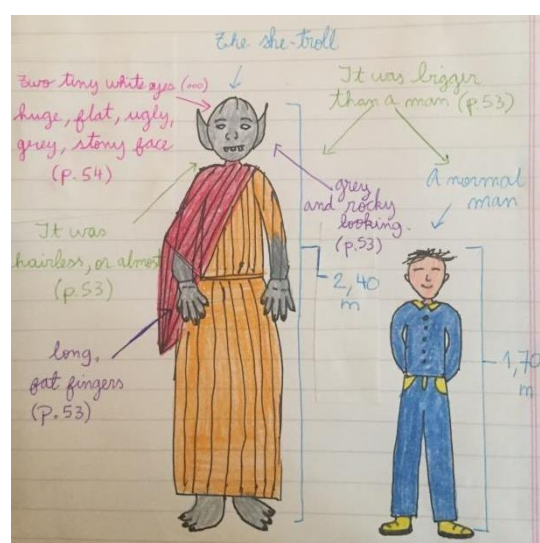
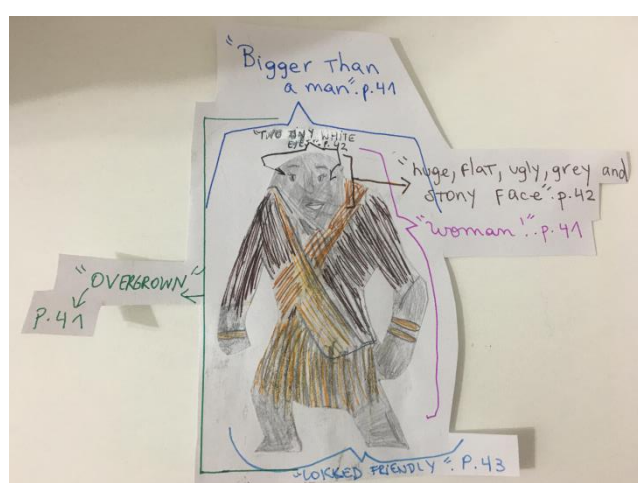
As regards Literature, both during remote and in-person learning, the best way to help dyslexic and non-dyslexic students fully grasp a literary text, no matter its genre, has been turning to Wolfgang Iser's Reader Response while-reading mechanisms and to Rob Pope's Textual Intervention (1995) strategies for post-reading activities. Consequently, Iser's theory, Pope's approach and the multisensory techniques constitute the backbone of my Literature teaching practice as they merge and support one another.

According to Reader Response theories (Nodelman, 2003), "readers are active participants in the reading process." Iser believes every literary text contains 'gaps of indeterminacy' which "readers fill in according to their unique way of viewing reality, their former experience and their cultural patterns." (Benton, 1992, p. 22). Author and reader collaborate in creating an imaginary world or as Tolkien calls it a 'secondary world.' In a way, the reader becomes the co-author of the text, endowing the text with meaning. In the reading process, the mental activities involved are:

- Picturing: all readers create mental images while reading. There are some which are 'text-free' which include all the associations made by the reader which shift their focus temporarily away from the text, or 'text-bound,' those images which are related to the text and provide information by which the reader makes sense of the text. Through the text-free and text-bound images, the reader's mind becomes like a TV

screen on which they can actually visualise the setting, the characters and what is happening in the text. Asking SEN students to describe what they see orally has been an activity which they enjoy very much together with the further illustration of what their minds have pictured.

The following examples show how students' text-free and text-bound images have contributed to their portrayal of a character from *The Song From Somewhere Else* by A.F. Harrold.



- Anticipating and retrospecting: As to anticipation, the reader's mind is activated as from the paratextual features of a text. Later, every sentence in a text provides further chances of prediction at a subconscious level. When the predictions prove right, the reader feels gratified but normally what occurs is that the predictions prove wrong, enticing the reader to carry on with the text. As to retrospection, the closer the readers are to the end of the text, the more they have to reflect upon previous events and link the 'present' of the text to what they have already read. As Michael Benton affirms, at the beginning of the reading process, anticipation consists of two steps forward whereas retrospection is one step backward. Instead, as the reader advances in their reading, retrospection will be two or three steps backward and anticipation one step forward. The teacher should encourage the conscious use of these mechanisms in order to give vent to their creativity and help students construct meaning.
- Interacting: refers to 'identifying' with the text through empathy, admiration, imitation and resemblance. That is to say, relating their life experiences to the characters to interpret the text and, at the same time, interpret their own lives. Stories allow students to understand aspects of life and emotions that they may or may not have experienced yet.



- Evaluating the text: readers are always judging the text explicitly or implicitly while reading in an appreciative or critical way. They have to be given the chance to state their opinion of the text, the sections they find more gripping or more boring for them to become critical readers regardless of their age. Moreover, the teacher should foster this mechanism to compare and contrast texts or characters, encourage the selection of favourite quotes, determine whether the protagonist has taken the right decisions, among many other evaluating activities.  
(Benton, 1992, p. 22)

Furthermore, Rob Pope's textual intervention approach invites the reader to interact with the text in order to understand it better, as he claims "the best way to understand a text is to change it." Borrowing the pattern of a text to rewrite it, engaging in textual expansion and reduction, changing point of view, genre and media are some of the creative post reading tasks that any teacher normally carries out when helping students interpret a text.

Most of the activities below are based on the previously mentioned mechanisms and Pope's textual intervention approach which allow all students, and especially SEN ones, to enjoy and reach a better understanding of literary texts no matter their genre. However, poetry has proved to be the ideal springboard to introduce SEN students to the literary world owing to the numerous advantages that poems offer these students.

## **II. 1. 2. Advantages of using literary texts in ELT**

Before exploring the multiple benefits of poetry in ELT, I will single out the advantages of using any sort of literary text in class, authentic or simplified. Collie (1991) highlights the importance of using authentic material, not fashioned for ELT and intended for native speakers. In this way, students become exposed to different linguistic uses, forms and conventions while incorporating cultural information from English speaking countries. Exposing students to more challenging texts which have not been simplified for non-native speakers gives students a highly rewarding sense of accomplishment.

However, abridged literary texts are an excellent way of making acclaimed works of literature accessible to all students no matter their level of English or reading difficulties. Abridged texts are classified according to language level and target age and most of the time they are accompanied by an audiobook. In addition, simplified texts are generally illustrated helping students visualise key events in the narrative. All these characteristics make them an ideal resource for SEN students learning EFL.

Furthermore, literary texts provide contextualised language enrichment which makes it more memorable than learning isolated lists of vocabulary and structures. Stories provide students with meaningful situations in which the second language is used in a natural manner, thus allowing students to broaden their speaking and writing skills. Metacognitive strategies can also be developed with while-reading activities as students learn to make inferences from linguistic clues and to deduce meaning from context.

Figurative language, though unsettling as it may seem at first for SEN students,

helps the reader create mental pictures while reading. Students need to become familiarised with this creative use of language in order to fully grasp a text or even an ordinary conversation in which metaphorical language is used. Since figurative language is rooted in culture it is essential in foreign language learning to raise awareness of its use and work towards its comprehension. Most students enjoy spotting figurative language and using it creatively. Nonetheless, it is necessary to mention that SEN students find figurative language comprehension perplexing due to their difficulties in abstract thinking. Through continuous exposure to it in various contexts, SEN students can acquire more sophisticated language skills. The teacher will have to explain their implications explicitly and clarify ambiguities each time they arise until they acquire a certain level of reading proficiency in which they can figure out metaphorical language on their own.

Literary texts foster personal involvement in readers. How many times do we become so drawn to some stories that a feeling of nostalgia invades us when finishing a story? Feeling eager to find out how events unfold in a literary text or becoming utterly stirred by the feelings evoked by a poem is clear proof that literary texts are an engaging means of language exposure.

## **II. 2. Poetry**

It is pertinent to point out that students benefit enormously when introduced to short literary texts. In this manner, by gradually increasing their length, the teacher is more likely to arouse interest in reading by not overwhelming them from the start with longer

texts. In this section, I will be analysing why it has proved to be convenient to begin by exposing students to performance poems, found and bio poems. These types of poetry are suitable and effective for teaching SEN students in the EFL class.

