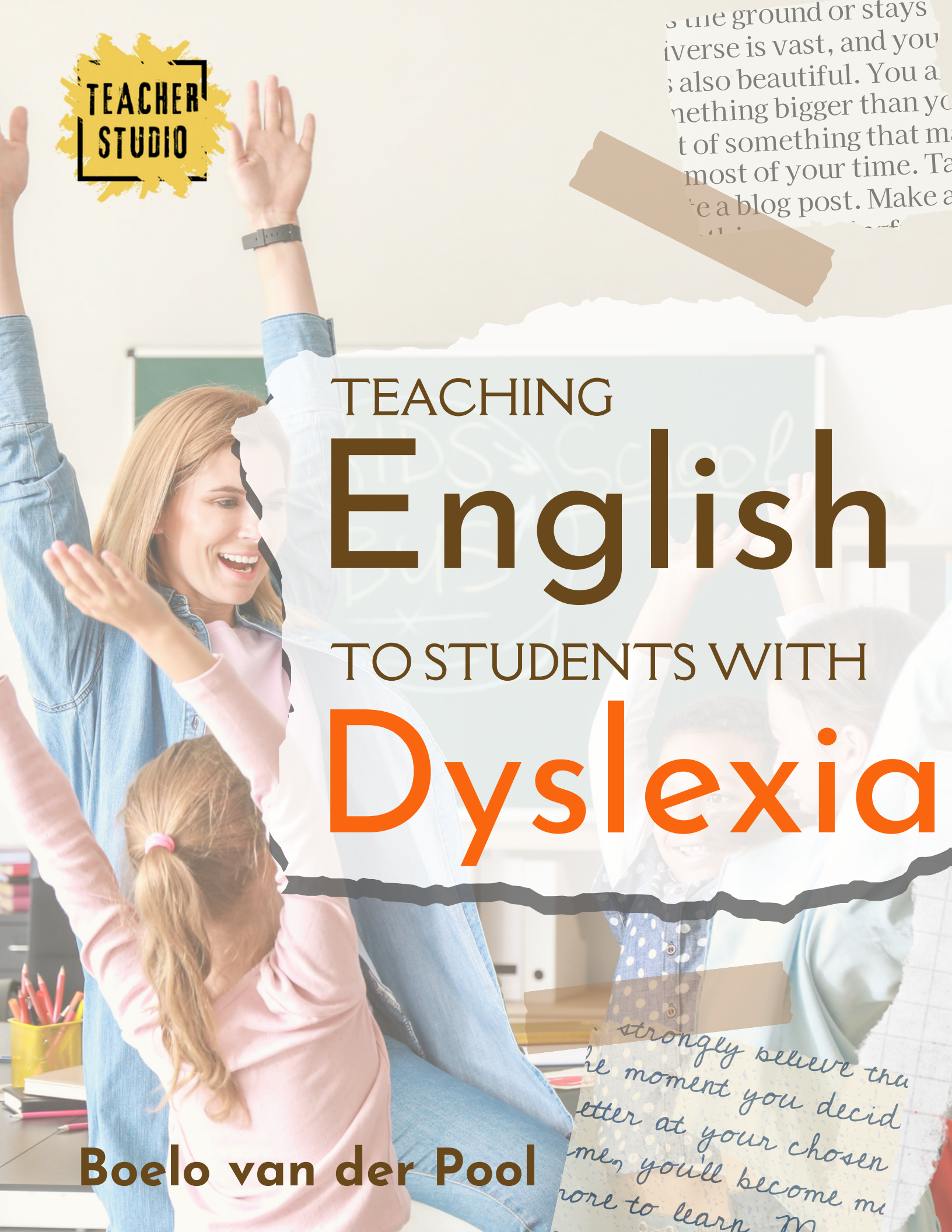
TEACHER STUDIO
TEACHING
English
TO STUDENTS WITH
Dyslexia
Boelo van der Pool

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Dyslexia should never be the reason for not speaking English

Contents

Oh, my goodness...Dyslexia! And now what?

