

# Matching Your Teaching to the Dyslexic's Learning Style

By Betty J. Roy

**S**uccessful educational treatment of dyslexia requires a variety of factors. Reshaping of attitudes is one of the most important.

Teachers must recognize that these students do want desperately to learn. Yet, year after year, they see their peers pass them by. Dyslexics develop a variety of coping mechanisms—some pretend to be competent, while others feign indifference to their weaknesses.

Priscilla Vail reminds us in her book, *Smart Kids With School Problems*, that there are neuroanatomical reasons for different learning styles. When a student learns one way, but not another, he isn't being purposely uncooperative. Often, teachers just haven't found the right approach. Vail makes an accusation that needs to be taken seriously. She says that some learning disabilities are "pedagogenic: spring[ing] from inappropriate schooling."<sup>1</sup>

Many dyslexic children are, due to the nature of the English language, code dependent. If their curricula use primarily whole-word approaches to reading, these students progressively "fall through the cracks."

Dyslexic children often have weak mental photocopyers to help them acquire sight vocabulary. They need to learn the structure of language through multisensory methods. For them, reading should first emphasize decoding, then fluency, and finally comprehension.

For these children, emphasis on meaning can be provided through listening and verbal expression activities. Ideally they will make a transition to basal readers and other texts after mastering phonics and language structure.

Jansky and de Hirsch say that many poor readers must grope to retrieve a word when they see its printed form. Since word retrieval is such a common problem for dyslexics, the authors

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recommend using memory devices to teach phonics. This helps the child to synthesize words, since "there are fewer phonemes [speech sounds] than words to remember."<sup>2</sup>

### **Language Elements**

Dr. Samuel T. Orton advised teachers to reduce language to its elements—44 speech sounds and 26 letters with which they can be written—and to use all the senses to teach these components concurrently. "Structured, systematic, sequential, cumulative, thorough, multisensory, individualized, cognitive and therapeutically-oriented" are terms that apply to both the materials and the way they should be used.<sup>3</sup> This can be done successfully in the classroom, both individually and with groups of students.

Different learners have subtle difficulties in certain aspects of oral language that affect their written language skills, according to Sylvia Richardson, pediatrician and speech-language pathologist. If these children haven't absorbed basic language rules by age seven or eight, the rules must be explicitly taught.<sup>4</sup>

### **Do's for Teaching**

Important principles to remember in teaching dyslexic students include the following:

1. *Use all neurosensory pathways to*

*reinforce learning.* The results of the Socony Mobil Study strongly support the involvement of more senses to ensure retention of learning. The kinesthetic pathway (sense of movement and pressure from muscles, tendons, and joints) must be included. This entails both the speech-muscle mechanisms and large muscle movements of the arm and hand. Writing in the air with stiff arm and pointed finger, or writing with the index finger on a desk top should supplement regular pencil and paper writing.

Anything new or confusing to a student should receive kinesthetic reinforcement. The more severe the problem, the greater use should be made of kinesthetic pathways in the learning process.

2. *Assess the developmental level of the student, and use activities appropriate to that level.* Younger students or those with severe disabilities will need to learn how to recognize and manipulate speech sounds (phonological awareness) before they can associate these sounds with visual symbols for reading.

Use of colored squares or blocks to represent sounds can serve this purpose.<sup>5</sup> For example, a blue block might represent /m/. To this the teacher might add a green block to represent /ee/ to create the word *me*. The teacher can change *me* to *be* by replacing the blue block with a red /b/ block.