As Alan Maley (1993) states, using “short, complete texts can be highly productive in foreign language teaching” and lists the following benefits:

- Students can read them quickly.
- They can be exposed to various texts in very little time.
- Texts can contain simple language but still complex ideas.
- Short texts are ideal to fill in gaps of indeterminacy and to enlarge.

Furthermore, if the poem’s structure follows a pattern, students can create their own version of the poem and get a sense of achievement when completing them with little guidance from the teacher. List poems, Irish Blessings, acrostic and alphabet poems, calligrams and shape poems are only a few possibilities among the wide range of poetry that SEN students find amusing and relatively easy to tackle.

Alan Maley and Alan Duff (1994) analyse the advantages which poetry offers and I will focus on the most significant ones for SEN students:

- **Literacy development:** In order to become competent readers, they need to be brought into contact with different sorts of texts. Poems are a rich source of language exposure. Their vocabulary, sensory images and figures of speech strengthen the students’ knowledge of the language. Moreover, due to poetry’s emphatic rhythm, marked rhyme and striking imagery some fragments may even stick to their minds. Students can absorb useful language through poetry

unconsciously.

- **Phonological awareness and reading fluency practice:** Poems lend themselves to repeated reading more than prose. Their musicality, rhyme and rhythm capture the attention of any listener. By listening to poetry being read aloud and doing choral repetition students, especially SEN ones, improve their pronunciation and intonation, become familiarized with the structure and rules of written language and they can increase their awareness of letter and sound correspondence.
- **Practicality:** Finding good reading material for students with dyslexia may be difficult because there is a huge gap between their reading level and their age. There may be interesting texts that are too long and difficult for them to read but there are poems of various lengths and themes to suit their needs, especially with students with a short attention span who are prone to distraction. Also, when running short of time in class, poems are a fruitful time-filler activity. Moreover, rhymes are ideal to memorize concepts. By teaching SEN students learning strategies, we are helping them become future autonomous learners.
- **Motivation:** Each student may share their own interpretation of poetry. As there are no right or wrong contributions, this is in itself a motivating factor for them to participate in class discussions. Any individual will feel that they have a valid and valuable contribution to make, which is a helpful means to boost their self-esteem.
- **Enjoyment:** When reading is done in a playful and theatrical way, it helps students reduce anxiety about learning a foreign language.

- **Feelings and taboo topics' discussion:** Poems pave the way for children to express their feelings and to tackle controversial or sensitive topics in class. The themes dealt in poetry are common to all cultures: love, death, nature, despair, fear, joy ... Their universal content appeals to all learners, engaging not only the intellect but their feelings owing to their emotive language. By allowing students to express themselves through poetry, lessons become meaningful and thus, memorable for them.
- **Creativity enhancement:** Poetry triggers children's imagination as poems very often contain more gaps of indeterminacy than prose pieces.

## II. 2. 1. Performance Poetry

SEN students are often frustrated and intimidated by lengthy texts. This is why I decided to begin by exposing them to humorous performance poetry from the very first lessons to maximise chances of success. When asked about their opinion on poetry, they normally resort to anticipation in unison: poetry is 'boring' and 'serious.' Immediately afterwards, I promise them I will make them change their viewpoint in a few lessons.

Introducing poetry through humorous performance poetry has always proved to be very effective. Humour, as in Paul Cookson, Michael Rosen and A.F Harrold's poetry, to mention but a few, immediately hooks students' attention and the rhythm of their poems allows for very entertaining choral repetition. When I first saw Paul Cookson reciting Mr Shadow's Shoes, I was captivated by his performance. Over the

last years, I've been teaching this poem, trying to imitate Cookson, as much as possible, and it has never failed to engage my students' interest in poetry.

### **Paul Cookson**

Performance poetry helps students to understand and take delight in its lines due to its body language. Moreover, kinaesthetic learners find it extremely appealing. In the video which follows, one can see the first time 2019 learners listened to this poem and how amused they were. Though SEN students find it hard to do choral repetition at first, they don't need to understand every single word to enjoy the poem. I just anticipated that Mr Shadow is the type of teacher who moves surreptitiously around the school so students have to be careful not to do anything sneaky because he can appear out of the blue anytime. (See Appendix)

SEE [VIDEO 1 Mr Shadow's Shoes .mp4](#)

As shown in the video, all students had a lovely time. It was a great pleasure to see how dyslexic children followed the performance and participated via body language and choral repetition.

To recapitulate briefly, the rationale for exposing students to performance poetry is based on multisensory teaching. Adding mime and gesture to words allows SEN, and actually all students, to infer their meaning, recall new vocabulary better and derive enjoyment from the class. A multisensory approach engages more than one sense at a time making lines in the poem more memorable and easier to grasp for students with language-based difficulties. Laughter and body movement helps self-

conscious learners relax and lower their affective filter, a much required need in SEN students.

## **Michael Rosen**

Once my students' preconceptions about poetry were challenged by this poem, they were ready to become exposed to a new poet: Michael Rosen who, to various critics, could be considered the master of performance poetry. On his official website ([www.michaelrosen.co.uk](http://www.michaelrosen.co.uk)) there are around 200 videos of himself reciting his fabulous poetry and doing storytelling. His poetry generally mocks adults and their stereotypical phrases so I knew my preteen students would easily relate to it through the mechanism of interaction. We worked with his well-known poem "Don't" which lists parents' typical don'ts in the first stanza and satirises them by including ridiculous ones in the next stanzas. (See Appendix)

Applying Pope's textual intervention approach, we played with its pattern: its anaphora and its internal rhyme. I erased the underlined lines and we thought of teachers' don'ts instead of parents' don'ts. I elicited classroom objects and students thought of rhyming words or used online rhyming dictionaries, if necessary, to brainstorm ideas. In pairs they created their own poems and later I chose a line from each pair of students to create the collective poem that follows. To my surprise some of the dyslexic children came up with the best ideas and rhymes with the help of online rhyming dictionaries. Obviously, being able to participate boosts their self-esteem.



## 7th B's Adapted version of "Don't" by Michael Rosen

### DON'T

Don't do,

Don't do,

Don't do that.

Don't pull faces,

Don't talk in class.

Don't pick your ears,

Don't be rude at school.

Who do they think I am?

Some kind of fool?

One day

they'll say

Don't put your folder on your shoulder,

don't add the teacher on Twitter

don't put rocks in your socks.

don't stick your test on your desk.

Don't draw on your jaw.

and don't be unhelpful, be respectful

Don't play bingo near the window.

don't put glue in your shoe

don't paint the screen with green

and don't play while you pray

don't play while you pray.

Don't what?

Don't play while you pray.

Don't what?

Don't play while you pray.

Who do they think I am?

Some kind of fool?

SEE VIDEO 2 Our version of "Don't"

[https://drive.google.com/file/d/1V1tDg\\_GdkNLaoRYDgkcnz5bcchX7Z9Mr/view?usp=s](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1V1tDg_GdkNLaoRYDgkcnz5bcchX7Z9Mr/view?usp=s)  
haring

Needless to say, all students were so enthralled by Michael Rosen's performance and charming personality that they kept asking me to watch more videos of his poetry. They loved "Chocolate Cake," "No Breathing in Class" and "The Car Trip" and I revelled

in their new enthusiasm for poetry. The former poem “Don’t” was done with one of the 7th form groups and the following, “The Car Trip” by the other. (See Appendix)

## **THE SCHOOL TRIP**

(7th Form A’s adapted version of “The Car Trip” by Michael Rosen)

Teacher says: ‘Right, girls, this is a very long journey.

I want you all to be good.

The driver can’t concentrate if you are going mad in the back.

Do you understand?’

So we say: “OK, Miss, OK. Don’t worry,” and off we go.

And we start The Moaning:

“It’s very hot. Can we open the window? When will we arrive? She sneezed all over me.

Yuck! Can I change places?”

And the teacher tries to be exciting:

‘Look out the window. There’s a lamp-post.’

And we go on with The Moaning:

“I’m bored. Can I drink Coke? I’m thirsty. Miss, she’s punching me. I want to go to the toilet.”

And the teacher tries to be exciting again:

‘Look out the window. There’s a tree.’

