

The Impact of a Dyslexia Diagnosis on a Second Language Student of Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

International students who have dyslexia can find that they are disadvantaged through both the dyslexia and the experience of studying at a higher level in a second language. Equally, international students who have undiagnosed dyslexia will be unable to access the additional support that would enable them to reach their academic potential. This paper discusses the experience of a second language student with dyslexia and considers the impact of a diagnosis of dyslexia and the subsequent support made on the student's progress. It finds that the student's account highlights that dyslexia can contribute to a student having a negative learning experience, and becoming anxious about their ability to learn; conversely, a diagnosis of dyslexia, which results in teaching support and additional resources, can provide students the opportunity to fulfil their academic potential.

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Introduction

Students who speak English as a second language can find studying at a UK university to be challenging. They are required to understand and use academic English and may find the academic style to be different from the academic style in their country. International students who are dyslexic can find this transition particularly difficult. This article describes the experience of a student from Hong Kong, who is studying at a university in the UK. It discusses her experiences of education in Hong Kong, her experience of studying in the UK, and her dyslexia assessment and subsequent support.

Brief description of dyslexia

Dyslexia is a specific learning disability, which is neurologically based. It is considered to originate from a phonological processing difficulty and is characterised by difficulties with accurate and fluent word recognition, spelling difficulties and difficulties decoding text (Snowling 2000). It is believed to have a prevalence of 5-10 per cent among the population and, in 2005, statistics from the Higher Education Statistics Agency found a prevalence of 2.47 per cent among the population of students in higher education. International students who have dyslexia can find that they are disadvantaged through both the dyslexia and the experience of studying at a higher level in a second language.

Elsa's educational history

Students who have dyslexia often find that problems occur from an early stage in their education. Suk-kan Ho (2000), for example found that Chinese children with dyslexia performed significantly more poorly in phonological tasks than children without dyslexia. Students who have not had their dyslexia recognised can be particularly challenged. Here, Elsa discusses her experience of mainstream education in Hong Kong.

“I found it very difficult to learn at school, in both primary and secondary school. In Hong Kong classes are very big, with up to 40 students in one class. I would usually sit at the back and try not to be noticed. Looking back, this was a bad strategy; it just meant that I got left behind. Being at the back of the class also meant that I couldn't always hear what was said and I would get confused and fall behind the rest of the class. Another difficulty I had was with the pronunciation of English, in my English classes. I never seemed to get any better and I couldn't always understand the tutor. I thought it was because I wasn't very clever. Finally, because school days are very long, I would be very tired by the end of the day and wouldn't be able to take as much information in. I had to concentrate very hard to keep up with work and would just be too tired to maintain that focus for the whole day. There always seemed to be so much to learn and I would struggle to switch between tasks.”

Elsa's account demonstrates how dyslexia can impact on learning. Whilst there have been recent developments in Hong Kong in recognising dyslexia and providing additional support, namely additional teacher training, funding, whole school policies, (Tsui *et al* 2012). Elsa's experience was that dyslexia was not recognised in her institution. Indeed, Chan (2002) found that the low incidence of dyslexia in Hong Kong could be due to a lack of appropriate tools to diagnose dyslexia, making the low incidence an issue of under-reporting. In Hong Kong, Elsa's primary school lessons were predominantly taught in Cantonese (with the exception of English classes), whereas, aside from Chinese language and history, the secondary classes were in English.

A further complication is determining whether the difficulties are due to dyslexia, or other factors, such as difficulties in learning an additional language. A difficulty with pronunciation, as highlighted by Elsa, is a key indicator of dyslexia; people with dyslexia often struggle with sound symbol relationships, having poor phonemic awareness (Widmann *et al* 2012). This is also an area of difficulty for students learning an additional language because the phonetic system in their first language may not coincide with the phonetic system in English. To differentiate this difficulty, a student with dyslexia is likely to have poor phonemic awareness in both their native and target language. Durgunoğlu (2002) highlighted that additional language learners with dyslexia could have difficulties with phoneme awareness, syntactic awareness, meaning making, and understanding of genre in both their L1 and target language. Indeed, according to her own testimony, Elsa had difficulties in both Cantonese and English.

Elsa's coping strategy of sitting at the back, whilst understandable, would have contributed to her difficulties, she would not be able to hear the tutor as clearly, due to background noise, and would be less likely to pick up on pronunciation differences, for example diphthongs. She also discusses concentration difficulties: a person with dyslexia can have difficulties decoding phonemes, often making reading and writing for an extended period very tiring.

This can be exacerbated by anxiety about not being able to complete the work in the required time.

Night school

A negative learning experience can impact on students' continuing education. Vitero et al. (2001) found that low academic performance was a key indicator in withdrawal from education. After completing her school education, Elsa, however, was keen to improve her English language skills because many jobs in Hong Kong require English language skills. She was also interested in attending a university in the UK (UK universities are very highly regarded in Hong Kong). To further these goals, Elsa attended night school. Here Elsa discusses her experience of further education.

“I really wanted to improve my English and hopefully go on to Higher Education, so I enrolled at night school. This was a much more positive experience. One of the positives was that it didn't cover as many areas, so I could focus on improving one area at a time. I really liked the way the lessons would build on the one before, recapping frequently, so I could always make progress. The sessions were much shorter too, just two hours, so I didn't get as tired and could maintain my concentration. I was able to improve my English and realised I was able to do the work and keep up. I began to feel much more positive about my abilities.”

Elsa's experience of night school is very interesting. Whilst she did not receive any specific dyslexia support, she was able to progress and build her confidence. She attributes this to shorter sessions, which she would have found less fatiguing, and avoiding plurality of tasks. Working on fewer diverse subjects could also have had an impact on Elsa's progress as it would decrease her cognitive load (Van Merriënboer & Sweller, 2010). Equally, Elsa's reference to a more scaffolded approach, with the lessons being built on previous knowledge, is a technique which is useful in supporting both EAP students and students with dyslexia.