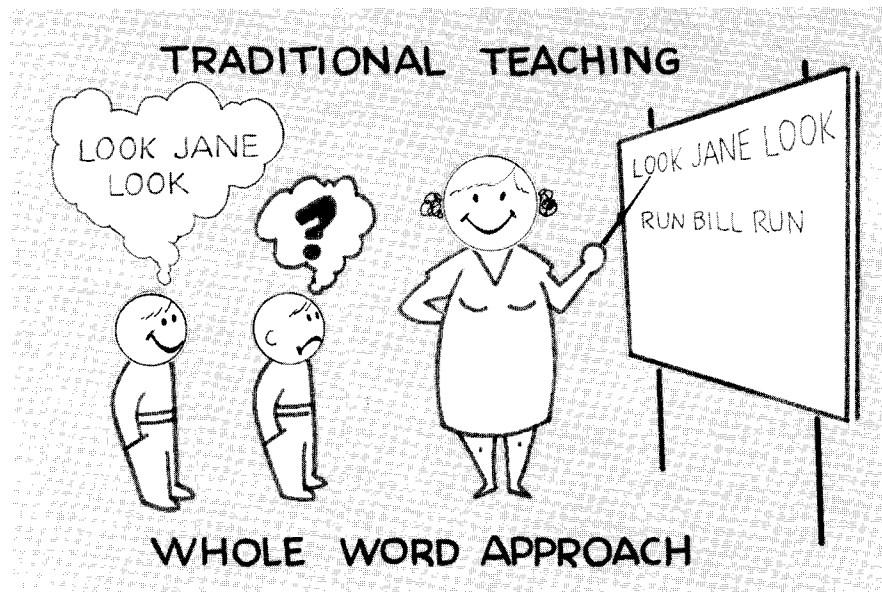
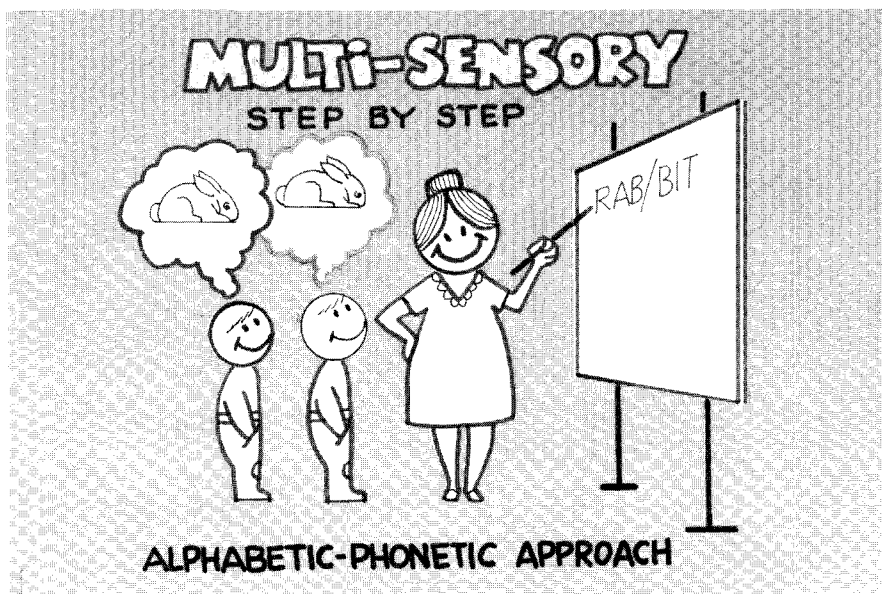
These activities provide practice in both rhyming and left-to-right direction for reading. Children can also play "fix-it" with words that are segmented. The teacher pronounces a word in "un-blended," sounded-out fashion as /m/,/o/,/m/ (where slashes represent sounds). The child then says "mom" to fix it. This can be done with key words during story reading, or in calling children by name as /J/,/i/,/m/.<sup>6</sup> Some children will need hands-on practice,

## HELPING STUDENTS WITH LANGUAGE LEARNING DIFFERENCES

Until a student can read, write, and spell easily, he or she will need help and support from family, peers, and teachers. Pressure to excel in the classroom should be eliminated. Arrangements should be made to avoid giving discouragingly low grades on report cards. The following suggestions have been helped dyslexic students in regular classrooms:

1. Seat dyslexic students near the teacher. Call their name before addressing them or asking them to recite. Keep directions simple and brief. Give only one step at a time. Question them briefly to make sure they understand.
2. Encourage active participation rather than memorization of facts.
3. Remember that dyslexic children may not be able to copy accurately from the board or to make notes on class lectures. Make specific arrangements for homework assignments to reach the child's home. Accept homework dictated by the child and written by a parent.
4. Ask parents to read these children's homework to them and to structure their study time.
5. Allow dyslexic students to bring a tape recorder to class on review days. Having a recorder in class will relieve two problems: They will not have to struggle to write everything down, or attempt the hopeless task of deciphering their notes.
6. Avoid putting these children under pressure of time or competition. Give them extra time to complete tests—at lunch, recess, or after school—or allow them to answer questions orally. Dyslexic students know much more about a subject than they can put in a paragraph, and their ability to organize sentences is often poor. Being able to take at least one oral test in each subject will reassure them that they can learn.
7. When possible, allow more time on written tests to accommodate these children's slower rate of reading and/or handwriting.
8. Encourage the use of "crutches" like memory aids or matrix charts of math facts. Other helpful aids include the following:
  - a. Verbalizing softly when reading or writing.
  - b. Naming each letter before writing it.
  - c. Repeating difficult words, spelling them orally, then writing them.
  - d. Writing large, or printing if necessary.
9. Recognize the correct and acceptable parts of the child's work. Give a grade for oral participation in class. Treat the dyslexic child as if he were a foreign student whose language skills are not yet adequate.
10. Until the child's spelling and structural language skills improve, give two grades on compositions: one for content and imagination, the second for accuracy, structure, and handwriting.
11. The brighter the child, the more despondent he or she is likely to become about poor performance. Find an area where he succeeds and have him do these activities daily in the classroom.
12. Accept hands-on or graphics projects as a substitute for written compositions. Dyslexics are three-dimensional thinkers who learn best through arts, crafts, science projects, drama, and films.
13. Help dyslexic children organize their materials, notebooks, time, assignments, and thinking. These children need structure both at home and in the classroom.
14. Reduce pressure to achieve. *Trying harder*, when there are gaps in skills, only results in further frustration and misery. Multisensory remediation will be required to bring the child up to individual capacity and high-level performance, not just trying harder.
15. Accept any behavior that does not interfere with the dyslexic child's or other students' learning.

Compiled from materials supplied by the Aylett Royall Cox Institute, 1129 Garden Gate Circle, Garland, Texas 75043.



using 3-D letters, letter cards and pocket chart, or felts and flannel board before they are ready to read books.

3. *Sequence work from simple to complex.* Copying is a more difficult skill than most people realize. This is because letter-by-letter attention is needed when the child cannot recall whole words. For dyslexic students, copying can overload attention and short-term memory.

4. *Teach through pattern and logic rather than rote memory and arbitrary connections.* Help students understand what they are doing as they acquire the tools of language. Teach rules and patterns that take the guesswork out of reading and spelling. For example, "-ess" is a feminine ending of a noun, as in *waitress*, "-ous" is the ending for an adjective (e.g., *dangerous*), and "-us" (as in *terminus*) is a noun suffix. A structured approach to the English language, its history, roots, prefixes, and suffixes enhan-

ces vocabulary and comprehension.

5. *Use lots of repetition to make the symbols stick.* Each day use pictured key words to represent the sounds of letters and letter clusters. This becomes a mnemonic (memory) device that facilitates automatic responses throughout the dyslexic's life.

Make use of other mnemonic devices whenever possible in teaching. For example: Teach students where each section of the dictionary begins so they can locate words quickly. (The sections begin with "A," "E," "M," and "S.") An elephant picture and the sentence **An Elephant Madly Squirts** can serve as a mnemonic aid.

To aid memory, have students create silly sentences. For example, to remember (oo)—one student suggested the following: "We will zoom to the moon at noon on a broom."