And we go on:

“Miss, I really need to go to the toilet. Can I unfasten my seatbelt? I’m feeling sick. She threw up on me. Open the windows! I’m cold. Can we close them? She took my pencil case.”

And the driver says; ‘Right I’m stopping the bus. I AM STOPPING THE BUS.

‘Now, if you don’t stop it, I’m going to put you out of the bus and leave you by the side of the road.’

She started it. I didn’t. She started it.

The Teacher says:I don’t care who started it! The driver can’t concentrate if you go mad in the back.

Do you understand?’

And we say; “OK Miss, OK, don’t worry. May I go to the toilet?”

Another aspect I took into account when teaching poetry with SEN students in mind, was creating an appropriate atmosphere for learning. Not all students enjoy performing poetry, so I allowed them to recite or just read their poems in a loud voice without imposing any acting on them. Eventually, all students got carried away and tried out their acting skills at some point of the year, experimenting with different tones and voices, using facial expressions, hand gestures, props and even dressing up on some occasions. “Success can only be achieved if there is harmony between the teacher and

the learner and an atmosphere of trust.”<sup>25</sup>

## **A.F Harrold**

On Spotify and on his official website ([www.afharroldkids.com](http://www.afharroldkids.com)), the teacher can find a great variety of captivating poems performed by the talented novelist and poet A.F. Harrold. In “A Poem About a Dog Having a Bath” and “Grandma,” students can easily pinpoint the main elements of performance poetry. These features are: the use of repetition, anaphora, internal and external rhyme, alliteration, onomatopoeia, change of voice and tone to help memorisation of lines and add musicality, body language (facial expressions and hand gestures mainly), voice projection, eye-contact with the audience and sometimes addressing the audience explicitly. What is more, my students delighted in the poems’ humorous tone and A.F. Harrold’s astounding acting skills.

The poem “I Miss You” by A.F. Harrold, illustrated and read by Chris Riddell, has a serious and moving tone. Its endearing illustrations are the perfect companion to its lines. This simile poem is ideal for borrowing its pattern and asking students to dedicate it to someone they miss. <sup>26</sup>

By pairing up SEN students with more proficient ones, the latter may act as scribes as spelling can be a daunting task for the former. Allowing thinking time with a partner helps SEN students gain confidence before engaging in a collaborative - creative activity such as the writing of a new poem as from the pattern of the one done

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<sup>25</sup> (Schneider and Crombie, 2012, p.4)

<sup>26</sup> <https://youtu.be/PXPUC-DZ9bA>

in class. Encouraging students to rewrite, change or play with a poem makes the literary text less intimidating and closer to them. Besides, the intervention of a text fosters a greater understanding of its lexical, grammatical and stylistic features.

## **II. 2. 1. Found Poetry**

Once students seemed to be more familiarised with poetry and less threatened by it, I introduced Found Poetry to them. It's a type of poetry created by taking words, phrases, and sometimes whole passages from other poems or prose pieces, even non-literary texts, to create a new poem. It is like making a collage, recycling words to form a poem. Words can either be highlighted in a text, cut out or as in this case, crossed out. Through this textual reduction, students can learn to select relevant information and summarise texts, a skill most students find hard to acquire, more so, SEN students. The following are examples of Blackout Poetry which my students prepared from factual information about knighthood as an introduction to a story project on Arthurian legends.





# The World of Knights and Chivalry



The idea of knighthood goes back to the time of Ancient Rome, when the emperor's personal bodyguards were known as 'miles' or knights. But the most familiar picture of the knight comes from the Middle Ages, which lasted from about the tenth to the fifteenth century AD. This is when we first see these mounted warriors, clad in armour and bearing a sword, shield and spear, riding into battle at the side of kings like Arthur or Richard the Lionheart.

In fact, the concepts of knighthood and chivalry (the code by which knights behaved) had evolved over a long period of time. They were known about from as early as the ninth century AD, though it was not for another hundred years or so that stories of famous individual knights, like the ones in this book, began to be told. In Europe, knighthood evolved at the same time as the feudal system. Under this system, knights gave their fealty (a promise to serve) to a great nobleman who, in return, provided the knights with a horse, weapons and a place to live. This gave the nobles their own private armies and, since they owed fealty to the king, when the king went to war, the nobles and their knights went along with him.

Like Tom, boys from the age of nine or ten were apprenticed to a knight to be trained in the arts of correct behaviour, good manners and skill with horse and weapons. This training usually lasted between six and eight years and fell into three stages. When they first arrived at the home of the knight, they became pages with duties ranging from work in the kitchens to caring for the horses. Then, aged around twelve or thirteen, they became squires, progressing to a more formal level of training. They virtually became personal servants to the lord, waiting on him and keeping his armour and weapons cleaned and polished. Squires wore silver spurs as a sign of their status. Finally, when they reached sixteen or seventeen, they became knights themselves if their families could afford it.

This generally involved quite an elaborate ceremony. First, the squire took a special ceremonial bath, to show that he was washing away any old, bad habits and preparing himself for his new life. Then, he usually spent the night alone in a church or chapel, with his sword laid before him on the altar, thinking about the duties he would undertake as a knight. This was known as a vigil.

In the morning, the candidate proceeded either to the main hall of the castle or to the courtyard. There, in the presence of all the other pages and squires as well as most of the household, he was formally made a knight. The lord himself struck the knight lightly on the shoulder (this was called the buffet of the dubbing) and helped to fasten on a new set of gold or gilded spurs in token of his new rank.

After this, depending on how wealthy his family was, the new knight either continued to serve the lord in whose house he had been trained, or returned to his own lands and himself became a lord with pages, squires and knights in his service.

During their time as pages and squires, the would-be knights learned about the code of chivalry by which all knights were expected to live. This was based on the idea of the strong caring for the weak. All knights were required to help people in distress, especially women and children, and to behave in an honourable way. They also had to champion right over wrong, uphold the laws of God and the Church, and serve their king with total obedience.

Many of the ideas of chivalry came about when the Church, concerned about general lawlessness and violence, tried to impose order on the warlike lords and their knights by making them take oaths to uphold the peace. This introduced a spiritual dimension into chivalry, which has remained a part of it ever since. It also gave rise to several orders of chivalry, such as the Knights Templar or the Order of St John of Jerusalem, who were devoted to protecting pilgrims bound for the Holy Land.





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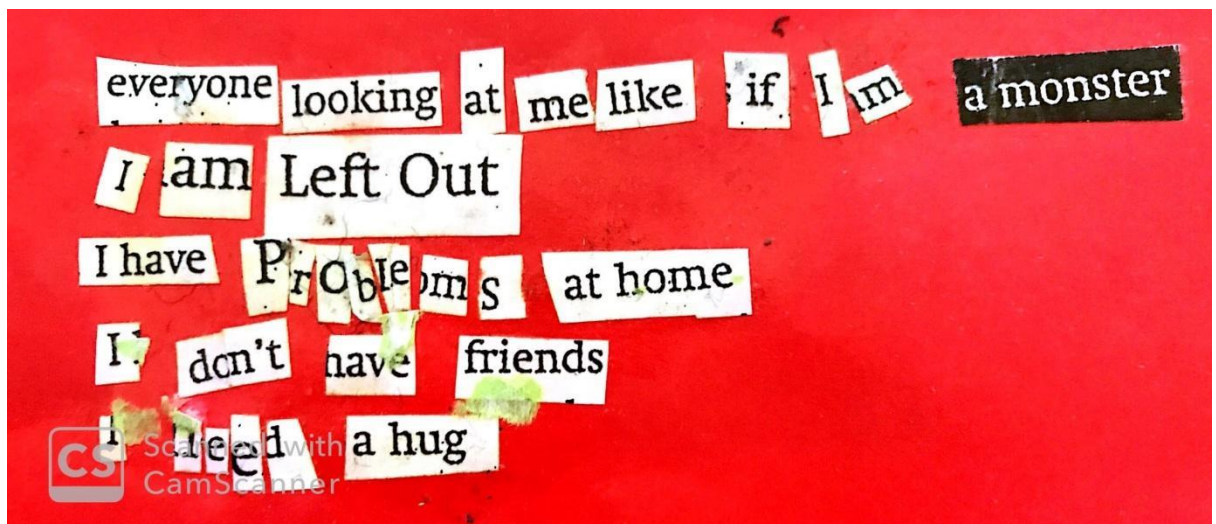
His family was the new knight's family. He either continued to serve the lord in whose house he had been training or returned to his own land and himself became a lord with pages, squires and knights in his service.