This is often the reaction I see in Facebook groups where a mother (and it is almost always mothers) asks this question. Their child has just been diagnosed with dyslexia and it seems that the family has fallen into a giant abyss. And it is understandable.
Unfortunately, there is very negative stigma associated with dyslexia. But it doesn't have to be that way.

It's a bummer, yes, I'm not going to deny it. Above all, it is because our “communication society”, and especially the area of education, is based, mostly, on the written form of exchanging information and knowledge.

But, let's be honest, reading does not come naturally. It is not something we’re genetically programmed to do, like walking, breathing or speaking. Writing is a way of representing concepts of the world and life through the use of a set of codes that we call letters. The combination of letters forms what we call words, and a set of words becomes a phrase. And that is a human invention. When we talk about our species in an evolutionary way, writing is something that was only invented very recently. Of the 2.5 million years that we, homo sapiens, have been in the world, we have only used reading and writing to communicate for the last 5,100 years. And it's really only in the last 600 years, since the printing press was invented, that the general public has had wider access to written text.

So, if Homo sapiens´ history spanned 24 hours, we would have only been reading en masse for approximately 22 seconds.

Sorry for digressing a bit, but I think it's important to put everything into perspective. And by the way, putting things into perspective is a virtue that is often linked to dyslexia (just like going off track, of course).
But let's get back to discovering that your child (or you) has dyslexia.
If they are still of school age (primary, secondary or higher education), the first thing you should do is sit down and talk to the people who are in charge of their education.

To do this, I recommend that you contact a local, regional or national dyslexia association, which usually has the most up-to-date information and, take my word for it, will understand you better than anyone else.

In addition to talking to the school, getting in touch with an association and, perhaps, a speech therapist or psychologist, it is also advisable to seek professional help so that your child can get the most out of their education.
One of the subjects that usually gives dyslexics the most headaches is learning foreign languages, with English being the most learned second language on the planet. If it is already difficult for them to read and write in their own language, learning an "opaque" language like English is much more complicated.

With "transparent" languages, like Spanish, you pronounce the words practically always the same way they are written. With English, the opaque language par excellence, it is just the opposite. We all know how difficult it can become.

So, let's get down to business.

No matter how dark you may see the future with dyslexia, I can tell you that, I personally see a world of opportunities and a life full of happiness and success ahead of you, your child or your student.

Make no mistake, it won't be easy. But easy hardly ever leads to real satisfaction. It's not impossible either. And just that tenacity, resilience and creativity when it comes to learning are skills that are acquired as a child or adolescent and that are GOLD for future employers. A well-trained dyslexic is a diamond in the rough for any company. Here’s one statistic to illustrate this; more than 40% of self-made millionaires in the world have dyslexia. Just let that sink in for a moment...

In this guide, based on my personal experience, years of research into dyslexia, developing materials, working side by side with English teachers and students with dyslexia and, after many conversations with experts from all over Europe, I will try to give you the basic and most important guidelines that will help anyone with dyslexia learn English, or any other language, better, and for life.

How we are taught English

Although I was born in The Netherlands, I've been living in Spain since 1994. This is where I've worked in private language education, and this is the educational system I know best. Nevertheless, after speaking to teachers and dyslexia specialists from many other countries around the world, the situation in Spain doesn't differ much from that in many other countries.

To date, the method of teaching in the vast majority of schools in Spain is very similar. Text-based classes, with the main focus on grammar, a lot of vocabulary, some dictation and very little listening or conversation practice. And, of course, in fairly large groups.

The course book used in class is also full of texts, with backgrounds of different colors, a lot of text on the same page, images of different sizes in different positions on the page, with the passages on top or overlapping them, etc. All very pretty to the eye, but very impractical for the dyslexic brain.

And with a curriculum that must be completed within the assigned hours, many teachers have no choice but to go through it all at breakneck speed.

With 25 to 30 students in class, it is not easy to focus on the specific needs of each individual. And even less so if no one has taught you how to deal with your dyslexic students. In fact, many English teachers tell me that they feel like their hands are tied.