6. *Explicitly teach rehearsal tech-*

# SKILLS IN ORDER OF DIFFICULTY FOR TEACHING

M  
O  
R  
E  
  
D  
I  
F  
F  
I  
C  
U  
L  
T



Auditory Recognition

Reading Accuracy

Oral Spelling

\*Multisensory Writing

Simultaneous Oral-Written Spelling

Sentence Dictation

Independent Accurate Copying  
From Near and Far Point

**\*Student automatically names each letter just before writing it, leading to independent proofreading.**

niques and give time to rehearse. Aylett Cox, an author and trainer of teachers for dyslexics, expresses it this way: Dyslexics need to "walk through, talk through, or draw through each new learning to make learning permanent. Symbols must become as automatic as 'Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star.'<sup>7</sup>

7. Use *guided discovery teaching*.<sup>8</sup> This questioning technique challenges the intellect, reframes and synthesizes past learning, and enhances memory. It brings the "Ah ha! response."

8. Use *structured, consistent, verbalization with "auditory cloze" procedure to teach essential definitions and sequential procedures*. At first, the teacher and students verbalize the material together. Gradually, the teacher leaves more blanks to be filled in by students, until finally they can recite on their own.

9. *Focus on the process and joy of learning, rather than on the student's written product.*

10. Be "deaf and blind" when students say, "I can't." Respond, "Yes, you can, and I will help you!"

11. Use a mastery model for teaching.

Access prior knowledge, then present new learning or relearning, practice, test for mastery, review concepts as needed, and then repeat the cycle.

12. *Minimize abstract, workbook-driven activities*. Instead, emphasize hands-on involvement and cooperative learning.

For further help, see Diana Clark's book, *Dyslexia, Theory and Practice of Remedial Instruction*, which provides information on effective programs and approaches.<sup>9</sup>

Finally, in the words of Margaret Rawson, "We can take the dyslexic person as he comes, without thought of altering his genetic structure, for we believe we know what can and should be done to set him free. *The challenge is to get it done—keeping our minds open all the way!*"<sup>10</sup> □

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> P. L. Vail, *Smart Kids With School Problems* (New York: New American Library, 1987), p. 8.

<sup>2</sup> Betty J. Roy, "A Cooperative Teacher Education and Language Retraining Program for Dyslexics in West Texas." Research in Action V Conference,

Texas Tech University, 1986, p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> M. B. Rawson, *The Many Faces of Dyslexia* (Baltimore, Md.: The Orton Dyslexia Society, 1988), p. 5.

<sup>4</sup> Sylvia Richardson, "Specific Developmental Dyslexia: Retrospective and Prospective Views," *Annals of Dyslexia* (1989), pp. 13-20.

<sup>5</sup> C. H. Lindamood and P. C. Lindamood, *Auditory Discrimination in Depth*, Book 2 (Hingham, Mass.: Teaching Resources Corporation, 1975).

<sup>6</sup> Eileen Ball, Presentation at the Orton Dyslexia Society national convention, Dallas, Texas, 1989.

<sup>7</sup> Betty J. Roy, Presentation at the Orton Dyslexia Society national convention, Washington, D.C., 1990.

<sup>8</sup> Guided discovery teaching uses questioning about examples to aid students in discovering a topic. For example, a student is asked to listen to the initial sound in several words to discover the sound to be taught.

