

Adaptation of learning content for students with SLDs

What are Specific Learning Disorders (SLDs)?

Most common characteristics of SLDs

Introduction

As an English teacher, you may already know one thing or two about **Specific Learning Disorders (SLDs)**. Some of your students might even be affected by at least one SLD. If you want to help, you are in the right place!

Even though it is difficult to obtain accurate statistics on the number of persons with SLDs, it is estimated that around **10% of the population has at least one SLD**. That's right, it is quite likely that at least one of your students has one or several SLDs.

Before diving deeper, here are some basics that need to be understood:

- **SLDs cannot be “cured”, as they are not diseases.**
- **Contrary to some misconceptions, SLDs have nothing to do with intellectual deficiency!**



- **SLDs are neurodevelopmental disorders.** Strategies can be developed so **people with SLDs can live a normal and fulfilled life.**

Theoretical explanation – What are SLDs?

There are different types of **SLDs** that **affect the way the learner's brain receives, stores or utilises/processes the information** and, subsequently, can result in **difficulties regarding memorisation, organisation, time management, reading, writing, speaking, listening and focusing** on some tasks.

Such SLD types are **dyscalculia, dysgraphia, dyslexia, dysorthographia, dysphasia and dyspraxia**, which will be further explained below. Due to their common Greek prefix “dys”, **SLDs are also often referred to as “Dys”**. We will also cover ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder), which can make learning difficult. Note that several **SLDs often co-occur** and that ADHD and SLDs also often co-exist.

What is Dyslexia?

Dyslexia is the most common SLD and it **affects reading**.

Here are some of the most common characteristics of students with dyslexia:

- **Poor phonological awareness**, meaning that they do not correctly relate the letters to sounds.
- **Difficulty in recognising letters and words**, particularly to read unknown words. Reading is therefore a real challenge and fluency can be hard to reach.
- Because reading requires all their focus, they **can have difficulties in understanding the content of the text and remembering it**, especially if they have to read it aloud.
- The **text can appear blurry or seem to oscillate, making skipping lines or getting lost in the text** quite common.
- They often have **attention difficulties** and taking notes (writing while listening), planning, and organising are also problematic.



What is Dyscalculia?

Dyscalculia is a **deficiency in mathematical and numerical skills** that doesn't match the age and the intellectual capacity of the learner.

Learners with dyscalculia can have difficulties with:

- **Numbers,**
- **Counting,**
- **Making basic mathematical operations** (mental or written calculation)
- **Evaluating durations, distance, and quantities**
- **Managing their time and organising their work.**

They need extra help to understand the amount of work that is asked of them and time required to achieve their tasks.



What is Dysgraphia?

Dysgraphia is an SLD that **affects written language** primarily, and it is not limited to handwriting. These students can have difficulties with the following:

- **Restricted fine motor control and illegible handwriting**
- **Expressing and organising their ideas in writing**
- **Many spelling mistakes** in their texts
- **Grammar and punctuation skills** may also be lacking.



What is Dysorthographia?

If dyslexia affects reading skills, dysorthographia is **all about writing skills**. As opposed to dysgraphia, the handwriting is not necessarily difficult in itself. Students with dysorthographia rather experience difficulties with :

- The association between sounds and their written forms
- The segmentation of the units of language
- Spelling and conjugation



What is Dysphasia?

Dysphasia is a disorder that **affects how a person speaks or/and understands oral language**.

There are several types of dysphasia. A person may have difficulties with:

- Putting together words to form a sentence
- Following grammar rules
- They may say **made-up words** without realising it.
- They are at risk of feeling **isolated**.



What is Dyspraxia?

Dyspraxia **affects fine and/or gross motor coordination**. This means making movements may be difficult. People impacted by this disorder may have the following difficulties:

- Poor balance and body and spatial awareness
- Hard or painful handwriting, leading to illegible handwriting, especially for long tasks
- Reading aloud and speaking may also be difficult



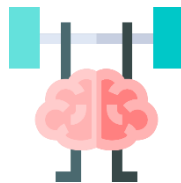
What is ADHD?

ADHD stands for “**attention deficit hyperactivity disorder**” and is one of the most commented neurodevelopmental disorders. Learners with ADHD may have some of the following difficulties:

- **Focusing on allocated tasks**
- **Being overly active and impulsive**
- **Daydreaming, being forgetful, or losing things frequently**
- **Making careless mistakes.**
- **Time management, planning and organisation**

Research shows that genetics plays an important role in ADHD. In any case, it is **not caused by eating habits, parenting or social and environmental factors such as the use of screens**, even though they may make those symptoms worse in some cases. If you want to learn more about ADHD and video games, you can read this sheet from the Gaming for skills project:

<https://www.gaming4skills.eu/resources/booklet-on-video-games-in-education/>



What you can do

The good news is that a lot of **things can be done to help your students cope with SLDs**. You will find more detailed solutions in our practice sheets dedicated to “Needs and adaptations for students with SLDs”. For now, let’s have a look at some basic options to consider in order to an inclusive teaching method that benefits all students.

Adopt the “Universal design for learning”

The **Universal Design for Learning (UDL)** is a teaching framework designed around the idea that there is always a **diversity of students** in a classroom, who **don’t necessarily learn optimally in the same way**. The core ideas of this framework are to try and make the **learning content as universal as possible** right from the start and to provide multiple means of **engagement** (the “why” of learning), of **representation** (the “what” of learning) and of **action and expression** (the “how of learning”).

The UDL is explored in more detail in our practice sheet “How to structure lessons and learning materials”.

Offer structure and organisation

It is difficult for students with SLDs to focus because they are constantly coping with their disorder(s). A clear structure and organisation of the content is therefore essential. Learn more in our practice sheets “**How to structure lessons and learning materials**” and “**Set achievable goals and track progress**”.

Use games for learning

Studies have shown that a **significant improvement in attention performance can be obtained by using games in a learning context**. Games will engage and involve students in the learning process. Students with SLDs, should particularly appreciate this different learning experience and forget a little about the formal school context during the activity.



Students should be diagnosed and followed up by a specialist

SLDs can only be diagnosed by specialists. The diagnosis process may differ from one country to another and will take several months because SLDs must be observed and monitored over a certain period of time.

If you think that a student of yours might have an SLD, share your concerns with the parents and refer them to a specialist. Having an early diagnosis will better support the student's development. The sooner the diagnosis, the sooner strategies and adaptations can be implemented to cope with the SLD.

Conclusion

In conclusion, SLDs are neurodevelopmental disorders that affect learning in various ways. They prevent students from reaching the same level of skills as their peers of equal intellectual ability. SLDs can affect reading, speaking, writing, counting and evaluating quantities as well as motor skills. They also **make it difficult for students to focus and organise their work efficiently.** SLDs are not diseases, the brain just processes information differently. As such, SLDs cannot be "cured" but, with the help of specialists, **strategies and adaptations can be implemented.** This way, people can learn to **live with their SLDs and live a successful, fulfilled, and happy life.**



Co-funded by the European Union

This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

Project code: 2021-1-BE01-KA220-SCH-000027783

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>).

Learn more about D-ESL at: <https://www.d-esl.eu>