They would like to be able to cater to all their students but, in most cases, the system does not allow them to do so. Furthermore, there is practically no specific training for them, and the few who learn about dyslexia and assist their students do so on their own initiative.

Therefore, it is not surprising that students with dyslexia encounter so many problems when learning English at school.

There are still teachers who label students with dyslexia as lazy, disinterested, a complete failure, “they can do it, but they just don't want to”, etc. And there are still too many schools which are opposed to carrying out the relevant assessments of possible cases of dyslexia amongst their students. Possibly so as not have to make specific adjustments for those students.

Many different sources say that 10-15% of students in any given country have some degree of dyslexia, although 80% of them go through school undetected. However, I am NOT saying that it is the teachers' fault. At least not all of it. I believe it's the education system that's at fault. I know many teachers who want to do their part, and I guess that if you’re reading this, you’re one of them.

But there is one thing that some of the schools that offer adjustments do that worries me even more than those that do not adapt anything at all. And that is the lowering standards.

When a neurotypical student (a very nice word for people who do not have any neurobiological condition, such as dyslexia) is required to achieve level “X” to pass, it is enough for the student with dyslexia to demonstrate that they have achieved level “X-25%”. This percentage is by way of example, it is not empirical data. It is only to illustrate what I see is happening in some cases with students in English classes at school.

And, seeing it, I say; "SORRY?"

Are we seriously going to treat them as if they had less ability?
Are we seriously going to tell them “you're not good enough for this”?
Are we seriously NOT going to make an effort to help them get the most out of that wonderful dyslexic brain they have?

My name is Boelo and I speak 5 languages

Maybe you already know who I am, but I'll introduce myself anyway.
My name is Boelo (pronounced “Bulo”) van der Pool. I'm in my early fifties and I come from Holland, although I should really call it The Netherlands. I have been living in Spain for about 29 years and dedicating myself to the world of language learning.

I am not a language teacher, nor will I probably ever be, for the very simple reason that I do not understand grammar.

It's true, I don't understand it: neither in English, nor in Spanish, nor in Dutch (my mother tongue), nor in French or German. However, I communicate perfectly, and daily, in English, Spanish and Dutch and I get by in French and German.
And all this without understanding the grammar.

If you ask me what the past participle of the verb “to understand” is, I will tell you that I don’t really understand your question. But I do know how to use it.

Honestly... past participle? What is a participle? And what does it have to do with the past? And what is the “past” are you talking about? Last week? A century ago? The terminology itself doesn't make any sense to my brain.

It may sound incredible if you realize that I have been surrounded by language teachers for almost 30 years.

have worked in various language schools in Spain and England and, for 24 years, I managed a private language school in Malaga (Spain) myself. And I’m a teacher trainer, but not in grammar, of course.

I've never been good at grammar, as I've already mentioned. But I have always been a good language learner. My way of learning is just different. I do not learn from the rigid, abstract and almost mathematical application of grammatical rules, but from a different logic, which I call the logic of meaning.

It's a deeper, more intuitive logic. It's the logic we use when we are asked why something is said in a specific way and we respond: "Because it's just like that, it sounds right."

It's maybe not the easiest way to learn, but it is effective. Especially because it allows me to "feel" the language instead of having to understand its grammar.
A few years ago I realized that I, too, have dyslexia.

It is not a profound type of dyslexia. I've never had serious problems at school, like the ones many of the students I have seen and worked with have had. But I have always been a rather slow reader, and when writing, I tend to take longer than other people, and understanding my handwriting can be a challenge.

I went through school without any serious problems and, later, I chose a practical degree, rather than a theoretical one. Apart from all that and having a poor working memory or confusing the names of the months, I am also very creative. In less than a minute I see solutions to problems that others have not seen in an hour, and I am able to see connections between concepts that others don't even notice at all.

I have mentioned before that I am not a language teacher. And that is the case - what I am is a "Linguistic Coach". I've got a master's degree in Coaching and Emotional Intelligence that I have been applying to language learning for 7 years.