University experience

After successfully completing night school, Elsa continued her studies, enrolling on an undergraduate course at a UK university, as a mature student. UK universities are very highly regarded in Hong Kong and Elsa was keen to experience a different culture. Here Elsa talks about the difficulties she had in the transition to studying at undergraduate level.

“When I began my studies at university, I found that I would often struggle in both lectures and seminars. In lectures, I would find it difficult to take notes and keep up with the lecturer. When I looked at my notes afterwards, sometimes it would be almost like someone else had written them. I would find it hard to connect them to my lecture. If I didn't take notes, I would be able to take in more information, but then I wouldn't have any notes to use afterwards. In seminars, I was anxious about talking in front of people; I felt my English wasn't good enough to express myself effectively. I also worried about people being able to understand me. Finally, I would know what I wanted to say, but couldn't organise the ideas. This was also a problem in assignments; teachers would often comment that I hadn't organised my ideas and that sometimes I wouldn't quite answer the question, affecting my marks. To sum up, I think that my dyslexia and the fact that English is not my first language combined to make learning at university level quite challenging.”

Elsa's experience exemplifies the challenges that students who speak English as a second language have in studying at undergraduate level. In addition, dyslexia was a further disadvantage. Students with dyslexia often report difficulties with note taking and keeping up in lectures. Mortimore & Crozier (2006) found that note taking, learning in lectures and academic writing were frequently cited as difficulties by students with dyslexia.

Elsa's experience, therefore, highlights the importance of providing additional support to international students and students with dyslexia, to ensure that the students have the opportunity to reach their potential.

Diagnosis and support

The turning point for many students is when they receive a diagnosis and can therefore separate the dyslexia from their overall ability. The diagnosis outlines the student's strengths as well as areas of weakness, and provides information about a student's learning profile. The students often have to make an emotional adjustment when receiving their diagnosis, however, with some students finding it difficult to adjust to being diagnosed with dyslexia (Farmer, Riddick and Sterling, 2002). Elsa's experience of the diagnosis was, however, more positive.

“It was my teacher at university who suggested that I go for a dyslexia assessment; she noticed that my written work didn't reflect the quality of my ideas. I was referred by my university and diagnosed as being dyslexic. I felt a real sense of relief from the diagnosis. It meant I wasn't struggling because I was capable; it was because of a specific difficulty. I now had something to work with. It made a difference to how I thought about myself and my learning. Not only did the diagnosis help me to understand why I was struggling, it meant that I could access lots of support. I was given more time in exams and more feedback on assignments, to show where I was going wrong, and help me improve my writing. I also received assistive technology; the Dictaphone was especially helpful. I was given a disability advisor to give me general guidance about things such as help at the library, and a dyslexia tutor who worked with me to develop learning strategies and improve my writing style. Together, we worked on my writing style and it is now much more academic; I can understand what the tutor is asking for and how I should answer assignment questions. I also feel much more confident in seminars and have successfully given presentations. I now feel confident that I can get my degree and achieve a good grade in it.”

This demonstrates the effect of a diagnosis both in terms of the students' understanding of their learning and the support that they can access. Elsa had attributed her difficulties to being a second language student and was, therefore, not accessing the support that is available to students with dyslexia. This experience underlines the role that tutors can play in signposting EAL students who show signs of dyslexia, for example suggesting to the student that they seek advice from the university disability service. It is acknowledged it can be difficult to distinguish between difficulties rooted in dyslexia and general language acquisition difficulties (Smith, 2010). Possible indicators are difficulties with sound symbol relationship and pronunciation, syntactical errors and working memory difficulties in both the L1 and L2. Students with dyslexia may find it difficult to identify spelling patterns, for example how adding an e changes the pronunciation of *ton* to *tone*, and use this knowledge to determine the pronunciation of words with a similar pattern, such as, *home*, *phone* and *zone*. Thus students may find it difficult to predict the pronunciation of unfamiliar words. There may also be a

discrepancy between the vocabulary and spelling, whereby students have a good command of the language verbally, but this is not reflected in their reading or their written communication. Finally, students with dyslexia will often struggle with irregular parts of the language and find it difficult to overcome this difficulty, for example irregular verbs such as *run* that form their past tenses irregularly.

In terms of supporting students with dyslexia, tutors of international students can provide support in class, for example:

- Providing students with lecture notes and slides
- Using dyslexia friendly resources, for example Cuisenaire rods and manipulatives
- Using multi-sensory teaching, for example the use of rhythm to develop a discrimination of different phonemes.
- Re-capping and reviewing frequently.

There are a number of resources that EAP tutors may find useful. Dr Margaret Crombie's work, for example, focuses on dyslexia and learning an additional language. Her work is accessible via her website, <http://www.languageswithoutlimits.co.uk/dyslexia.html>. Another useful resource is the culmination of a two year project called *Dyslexia for Teachers of English as a Foreign Language*. The project's accompanying website offers materials for self study to support teachers of English as a foreign language, <http://course.dystefl.eu/index.php?id=55>.

Conclusion

Elsa's experience, whilst personal to her, is very useful in providing an insight into the experience of an EAL student educated outside the UK who has dyslexia. She provides a startling account of the difference that being diagnosed and subsequently supported can have on a student, potentially ensuring a student is able to achieve their academic potential. This highlights the role that academic tutors can play in supporting international students with dyslexia. This could be through signposting to the disability services, providing dyslexia friendly resources and allowing student to access lecture slides and notes. By being aware of the impact of dyslexia on EAL students, tutors can reduce its impact on learning and provide the opportunity for students to achieve their academic potential.

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