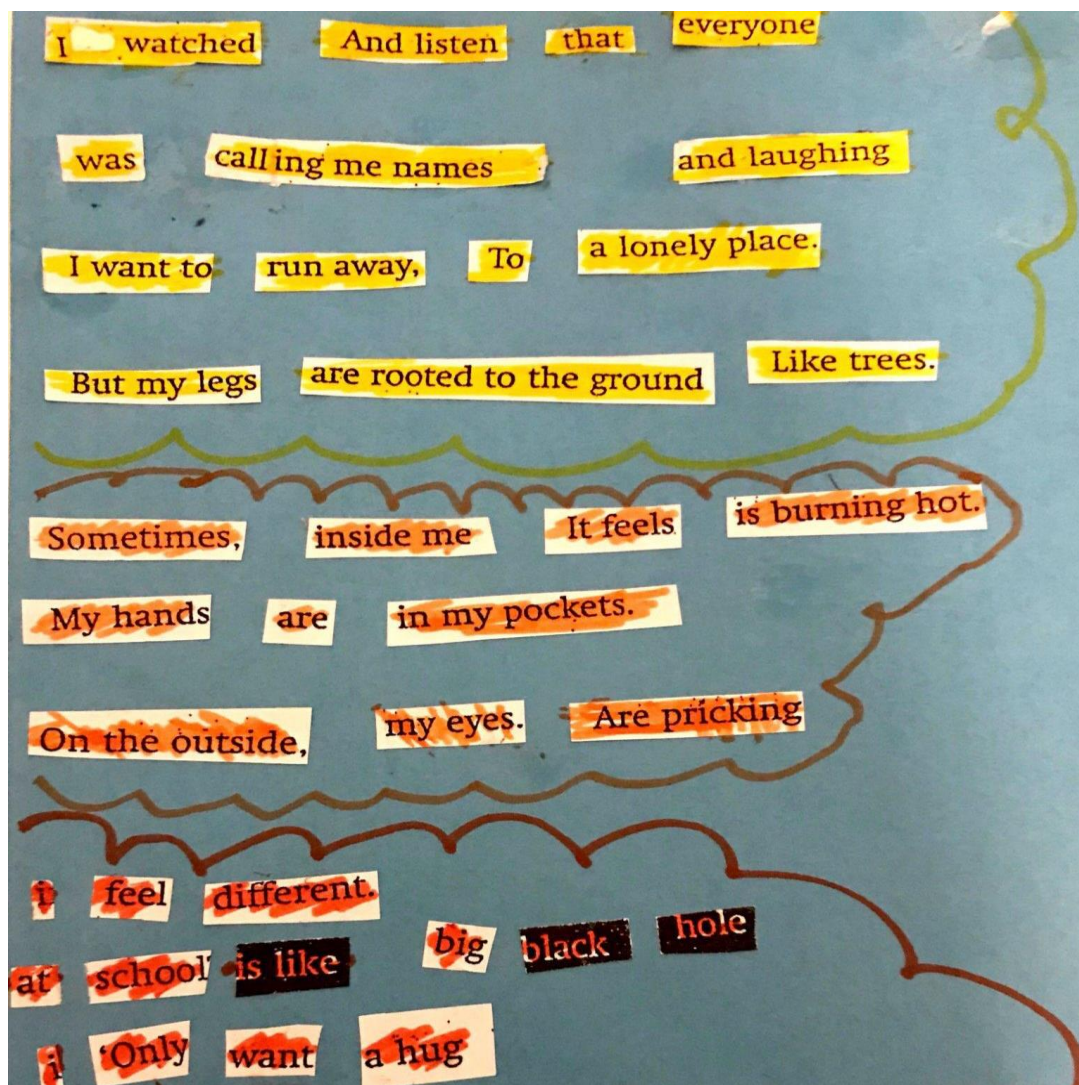
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For SEN students it is much easier to do Found Poetry than Blackout Poetry since long texts may confuse them whereas getting cuttings from texts they have already worked with facilitates their work. We read and analysed several thought-provoking poems in class on bullying, name-calling, being left out, jealousy and other relatable themes. Afterwards, I cut words and phrases for them to create their own poem in groups. This is what two groups with SEN students came up with:





Prior to starting, I told students to focus on content and to enjoy the activity rather than concentrating on syntax and grammar. Grammatical accuracy in this kind of poem might be difficult as students use bits and pieces from other texts. Therefore, as a follow up activity, students worked on achieving grammatical accuracy.

Found poetry also helps students summarise any sort of text and teaches them to skim a text in order to find what's relevant in it. This way we are helping them develop a reading strategy that they generally lack, more so, SEN students.

Selecting the major ideas within a text is a difficult task for all students especially for SEN ones. This is why an activity such as the one proposed, in which students have to pick out the most relevant words and phrases, helps them develop metacognitive strategies. The advantage of carrying out this kind of activity is that students are already familiar with the vocabulary and grammatical structures with which they will have to work as they belong to literary and non-literary texts previously analysed in class. Given that SEN students' strength relies on a greater use of the right hemisphere, which is the one related to creativity, artistic skills and lateral thinking, Found Poetry activities allow them to give free rein to their imagination and manual skills. Engaging in group work is a further advantage of aforementioned activities as SEN students often need the support of their mates.

## **II. 2. 2. Bio Poems**

Bio poems are an interesting and easy-to-handle type of poems. Biography poems, or Bio poems, are reflective ten-line poems about oneself or anybody else. They are generally unrhymed poems that allow students to express their personality and introduce themselves to others, making them a perfect activity for the first day of school. Bio poems can also be used to describe someone else; they are ideal for describing historical or literary figures. As students may be too embarrassed to talk about themselves, they can interview a classmate and create a Bio Poem of someone else. As they are guided and structured poems, students don't have to produce long lines and they feel confident enough to complete them. They can later type the poem on Wordle, an internet tool used for generating word clouds. The teacher can make their own

template and adapt it to their students' level of English.

Below is the template I made and a severely dyslexic student's production.

\_\_\_\_\_

**NAME**

**IS** \_\_\_\_\_

**FOUR ADJECTIVES THAT DESCRIBE YOU**

\_\_\_\_\_

**SIBLING OF (OR DAUGHTER OF)**

**FOND OF** \_\_\_\_\_

**THREE PEOPLE, -ING ACTIVITIES OR THINGS YOU LOVE**

**WHO FEELS** \_\_\_\_\_

**THREE FEELINGS YOU HAVE AND WHEN THEY ARE FELT**

**AND WHO IS SCARED OF** \_\_\_\_\_

**(THREE THINGS THAT SCARE YOU)**

**WHO IS GOOD AT** \_\_\_\_\_

**THREE ING- ACTIVITIES OR SUBJECTS**

**WHO HOPES TO** \_\_\_\_\_


**TWO THINGS THAT YOU WOULD LIKE TO BECOME, IMPROVE OR DO IN THE  
FUTURE**

**LIVES IN** \_\_\_\_\_

**BUENOS AIRES, ARGENTINA OR A BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF WHERE YOU LIVE**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**SURNAME**





**BIO POEM**

The Bio Poem is a reflective, 10 line poem about oneself.