As such, I am a founding member of the International Language Coaching Association; I provide training to language teachers and help students of all ages to reach their goals faster and more effectively.

Through the world of coaching, I had my first contact with dyslexia. It was in 2019, when I was invited to collaborate in the European project “SEN Toolkit” on Special Educational Needs and Emotional Intelligence.

Shortly after starting to talk to students with dyslexia and to their mothers, I realized the enormous frustration that exists around learning English for them. It was in the middle of the pandemic that I said to myself: “Let's learn how to adapt English classes to students with dyslexia.”

So I did. After several years of research, many interviews and sessions with dyslexia professionals from all over Europe and months of experimenting in class, together with a wonderful team of teachers, I developed a technique that helps students with dyslexia to learn English and probably any foreign language.

Seeing the reaction of the students in class and how they can improve their English with the slightest of changes, I can see that this is going in the right direction. However, I will continue researching and studying to always give the best to teachers and their students.

I think I can safely say that if I didn’t have dyslexia, I would never have had the idea of starting this project. I would never have seen the possibilities nor the solutions. So I can say: **Long live the dyslexic brain!**

6 keys to learning English better

I want to share with you what I understand to be the 6 keys to learning English better for students with dyslexia.

These are the 6 main points on which my work with teachers is based and which can also be worked on at home.

Furthermore, this not only works for English classes, but for any subject that a student with dyslexia wants to learn

Key 1: Multisensorial classes

Perhaps the most important thing to know about the dyslexic brain is that no two brains are the same. Although it's true that the most important thing that all students with dyslexia have in common is that it is difficult for them to process content that is presented solely in written form.

But we all know that there are more ways to present new information and that the important thing is to find the way that best suits each brain.

It is as if the brain had several doors or windows through which information (or learning) can enter and that reading is only one of those doors. We therefore have to use the other "sensory" doors to foster better learning amongst our students.

The multisensory method in learning any subject is a teaching technique that uses different sensory stimuli for the transmission of knowledge.

This teaching approach involves all the senses:

- sight (and not just reading)
- hearing
- touch
- smell
- taste

Using the senses helps students process information and retain it more quickly and effectively.

Through the combination of different stimuli, a more complete and diverse learning experience is achieved, allowing for better understanding and retention of the material.

In the case of English classes, images should be used to accompany and reinforce vocabulary. Learning that “car” is “car” is not the same as actually seeing a car and the word “car” underneath.

You should also use colors, which can work very well in texts. When keywords in a text appear in a different color, we help the brain analyze what they are. But we can also, for example, put all the verbs in a different color, so that the student can easily “see” what is a verb and what is not.

Colors are also used when learning vocabulary and, above all, spelling. If we put the “ee” in “cheese” in a different color, the student learns that these two letters together form a single sound (or phoneme).

Most students with dyslexia tend to be very visual. Therefore, this sense is extremely important in learning.

Hearing is also essential, whether with audio texts or through songs. The sounds of the words (phonemes) and the melody of the language are essential to improving listening comprehension and oral fluency. There are many students who work better when they listen to the teacher's explanations or when they listen to practical examples instead of reading them.

Above all, when learning languages, it is important to be exposed to the sounds of the language. I have observed in students that the dyslexic brain is capable of reproducing the sounds of another language correctly and that many students with dyslexia have very clear pronunciation in English.

Although it may seem strange, English can also be learned, or rather reinforced, through touch. Learning the word “CAR” from a course book is not the same as picking up a toy car and reproducing the word while manipulating it. In this way, there are more neurons that are activated in the brain and, therefore, it is more likely that this word will be installed in long-term memory.

Likewise, we can use touch when writing or spelling words. Instead of writing on paper, the student can make the letters with LEGO pieces or Play-Doh. This way of working strengthens your memory. When they have to remember how to spell a word, they’re able to remember and visually represent how, at the time, they physically constructed the letters.

And if we combine this with colors, the impact is even greater.

For example, from the word “CHEESE”, the student constructs the C, the H and one E in red and the other two “E”s in yellow. As you form the word “CHEESE” with the letters, you say (or listen to) it several times. Now they have a very multisensory activity (reading, seeing, touching, hearing).