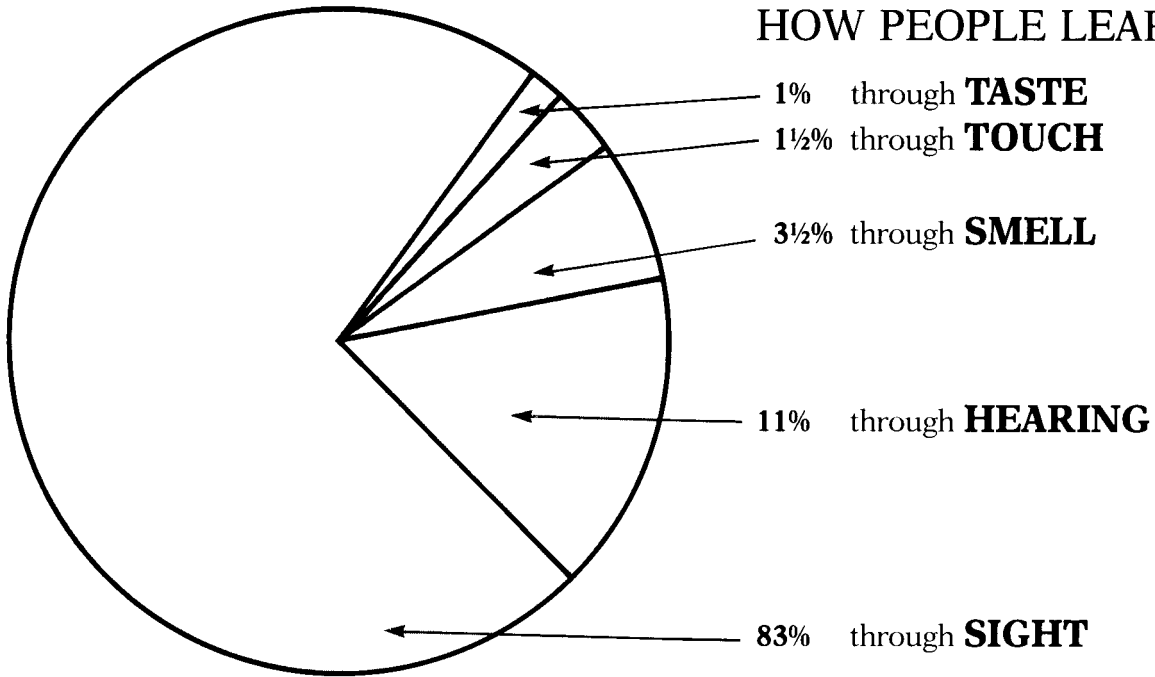
<sup>9</sup> D. B. Clark, *Dyslexia: Theory and Practice of Remedial Instruction* (Parkton, Md.: York Press, Inc., 1988).

<sup>10</sup> Rawson, p. 13.

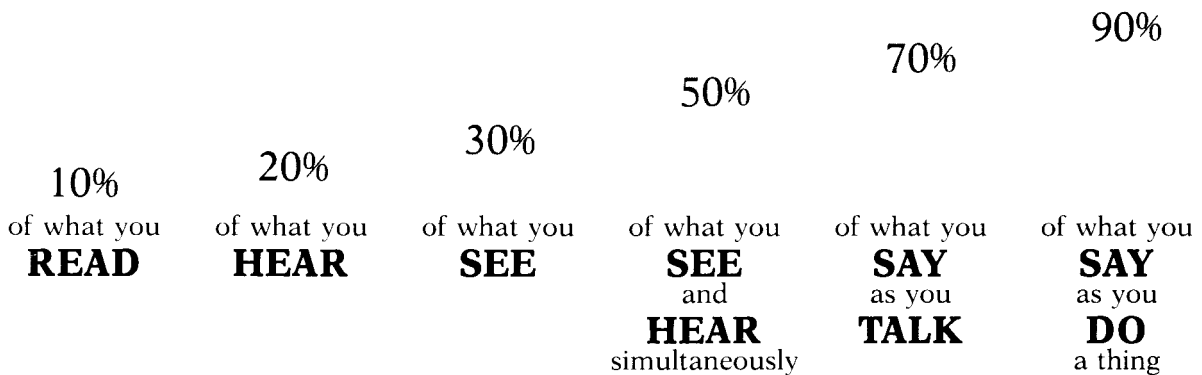
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# THE VARIOUS SENSES AND THE LEARNING PROCESS

HOW PEOPLE LEARN



## HOW MUCH OF WHAT PEOPLE LEARN DO THEY RETAIN?



METHOD OF INSTRUCTION	RECALL 3 HOURS LATER	RECALL 3 DAYS LATER
Lecture .....	70%	10%
Showing Used Alone .....	72%	20%
A Blend of Showing and Telling .....	85%	65%