Justina  
(NAME)

IS generous honest kind cheerful  
(FOUR ADJECTIVES THAT DESCRIBE YOU)

SIBLING OF (OR DAUGHTER OF) my angel, Silvestre and Corina  
FOND OF playing hockey, cooking and playing the guitar  
(THREE PEOPLE, -ING ACTIVITIES OR THINGS YOU LOVE)

WHO FEELS sad when I fight with my sibling and friends  
(THREE FEELINGS YOU HAVE AND WHEN THEY ARE FELT)

AND WHO IS SCARED OF sniders, scorpions and all types of bugs  
(THREE THINGS THAT SCARE YOU)

WHO IS GOOD AT playing hockey, handball and cooking  
(THREE ING- ACTIVITIES OR SUBJECTS)

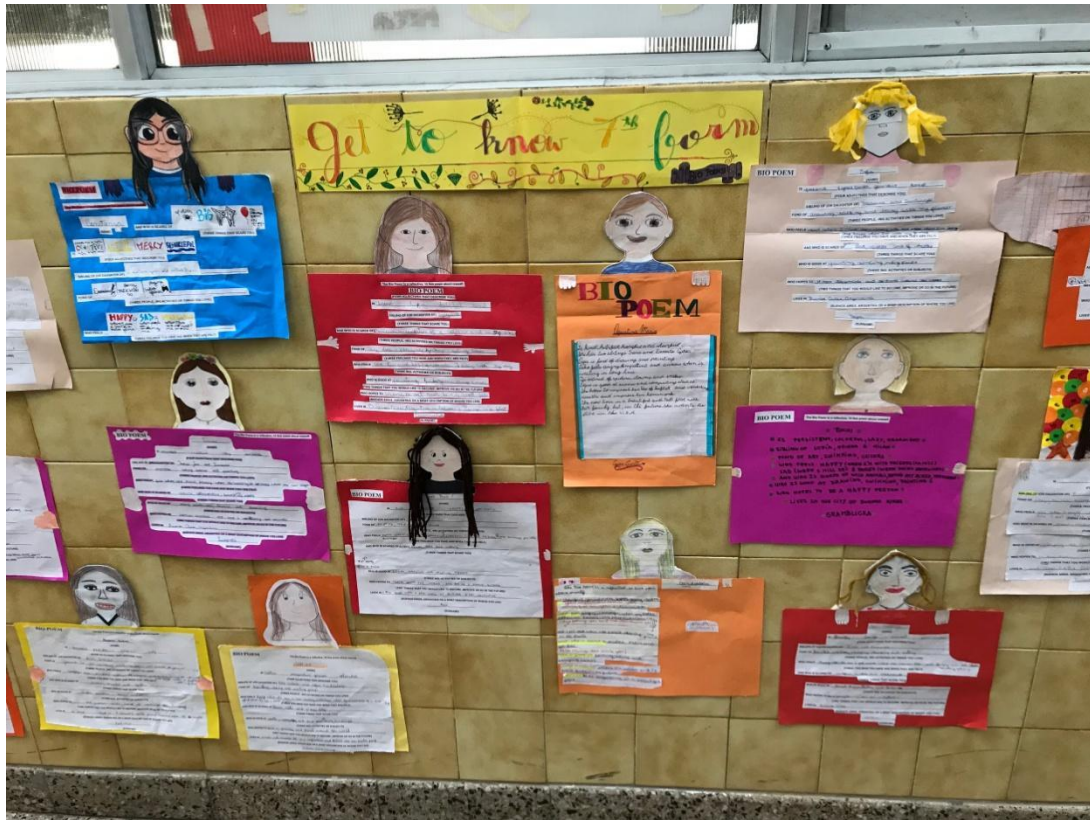
WHO HOPES TO be a hockey player, to be in a TV channel and be a photographer  
(TWO THINGS THAT YOU WOULD LIKE TO BECOME, IMPROVE OR DO IN THE FUTURE)

LIVES IN Buenos Aires, Argentina  
(BUENOS AIRES, ARGENTINA OR A BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF WHERE YOU LIVE)

CS Scanned with CamScanner  
(SURNAME)

When they handed in their work; I read out some lines and students had to guess whose poem it was. Of course, they all mentioned it was hard for them to complete what they were good at and were worried about seeming boastful. However, as they all had to complete that line, they realized that they would not be bragging just sharing their skills. It was great for getting to know each other and bonding. We ended up hanging them proudly in the corridor for everyone to see them. Among them were various poems by proud dyslexic students.





Due to the fact that bio poems are highly structured ones, SEN students tend to feel at ease complying with the activity. What is more, the teacher can create their own template according to their level of English and interests. As the completion of the template is a very personal one, students can express their likes and dislikes, fears, concerns for their future, etc. This activity may trigger various others, such as: guessing the name of the author of the poem, getting to know one another, interviewing a classmate and designing their Bio Poem, drawing themselves, etc.

Very often, SEN students feel different from the rest and are more self-conscious. Carrying out this activity may allow them to bond with their classmates by realising that they share common interests.

### **II. 2. 3. Poetry Competition**

The last project we carried out in 2019 was holding a poetry competition. Students had to enrol voluntarily. They could prepare any of the poems we had worked on in class. So I stuck the complete list on a wall and uploaded a recording of each poem into the school's platform for them to listen to the correct pronunciation and intonation. They did not need to memorize the poems, but I told them that they had to recite them using all the techniques that the performance poets used. Some teachers and the school's head became the jury and to our surprise all SEN students participated and two of them were runners-up during the prize giving ceremony which followed.



SEE [VIDEO 3 Poetry Competition.mov](#)

### **Rationale behind holding a poetry competition**

On the one hand, a poetry competition entails that students have to go over all the poems worked in class for them to choose which one to recite. On the other, once having chosen the poem, they must practise reciting it while adding body language, different tones of voice and the establishment of eye contact with the audience.

Furthermore, facing the jury and their peers becomes an extra challenge for SEN students who are normally withdrawn, and a source of happiness once having performed successfully. The jury often asks them the reason why they have chosen such a poem, which allows them to expand on their choice. To the jury's surprise, the students who offer themselves to take part in the competition are often the SEN ones, most probably because this activity fosters their innate acting skills.

### **II. 3. Prose**

According to Sir Jim Rose, when students have had difficulties decoding texts for long, they are likely to lack efficient strategies for reading comprehension. Therefore, even if children can manage to read a text with certain fluency it doesn't necessarily mean they can fully understand it. What is more, if reading is slow, due to weak phonological decoding, this can lead to poor understanding of a text and a lack of enjoyment causing demotivation to improve reading and spelling skills (Everatt et al., 2002; Snowling, 2000;

Stanovich, 1986).

When selecting suitable reading material, the first thing to take into account is our students' interest. Generally, we make that choice before actually meeting our students. Therefore, to cater for all tastes we can provide them with a wide variety of books through a lending library or as part of the curriculum, including fiction and non-fiction: graphic novels, biographies, journals, mystery stories, science fiction, fantasy, realistic and/or historical fiction, among so many other appealing genres. Many preteen SEN students may prefer non-fiction books and there are very interesting ones available which will facilitate their progress in reading. In addition, dyslexic students may find them easier to read than fiction because "they do not have to remember events from the beginning of the book in order to make sense of the text- facts tend to be short and self-contained." (Ruttle, 2009, p.11)

### **II. 3. 1. Lending Library Strategies**

It is paramount for SEN students to be exposed throughout the year to a great array of texts via a lending library. It is advisable for the teacher to have selected a number of texts with a dyslexia-friendly font, medium length and simple lexis. Regarding the latter, the "five finger test" often comes in handy for them to choose a suitable text. If when reading the first page, they come across more than five words they do not understand, the text is definitely not for them.

As a lending library activity, what has proved to be very effective in encouraging students to continue reading is sharing their opinion of the books through the following

activities: becoming booktubers and recording themselves, creating a scale model to show the setting and main characters and later describe what they have done orally or through drawing a poster and explaining it.

In order to do so, the following rubric for fictional texts can be used:

**Story elements that you must mention and analyse:**

- a) **Title** (explain its connection with the plot)
- b) **Author** (mention if you've read any other novel by the same author)
- c) **Genre** (What kind of story is it? Fantasy, science fiction, realistic fiction, historical fiction, biography, legend, myth, fable, etc.)
- d) **Main themes** (What is the story about? Love- friendship- family- growing up- honesty- differences- imagination- magic- kindness, etc.)
- e) **Setting** (Where and when does the story take place?)
- f) **Main characters:** (Describe their personalities. Is there an antagonist?)
- g) **Plot** (What happens in the story? Introduction- conflict- resolution) Don't spoil the ending. Just mention if it lived up to your expectations or failed to do so.

**Add your opinion as well.** Would you recommend the novel to a friend or relative? Why (not)?

How many stars would you give it? Why?