In addition, working with Play-Doh or LEGO pieces, and playing with colors stimulates the student's creativity. And, as we have seen before, if something sets apart a student with dyslexia, it’s their creativity.

Smell and taste are, perhaps, the least used senses in language learning. However, learning the word “SWEET” from a book is not the same as reading it and hearing it while we smell or taste something that smells and tastes sweet. And if, while we taste or smell it, we also pronounce the word “sweet”, it will lodge itself much more firmly in our brain.

The more senses that are used at once, the more powerful the learning becomes. You can also start with an audio activity, then move on to a visual activity and, finally, create the word with Play-Doh. Each activity, and sense, reinforces the previous one.

Key 2: Make it visual

Of all the senses we've talked about in Key 1, sight is probably the most important.

When I talk to students with dyslexia about their problems with English, many of them respond: “I don't see the grammar.” They don't usually say "I don't understand it" or "I don't hear it." And even less “I don't smell it.”

That’s why it’s important that any concept we want to teach them is made visual. In Key 1, we have already talked about the importance of colors. But be careful: you don't have to use them like crazy. You have to use them wisely and in a logical way. If I put all the verbs in an exercise in green, I have to make sure that they really are all green and that only the verbs are green and not another part of the text. Consistency is fundamental.

But we can, and should, also use images. If you can reduce the text and use more images, learning is easier. And to be honest, practically everything can be accompanied by images.

If you want to create material with images, I am personally a great fan of Canva. I have not yet found any vocabulary, concept or even expression in English that could not also be expressed through an image. I say “also”, because the image should not replace the text, but accompany it. It is not about the student with dyslexia not receiving any text, but about reducing the use of text so that it is easier for them to learn to interpret it. The goal is that over time, the student can read and interpret a text in English in the best possible way. That's why we have to do it little by little and with the help of images, because the creative brain works well with images.

To make something visual, you can use colors and images, but also videos and objects. The more visual stimuli we use to accompany a concept or a word in English, the more entry routes we have to that student's brain.
By “making it visual” I also mean the composition. It is important to compose the exercises and explanations in a way that can be easily interpreted.

Aligning the text vertically, leaving more space between lines, dividing a text into shorter paragraphs and reducing the amount of text or the number of questions per page are all elements which are very easy to implement and that reduce the “visual noise” that many students with dyslexia have to deal with.

We can also use lines, text boxes and arrows to help the student focus on what is important in the text or explanation.

But, as I said before, you don't have to use everything like crazy. Everything has to make sense and be coherent. I once asked a teacher why her exercise had a flower in the top right corner. She told me that she had placed it there because she thought it was pretty. However, my dyslexic brain did not classify it as something “pretty”. Instead, it asked itself: “What is that flower doing there if the text is about the world economy?” And that minimal distraction, which to other people may seem silly, can cause a student with dyslexia to divert their attention from what is really important. To be honest, when I saw the exercise with the flower, my immediate thought was: “Surely the text is about the international flower market.”

So, GOOD use of visual aids is extremely important.

Key 3: Little by little

One of the first things I tell teachers when they start working with dyslexic students is that they have to be patient. English is learned little by little. That's true for everyone, but even more so for students with dyslexia.

The dyslexic brain has some difficulty processing certain impulses and certain information and takes longer to do so.

To put it very simply, the connection lines between the neurons responsible for processing certain information within the brain are longer than in other people. This is not the case with all the impulses that the brain receives, but it is with many of those responsible for reading and learning a new language.

By this I do not mean that students with dyslexia have less cognitive ability than others. Not at all. What's more, in general terms, it's believed to be just the opposite. It simply means that it takes longer to process certain information. And, to make it even more interesting, when the brain takes longer to process the information, it may even question it and see other explanations and uses for that information that other brains are not capable of seeing.

