



## Learner Learning Difficulties

***"I don't really believe that learning difficulties exist. They are just excuses for 'naughty' children."***

**How many times have you heard that old chestnut?**

*"Giovanni is slow at writing and his concentration level is low. When asked to do something he takes forever before responding. He appears to be lazy and belligerent. He spends hours on his homework and has no idea how to organise his time. He can't remember things from one day to the next and he gets really low marks in his written tests. He doesn't have many friends and he doesn't enjoy playing ball with the other kids at break time". "Sara seems to be behind her peers in reading and writing. She does quite well in her oral tests, but gets far lower grades in her written tests. Her spelling is appalling and she refuses to read aloud in class". "Alessandro is always talking out of turn and, more often than not, his contribution has nothing to do with the task in hand. He won't sit still and is often out of his seat. He can't concentrate on anything for long. He has difficulty working on his own and when asked to work in pairs or groups his behaviour has a negative impact on other children. He won't play quietly in the break and is always running and climbing and taking risks".* Most of you probably have at least one pupil like this in your class. So, how do we, as teachers, know whether this child has a learning difficulty or is just plain naughty? The USA and Canada wrote the **Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)** which defines learning difficulties in the following way:

*The term means a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations, including conditions such as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental asphasia.*

*Disorders not included are learning problems caused by visual, hearing or motor impairment or mental retardation or emotional disturbance.*

*So what does that mean? Well, it means that learning difficulties are:*

- unique to each individual. We all find some things hard to learn and some methods make learning difficult for us;
- presumed to be caused by central learning dysfunction (...note – *presumed to be* – these problems are so complex that they are still not fully understood – not even by the experts);
- last a lifetime ( an individual may learn coping strategies, but the problem still exists);
- involve significant difficulties in speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, understanding and maths.

To be considered learning disabled a child MUST HAVE AVERAGE OR ABOVE AVERAGE INTELLIGENCE. Does that surprise you? Think of Einstein. We all agree that he was a genius, but at 14 a teacher told his parents he disrupted the class. He himself wrote that his teachers thought he asked too many questions and that he found learning difficult. It is estimated that about 15% of people have learning disorders – some estimates even quote up to 30%. If these figures are to be believed, that means that in an average class of twenty-five, at least 3 pupils will have a learning difficulty of some kind. Not all these children are as self motivated as Einstein was and they may not become world famous geniuses, but it is our role as teachers to ensure that they are given the opportunity to shine. A teacher does not need to be a medical expert to do this, nor should she pretend to be. However, a little reading around the subject would be helpful in understanding the different types of learning difficulties and what strategies can be employed in the classroom to help the learner cope. One of the most comprehensive websites is the Canolean Dyscovery Centre, *An interdisciplinary centre for children and adults with specific learning difficulties* ([www.dyscovery.info](http://www.dyscovery.info)). They offer a wide range of resources including books on Mathematics and Dyscalculia, Handwriting, Organisational skills, etc. They also offer training materials: CDROM's and DVDs on social skills, activities of daily living, living with Dyspraxia, organisation skills, etc. or her best. This may entail giving children different help and different tasks. Above all, it is important to try and meet all the learners' needs, and this can only be achieved by offering a variety of different activities adapted to diverse learner styles and setting up activities in such a way as to allow you, the teacher and facilitator, the time needed to give individual attention to your learners as and when required. We must remember that we are language teachers first and foremost – and a lot of what we do is already geared to helping children with learning disorders. We already know how important it is to make ourselves understood.

Just remember to: be consistent in the language of instruction – be it L1 or L2

- model everything first – more than once, if necessary
- give the student time to respond think about how you can make what you are trying to teach comprehensible
- consider taking smaller steps to reach your goal
- look at the possibility of changing the way that you test and monitor the students output
- help your learner notice connections, similarities and differences between L1 and L2
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Effective practices in the language classroom will often be equally effective with children with LDs (Learning Disabilities), so consistently;

- define basic vocabulary
- use plenty of visuals
- use hands-on activities
- use lots of repetition
- model activities
- allocate different students different tasks to promote self esteem.
- think carefully about classroom layout
- ask your school to invest in different teaching aids
- give clear instructions – one at a time
- speak slowly clearly and naturally
- face your students and avoid putting your hand in front of your face
- be careful using idioms
- alert your students when something is important

- provide written notes if possible
- lower the level of background noise
- allow a long pause between your questions and your students' answers
- focus on key vocabulary
- give plenty of opportunity to practice
- use or adapt readily available games and activities
- grade and personalise your activities where appropriate

Think of ways of adapting everyday activities such as dictation or reading into fun activities that motivate and involve learners. An invaluable resource, and one I return to over and over again, is Dictation: **New Methods, New Possibilities** by Paul Davis and Mario Rinvolucri. Also useful are three recently published books co-authored by Herbert Puchta and which are all well worth including in your resource centre: *Grammar Songs & Raps*, *Teaching Young Learners to Think and Get on stage!* *Cater for different learning style*s – for instance for the kinaesthetic learners by using Cuisenaire rods. Or take time out for 'brain gym' to raise your learners' concentration level and, of course, use the interactive whiteboard ... in an interactive way! Don't be afraid to ask for help. It may be difficult to get a diagnosis or a support teacher, but try to involve parents and other members of staff. Do activities which encourage the other children in the classroom to collaborate. If you do not have access to professional help, create a support team. You cannot possibly know all the answers, but sharing the problem may bring some positive solutions.

The team should include as many of the following people as possible.

Classroom teacher	Parent liaison	Special education teacher
Speech therapist	School psychologist	Learning disability specialist
Principal	Special interest groups	Classmates

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Finally, we come to the question of assessment

**About test taking, Einstein wrote, "I would feel under such strain that I felt, rather than going to take a test, that instead, I was walking to the guillotine."**

The Italian school system does not entirely allow teachers to be flexible when it comes to assessment. However, that doesn't stop you creating tests using plenty of pictures, matching exercises and gap fills rather than long written essays. For external assessment Cambridge ESOL provides for most special requirements.

Find out more on their website [www.cambridgeesol.org/exams/special-circumstances/index.html](http://www.cambridgeesol.org/exams/special-circumstances/index.html).

No, these kids are not naughty. Every child is different and we need to treat them differently. We may not hold all the answers, but if we want them to succeed, we need to provide help and support for them both in and out the classroom.

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