Of course, all the literary elements should be previously introduced and explained in class. The fact that the book review is done orally and students are given options on how they can deliver their presentations, eases the anxiety that can otherwise arise in both dyslexic and non-dyslexic students when writing an essay. Moreover, allowing them to choose whether to record their presentation or do it on-the-spot also reduces their tension. For their creative energy to flow, they can be told they may wear a costume, add a song, rap, dance or any artistic skill they have as the main objective is to have fun.

A self-assessment record sheet can be of use for SEN students to know what to expect from the teacher's corrections. As a metacognitive strategy, evaluating their own progress toward the completion of a task allows them to become more autonomous and reflect on their achievements.

#### Self- assessment Record Sheet

**My oral presentation is successful when...**

- ☐ I can give my opinion and comment on the plot, setting, characters, main themes and other story elements.
- ☐ I try to avoid grammar mistakes.
- ☐ I use a wide range of vocabulary and include new words and phrases I've learnt this term.
- ☐ My pronunciation is clear and I make sure everyone can hear me.

Another motivating classroom library activity that students enjoy is preparing book reviews for the students one year below. They can work in the computer laboratory for them to access online dictionaries, add images and use the word processor spell-checker. After correcting their work, they can print them to store them in the school library. Adding a clear and real purpose to the task entices them to read as they can find a purpose in their work. What they enjoy the most is rating the books, adding emojis to their reviews, making explicit references to the target reader and addressing them.

### **Rationale for incorporating a lending library in the classroom**

SEN students tend to choose non-fiction texts for home reading because they contain less figurative language, which they find difficult to interpret. What is more, they find illustrated texts more appealing because of all the scaffolding of the visual text. By providing them with a wide variety of book genres, such as graphic novels, biographies, journals, etc, they are given a taste of different text structures that will eventually help

them discover their own favourite genre.

Reading at home and at their own pace with a set of guidelines on what aspects of the book to focus on, allows SEN students to gain more confidence and independence. With extra exposure to books, SEN students do better at school, as reading exercises their brains, improves concentration, and fluency (speed, accuracy and comprehension) and triggers their imagination.

It is advisable that they listen to audiobooks while reading not only to improve their pronunciation and intonation but because this extra source of input will allow them to understand the text better through the changes of tone and voice. Moreover, the use of a bookmark as a ruler, together with the audio, will help them trace the text from line to line.

Reading increases SEN student's vocabulary. They incorporate new words they would never come across in ordinary talk. It helps them develop inference skills by figuring out the meaning of unfamiliar words through their context. Students will take pride in sharing their presentations with their classmates, especially if they involve showing off their artistic skills.

### **II. 3. 2. Short Stories**

Short stories are an excellent resource for dyslexic students. Their brief length makes them more approachable and less intimidating than novels. The fact they are concise, their narration direct and explicit, their plots simple and linear, makes them a perfect choice for dyslexic or reluctant readers.

Be they short stories or novels, transversality in education allows SEN students to make connections between subjects enhancing their learning experience. For example, as is my case in 7th form, the topic in Social Studies is the Middle Ages. For that reason, the adventure stories selected are those set in that same historical period: abridged and simplified versions of “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight”, “The Canterbury Tales” both written in prose and Arthurian tales like Sir Thomas Malory’s “The Sword in the Stone” retold by contemporary authors.

Normally, all students find the world of knights and chivalry gripping especially because they are already familiarised with the historical period and with well-known Arthurian legends due to the countless versions they have already read or watched in films. Eliciting prior knowledge is always convenient when introducing a new topic to add to all students’ understanding when they read. Furthermore, anticipating and pre-teaching the vocabulary they may encounter in the text is vital for dyslexic students. Therefore, the teacher may ask students to look for pictures online of specific words, in this case, connected to knighthood before starting to read the stories.

Identifying the stages the hero goes through during their quest, allows students to appreciate them better. Joseph Campbell’s concept of the ‘Hero’s Journey’ or ‘monomyth’ is of great help when analysing the plight of the protagonist. Recognizing the narrative pattern in stories allows students to understand them better and even write their own stories, which is what my 7th formers do as a final task: the writing of a Medieval Story.

At the end of each year, all upper primary students from fourth to seventh form become engaged in writing a tale for what is known as the ‘story project.’ They are the result of a gradual process which begins in the Literature class by reading and analysing

a great variety of tales. The students learn to identify the main elements that are combined to make up a story, taking into account the distinctive characteristics of each genre. It is only then that students start to write several drafts, putting into practice everything they have learnt in their Use of English and Writing lessons, culminating with the highly imaginative stories they produce and are proud to share with the whole school community as parents and close relatives are invited to read them.

What characterizes the story project is the fact that it fuels students' imagination, as from the planning of the plots to the moment they design their covers, illustrations and blurbs. Students not only enjoy creating stories but also having them read by their family and classmates who write their feedback at the back of their books. They find the whole process very rewarding especially when the most creative stories are published in the school magazine.

Process writing is particularly beneficial for dyslexic students as in their first drafts they can give free rein to their imagination and have fun elaborating their stories without worrying about spelling or grammatical accuracy. Completing the final draft generates a profound sense of achievement in them as they realise what they are capable of writing.

In 2020, due to distance learning, the story project had to be adapted to take place virtually. Therefore, once their stories were corrected, they were given the possibility of recording them by reading them aloud or preparing an animated version of them. For the former purpose, they had a special virtual session in which they were taught how to change their tone of voice when changing characters or to reflect a certain feeling, to add onomatopoeias and sound effects. Once their recordings were ready, they were uploaded onto Spotify where they can still be found under the title "Arthurian



Legends.” As to the animated version of their stories, students were able to share them in a virtual session devoted exclusively to this purpose. Afterwards, students were able to write their feedback on their classmates’ stories on a padlet.

### **Rationale for reading and writing short stories**

Reaching the completion of short stories in class gives SEN students a sense of fulfilment that boosts their self-esteem. SEN students benefit enormously from doing process writing on the computer. As they are already familiar with the features of legends and myths, they can create their own versions, at first, focusing on plot rather than spelling and grammatical accuracy. The next step is editing their story with the teacher’s help. The use of the computer plus that of the spell checker, dictionaries and thesaurus are invaluable tools for students with dysgraphia. A further step entails the design of paratextual elements such as the cover, blurb, back cover, title page, dedication and illustrations. This is often the part of the task SEN students most enjoy since it appeals to their artistic skills.

### **II. 3. 3. Novel: *Kensuke’s Kingdom* by Michael Morpurgo**

One of the novelists for children that appeals to SEN students, owing to his thematic concerns and reader-friendly style, is Michael Morpurgo. His most critically acclaimed novels: *The Butterfly Lion*, *Outlaw*, *An Elephant in the Garden* and *Kensuke’s Kingdom* are great page-turners for SEN students for they are well-written texts with plenty to

discuss, suitable layout and illustrations to break up the text and keep the story moving.

In 2019, my students read one of Michael Morpurgo's most well-known novels *Kensuke's Kingdom* whose audiobook can be found online. Like most of his novels and stories, it has to do with the predicament of war. Contrary to what happens in most novels addressed to children, he offers a less "sanitised" viewpoint of the atrocities perpetrated in times of war as well as dealing with taboo topics such as death, adults' abuse of power, physical punishment, bullying, among others. This is precisely what makes his novels so appealing to students: their realism.

#### **II. 3. 4. Elements to take into account when choosing a novel: relevance, relatability and realism**

Most probably, one of the elements that young readers find so engaging in Morpurgo's novels is the fact that they can relate to the character's problems. Daniel Franklin emphasizes the importance of making books relevant for dyslexic children by choosing relatable material. Pre-teens and teens go through a difficult phase in which they seek independence, try to define their own identity and test authority, especially that of their own parents. "By the end of such novels, characters are shown to have matured, and by implication, readers too will have moved a step closer to adult knowledge and experience".<sup>27</sup> When stories depict life with gritty realism, children learn to confront problems in their own lives from how characters face their inner and outer conflicts. Children's writers consider that no matter how realistic a story is, "if it is intended to be

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<sup>27</sup> (Reynolds, 2010)

read by children, it should end on a note of optimism, or at least hope.”<sup>28</sup> Nearly all Morpurgo’s novels follow this leaning.