When, for example, we show a student a car and tell them that in English it is "car", a neurotypical student will say "ok". However, it is quite likely that the dyslexic brain will say "ok", but at the same time think: "but this is a toy car, so is it the same word?" and/or "I see that it is a convertible car, how do you say that in English?" or the brain may even go: "I love cars". "How long do I have to wait to get my license and be able to drive one myself?" The student with dyslexia can look at the information from different angles, turn the topic around and even convert it into a completely new topic without even realizing it. For them it's normal, their brain is just like that.

That is why patience is an essential element; you have to go bit by bit and give the brain time to process the stimuli.

Another advantage of giving information and concepts gradually is that the student has time to process it in their own way and give it a meaning that works for them. Remember I told you that, for me, languages need to have logic of meaning? Well, that meaning can be different for each person. The dyslexic brain does not usually work with grammatical explanations. However, if we give it different impulses, with examples, explanations, exercises, games, audios, videos, etc., little by little the brain will find and feel its own logic. And, once you have achieved that, you can no longer “un-feel” it. When you have truly internalized it, it doesn't go away.

That is why I am convinced that the dyslexic brain can learn languages even better than the neurotypical brain. As long as it's done in the right way, of course.

Key 4: With meaning and connection

In the previous key I already mentioned that the dyslexic brain has to feel the language. For me, this is fundamental. In the same way that a musician feels when a new piece is right, a painter feels when a painting is in balance, a businessperson feels when a new business idea is going to emerge, and a golf player feels when they’ve hit the perfect shot. It is something that cannot be explained. It has to be felt. And that feeling is something personal (and magical).

Therefore, when we teach English (or other languages), and especially to dyslexic students, we have to make sure it makes sense for them.

One of the questions I always ask new students is, “What are you incredibly good at?” When asking that question, they always smile. Many of them do so with a look of surprise, because they are not used to being asked what they are good at. They only usually talk about what they do wrong and how difficult things are for them.

Well, the thing is, when you ask that question, you always get an answer. To this day, I have yet to meet the student who tells me they are not good at anything. And the funny thing is that almost 100% of the answers have to do with something creative, whether it's painting, drawing, playing an instrument, building with LEGO (many say that), fixing things, animating them, etc. I also ask what they like, what they are passionate about. This can be football, Harry Potter, horses or whatever.

I am not asking for this information to make them feel good or to have a pleasant conversation with them, but rather because it is essential information to be able to make learning English a success for them.

This information tells us how we can make sure that learning English makes sense for these students. We have to connect learning of the English language with real life and, above all, with the things they are passionate about and at which they excel. And that provides us with multiple benefits.

Firstly, when I explain something new to you, like a grammatical concept in English, but I connect it with your world, with the things you like, it is easier for you to imagine or “see” that concept, since the only new thing in that explanation is the grammatical concept and not the context. In key 2 we have seen the importance of making things visual.

As soon as we connect the learning of something new with the student's life, we are already making it visual because they can create that image in their brain. Secondly, when we connect learning with the things they like and are passionate about and we give them the opportunity to talk about them in class and use them in examples and writing, their level of joy and connection in class goes up. And, therefore, their motivation too.

Finally, by connecting English with their passion, enjoying English more and being more motivated, they will most likely learn more too. And that helps something as important as self-esteem. Making a student with dyslexia see what they have learned in recent weeks and making them realize what they are capable of doing is something magical.

Key 5: Daily practice

A very important handicap of the dyslexic brain is the lack of working memory. It's hard for us to remember a phone number, a shopping list, or even why we got up from the couch and headed to the kitchen.

And to learn a language, working memory is very important. You have to process new concepts, such as grammar, vocabulary, expressions, pronunciation, listening comprehension, etc. All these concepts, to explain it in a very simple way, have to go from working memory to long term memory. And if working memory is not your strong area, this can be a problem. It is very common to explain something to a student with dyslexia on Monday and have to start from scratch two days later.

Unless it's done right, of course.

An essential tool for this is daily practice. Although I am not referring to “just” watching series in English or listening to English music. And I'll explain why.

If you watch a series in English, when the episode ends, what do you usually do? Do you continue to the next episode? If so, for what reason? Did you really understand ALL the English from the previous episode? All the vocabulary and expressions? If that’s the case, maybe this series is not the right one for you to practice your English.

But if you haven’t understood everything? If you’ve understood maybe half (or even less), why go on to the next episode? When you’re at school and you have a two-page text on the Spanish civil war which you’ve read once but not really fully understood, do you think you are ready to take an exam on that subject? No, right?

Well, the same thing happens with English. If you want to practise, you should really do so.

It was Dr. Angela Duckworth who coined the term “deliberate practice” a few years ago. If you're interested, there's a Ted Talk by her on the topic.

Deliberate practice is purposeful, planned, and mindful practice. And the good thing is that you don't need hours of practice for it to be deliberate. About 10-15 minutes a day is enough.

One example of deliberate practice that I recommend to all students is the use of listening exercises. First, look for some videos in English on YouTube or whatever platform you prefer on the topic that you are passionate about (and that are about 3-5 minutes long at most).

Activate the English subtitles and watch the video. If you have understood everything (EVERYTHING), then go on to the next video. If there are words that you have not understood, write down 3 to 5 of them (not all). Look up their meaning in your language, write it down in a notebook and review it a little. Then move on to another activity for about 5 minutes. Maybe a short exercise from what was done the day before in class.

The next day, take your notebook and review the vocabulary (the 3-5 words) from the previous day's video. Then play the same video again. You will see that, now, you understand it a little better. Maybe not completely, but definitely more than the day before. Now, look up another 3-5 words that you don't understand and do the same thing as the day before.

On the third day, go back through your notebook and play the same video again. You will now understand a lot more, maybe even everything. This is when your English has really taken a step forward. You have acquired better listening ability and a somewhat larger vocabulary.

Once you understand everything in the video, go on to the next video (or a completely different one) and do the same thing all over again.

Now you may say, “it's so boring having to watch the same video 3 days in a row”. Well, yes and no.

It may seem boring to repeat it until you can almost recite it yourself (that would be amazing!).

But it won’t be boring because if you have chosen well, the video is on a topic that you are passionate about. If you are passionate about Harry Potter, do you really get tired of watching the same video about Harry Potter 3 or 4 times? This key may be one of the most decisive ones for anyone to reach their goal with learning English, whether they have dyslexia or not.

Key 6: With patience and trust

I have already mentioned the importance of patience before, but it is so crucial that I think it deserves to be mentioned separately.

When I talk to teachers about their experience when they teach English to students with dyslexia, they greatly emphasize the enormous patience that they sometimes need to have. The student finds it difficult to concentrate, gets distracted very easily and needs time and methodology to internalize the concepts. Furthermore, if you work with students with dyslexia, it is very likely that they come with low and damaged self-esteem. They have been stigmatized for many years (some of them their entire school life) for their dyslexia and their deficiencies. They fight daily against what they are NOT good at.

It is, therefore, important that we give them the space to work at their own pace, to internalize the concepts in their own way and to celebrate when they have succeeded. At first, they may feel insecure. This makes learning difficult and requires even more patience.

When, little by little, students learn more and more, it is extremely important to let them see it. Every small achievement has to be celebrated and every mistake has to be seen as merely another learning experience.

We don't really know how the dyslexic brain works, which is why we need to have patience and, above all, trust. Trust in the student's brain and that, in one way or another, it will manage to process the information and impulses that we give it.

Not only do teachers and parents need to have that trust, but, above all, the students themselves. To put it visually, the student has to “see” that they are capable of learning English. And if we work on all the previous keys, we will see that this is the case.

We have reached the end of this little guide. It has not been my intention to write a scientific manual or an educational methodology. I wanted to share what I have learned over these years from books, experts, my experiences, teachers and, above all, from students with dyslexia who, with these keys, have begun to enjoy learning English.

I hope you have enjoyed it and that, in some way or other, it may be useful to you.
If you have dyslexia, have a family member with dyslexia, or work with students with dyslexia, I hope you can put it into practice.

And, don't forget;

Dyslexia should never be the reason why you haven't learned English.

A big hug,

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