In “Kensuke’s Kingdom,” Michael, a modern *Robinson Crusoe*, falls from his parents’ yacht and ends up on an island in the Pacific. There he meets Kensuke, a Japanese, a very reserved man who has lived on the island since the bombing of Nagasaki. Both characters are enriched with each other’s culture. In this way, the reader may also learn to appreciate Kensuke’s idiosyncrasy and eventually, respect cultural diversity. There is increasing evidence that demonstrates that reading fiction is not merely a source of entertainment but has psychological benefits for readers as they develop empathy and an understanding of interpersonal skills.

All students, but especially SEN ones, read “Kensuke’s Kingdom” with great interest. As an after-reading activity, we recreated the atmosphere described by Kensuke of his homeland, pupils made origami figures, such as the well-known crane, which symbolises peace and hope, to decorate the classroom. It was in these artistic skills that SEN students excelled. Afterwards, they followed tutorials online of Sumi-e (black ink painting) and drew flowers, birds and landscapes which they hung proudly on the wall.

Prior to these after-reading activities, I had shown them a presentation with basic information about Japan and its culture, among which is the traditional wearing of kimonos, the activity with which we rounded off our class. It is worth mentioning that, as I explained to my students, we would be learning how to wear this traditional garment (left panel over the right one) and to respect its cultural significance. I aimed at avoiding

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<sup>28</sup> (Tucker, 2006)

cultural appropriation, that is, borrowing elements from other cultures without due respect, and educated my students to appreciate and respect Japanese and other cultures. As a final touch of our special class, they posed for the school magazine.



Pre-teens enjoy first-person narratives, such as journals, diaries and letters as in Morpurgo's *Kensuke's Kingdom*. They are able to relate more closely to characters' feelings and to arrive at a deeper understanding of the characters' behaviour when adopting their perspective. Personal narration usually entails the use of colloquial language which reflects social class and culture. Furthermore, Morpurgo uses an "autobiographical voice" in many of his novels, which is why students often wonder whether they are fiction or true stories (Gamble, 2008, p. 53). For instance, in "Kensuke's Kingdom," Morpurgo includes a postscript with a letter by Kensuke's son supposedly written four years after the book was first published, confirming the realism of the story.

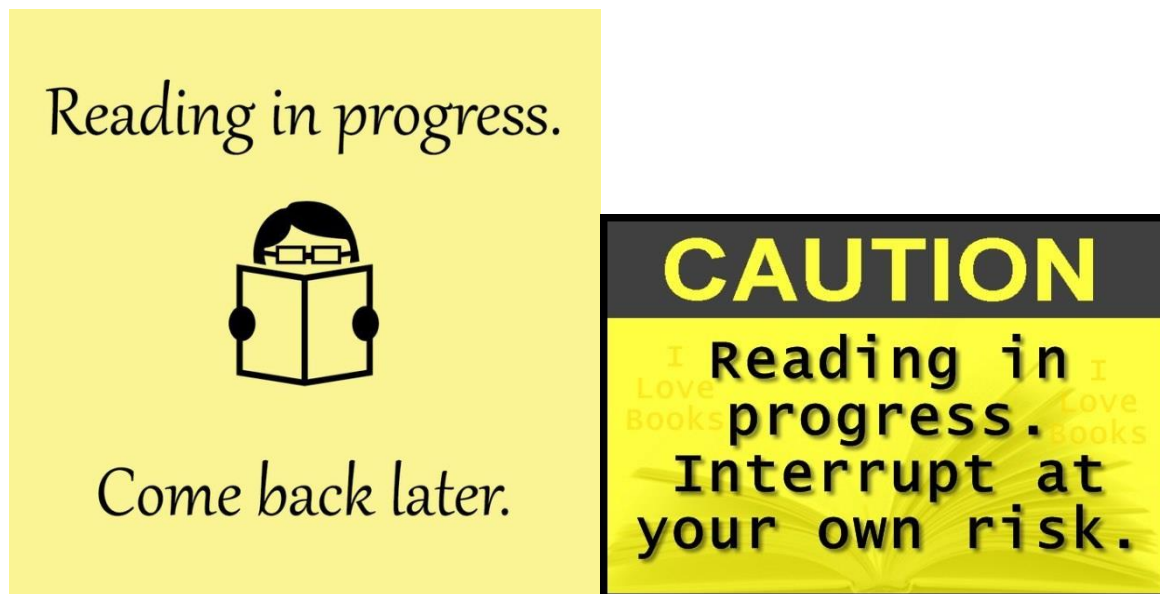
### **II. 3. 5. In class reading**

In primary school, most of a novel's reading should be done in the EFL class more so when having SEN students among them. As the year goes by, in 7th form, I try to assign students more pages to read on their own for them to gain autonomy. Each lesson begins with a recapitulation of what was read in the previous class. This can be done through a retelling by varying point of view. At first, they narrate events from a third person perspective and as they gain more confidence, I ask them to turn it into a first person's and tell the story from one of the characters' point of view. This allows students to explore events from different angles, thus contributing to a deeper understanding of the text. Sometimes I even add key vocabulary on the board for them to use during the retelling. It is important to vary activities when going over previous chapters not only to avoid boredom but also while some SEN students enjoy doing role-plays like hot

seating, chat shows and trials, others prefer doing presentations or more traditional retellings.

After activating prior knowledge of the text, prediction activities can be held by analysing the paratext or anticipating how the characters will respond to internal or external conflicts. Pre-reading activities such as activating schemata and anticipation are necessary for all students but crucial for dyslexic ones.

In order to create the right atmosphere for reading, I make sure students will not receive any interruption. It is a good idea to hang on the door a “do not disturb” sign while doing the reading, as SEN students could have limited concentration, especially ADHD ones who may be fidgety and inattentive. There are plenty of signs on Pinterest as the ones below, though to get my students involved in decorating the class, I ask them to prepare them themselves and we hang a different one each time.



Moreover, while reading, Daniel Franklin suggests to SEN students that they should point to each word to follow along and stay focused. They can hold a blue

bookmark as ruler under each line as this colour contrasts with the white of the page and eyes adjust easily to blue. I explained this reason to them, prepared the bookmark in class and they kept it inside their books to have it ready when reading.

David Grant explains in *That's the way I think: dyslexia, dyspraxia and ADHD* that “around 40 percent to 50 per cent of the dyslexics and dyspraxics he studied reported a very noticeable and positive improvement in the visual perception of text when using a coloured overlay, such as Cellophane paper which they find is best suited to them. Some individuals with ADHD also report an improvement. A number of dyslexics, dyspraxics and individuals with ADHD, experience visual stress when reading words printed in black on white paper and in a small size of print. This may be one key reason why some people, who enjoyed reading when young, gradually stop reading for pleasure as they enter their teens. Children's books are generally printed in a large typeface. However, as stories increase in complexity, print size decreases and an underlying visual stress factor then becomes more of an obstacle to the enjoyment of reading.”

Nowadays, it is easier to find well-known novels' audiobooks and the teacher can alternate between this option and reading aloud. Contrary to what I did for years, now, whenever we have to read climactic moments, I do most of the reading aloud instead of my students. For children with dyslexia, being read to is very important. “They gain exposure to print, giving them the opportunity to recognize written language which differs from spoken one. They develop an ear for the structure and rules of written language.” (Franklin, Daniel. 2018. p. 86) Whenever there are long dialogues, I ask students to volunteer to read out and to imagine the voice and tone the characters would use in each exchange. The following are strategies recommended for reading in the

dyslexic-friendly classroom that can be used for rereading climactic moments in a novel.

1) Paired reading:

- The dyslexic learner works with a teacher or classmate in a quiet space for 10-15 minutes. The pair sit side by side and read aloud together.
- A signal is agreed on (e.g., a knock on the table). Whenever the learner feels confident, they signal that they want to read alone.
- Whenever the learner hesitates, the supporter provides the word and continues to read aloud with the student until the student signals again.

2) Repeated reading:

- The teacher records the text at the student's speed but maintains fluency and intonation. The teacher marks whenever a page needs to be turned.
- Session outlines:
  1. The student listens to the recording, getting the gist of the text.
  2. The student listens and follows the text closely.
  3. The student listens and reads the text aloud.
  4. The student lowers the recording's volume so they can scarcely hear it and then tries to read the text without prompting.



5. The student reads the text to the teacher.<sup>29</sup>

Once the SEN student has been able to read the text or an assigned extract of a text in pairs, they can pass on to read it on their own to activate the reading mechanisms which Reader Response critics have enlightened us on, that is: anticipating/retrospecting, picturing, interacting and evaluating. Therefore, the activities planned when analysing a literary text should be based on these preconscious mechanisms which will help any kind of student, dyslexic or not, develop critical thinking in order to fully grasp a text.

### **II. 3. 6. Fostering metacognition and critical literacy**

Moreover, teaching metacognitive skills, as stated before, is paramount to allow SEN students to become autonomous readers. The term metacognition implies making students become aware of how their minds are functioning while reading and how active they are in terms of the preconscious mechanisms. Once students realize what is happening in their minds, the teacher can show them how to pose questions to themselves while reading. "The third strategy known as 'reciprocal teaching' is a dialogue between students in which they take turns assuming the role of teacher. Group members check their understanding by stopping at regular intervals to ask questions, summarise, predict and clarify what they have read." (Reid and Wearmouth, 2002)

Literacy is seen not just as learning to read but developing critical awareness for

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<sup>29</sup>

Adapted  
[https://www.britishcouncil.mk/sites/default/files/making\\_classrooms\\_dyslexia\\_friendly.pdf](https://www.britishcouncil.mk/sites/default/files/making_classrooms_dyslexia_friendly.pdf)

from

the empowerment of the reader. The essence of critical literacy education is not solely to understand what the author meant but to examine their use of language, how it affects the reader and the implications of their choice of words. If this is attained by SEN students, it will be a major step towards autonomy. From my experience in class, it is often achieved once having followed the different strategies described along this paper.

## Conclusions

“But what really gets me is that in order for Mr. Daniels to come up with this plan, he must have thought of me outside of school—when he didn’t have to think of me. I bet other teachers have never let me sit in their head one second longer than they had to.”

— **Lynda Mullaly Hunt, *Fish in A Tree***

The quotation above was taken from the novel *Fish in a Tree* by Lynda Mullaly Hunt which inspired me to embark on this quest for finding how to reach and motivate dyslexic students through Literature. Ally, the protagonist, a frustrated sixth-grade student, finds out with the help of her teacher, Mr. Daniels, why she has always felt out of place and struggled so hard with literacy. Ally suffers from dyslexia and ignoring this fact has brought her nothing but trouble. Lynda Mullaly Hunt takes up Albert Einstein’s famous alleged quotation: “Everyone is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid” and she vividly describes the hurdles undiagnosed dyslexic children must overcome. With memorable quotations from Ally, the protagonist: “Alice in Wonderland - a book about living in a world where nothing makes sense - made perfect sense to me” or “Great minds don’t think alike,” this novel challenged my own views as a teacher on how much we respect and value our students’ individuality.

Ally is struck by the realization that her teacher has thought of her outside school. Our demoralised students are, in fact, top of the list concerns we teachers have outside working hours. They are the ones who either awaken our commitment to better our teaching practice or who, hopefully not, could make us question the choice of our

profession when frustrated for not witnessing the expected progress.

When I came across the novel *Fish in a Tree* two years ago, I felt I had the moral duty to make my Literature lessons more inclusive. All children, no matter their level of literacy, should have access and be allowed to derive great pleasure from literary texts and develop critical thinking skills. The springboard for achieving this would be the broadening of my mind through instruction. I have been reading avidly and attending inspiring courses on dyslexia, engaging myself into the humbling experience of embracing diversity.

We, EFL teachers, have a long way to go to become qualified enough to provide SEN students with the necessary tools to confront their obstacles. Nevertheless, over the last four years, everyone involved in education has been talking, in one way or another, about dyslexia owing to the passing of the national law 27306. Enforcing the law through thorough educational policies is long overdue. However, a lot can be done to encourage dyslexic students to read and lose themselves in the enchantment of literature once they are able to conquer their fears. Resorting to multi-sensory teaching, playful activities, meaningful and relatable material, are only a few of the numerous strategies recommended by experts. Will the pace of the lesson be affected by taking SEN students into account when planning lessons? Certainly, but each minute spent on integrating them will be worth it and all students in the class will benefit from it as I hope to have proved through the presentation of the students' videos and their artistic productions. It would be extremely helpful if teacher training colleges should include the findings of neuroscientists and educational therapists on how the dyslexic brain works and empower future teachers on how to integrate SEN students to their mixed-ability classes. For those like myself already teachers it is our responsibility to keep up to date

with the latest research on neurodiversity and its implications when teaching a foreign language and its literature. It is in this manner that we may start to pay our debt with the number of students we have neglected or failed to maximize their rich potential. In this way, students like Ally will feel that we have them on our minds and in our hearts inside and outside school.

## Appendix

### Mr Shadow's Shoes

Mr Shadow's shoes  
Soft-soled shoes

*Shush shush - left and right*  
*Shush shush - out of sight*

Mr Shadow's always there  
No one knows exactly where  
Soft-soled shoes  
Silent on the stairs

*Shush shush - left and right*  
*Shush shush - out of sight*

He's sneaking and he's creeping  
He's spying and he's peeping  
Soft-soled shoes  
Are what he keeps his feet in

*Shush shush - left and right*  
*Shush shush - out of sight*

Like a whisper near the door  
Ghostly in the corridor  
Soft-soled shoes  
Slide across the floor

*Shush shush - left and right*  
*Shush shush - out of sight*

Mr Shadow's shoes  
Soft-soled shoes  
Soft-soled silent shoes  
Soft-soled sloppy shoes  
Soft-soled slidy shoes  
Soft-soled shiny shoes  
Mr Shadow's soft-soled sloppy slidy shiny silent shoes

*Shush shush - left and right*  
*Shush shush - out of sight*

He will always find you  
Creeping up behind you  
He will always find you  
Look out . . . he's behind you

*Shush shush - left and right*  
*Shush shush - out of sight*

*Shush shush - left and right*  
*Shush shush - out of sight*

*Shush shush - left and right*  
*Shush shush - out of sight*

*Shush shush - left and right*  
*Shush shush - out of sight*

*Shush shush - left and right*  
*Shush shush - out of sight*



### Don't by Michael Rosen

Don't do,

Don't do,

Don't do that.

Don't pull faces,

Don't tease the cat.

Don't pick your ears,

Don't be rude at school.

Who do they think I am?

Some kind of fool?

One day they'll say

Don't put toffee in my coffee

don't pour gravy on the baby

don't put beer in his ear

don't stick your toes up his nose.

Don't put confetti on the spaghetti

and don't squash peas on your knees.

Don't put ants in your pants

don't put mustard in the custard

don't chuck jelly at the telly

and don't throw fruit at the computer

don't throw fruit at the computer.

Don't what?

Don't throw fruit at the computer.

Don't what?

Don't throw fruit at the computer.

Who do they think I am?

Some kind of fool?

The Car Trip.

Mum says "Right you two. This is a long car journey. I'm driving, and I can't drive properly if you two are going mad in the back. Do you understand?"

So we go "Okay Mum, okay. Don't worry about it!" And off we go... and we start the moaning.

"Can I have a drink? I want some crisps. Can I open my window? He's got my book. Get off me! That's my ear!"

And Mum tries to be exciting. "Look out the window! There's a lamppost."

And then we go on "Can I have a sweet? He's sitting on me. Are we nearly there? Don't scratch! You never tell him off. Now he's biting his nails. I wanna drink, I wanna drink."

And mum tries to be exciting again. "Look out the window! There's a tree."

Then we go on, "My hands are sticky. He's playing with the door handle now. I feel a bit sick actually. Your nose is all runny. Don't pull my hair! He's punching me, Mum! That's really dangerous, you know?! Mum! He's spitting!"

And mum says, "Right! I'm stopping the car, I am stopping the car!"

She stops the car, "Now, if you two don't stop it, I'm gonna put you out the car and leave you by the side of the road."

"He started it!" "No he started..."

[facepalm] "I don't care who started it, I can't drive properly if you two go mad in the back. Do you understand?"

And we go "Okay Mum, okay. Don't worry about it!"

"Can I have a driiiiiink?"

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