

Dyspraxia, visual stress, and foreign language learning from a student's perspective

I have just started my second year at Durham University studying French, German, and Spanish. I took all three languages at A-Level, and taught myself Spanish from scratch. I also enjoyed learning Mandarin Chinese and Italian as extra-curricular activities at school. I was able to continue learning Mandarin through a skills-swap/tandem language programme¹ at Durham University. After struggling in my first term at university (almost a year ago now), I was diagnosed with Dyspraxia and traits of Asperger Syndrome. I had previously been diagnosed with Meares Irlen Syndrome/visual stress. I am also aware of disordered sensory and delayed auditory processing.

My learning differences inevitably affect my language learning ability, sometimes more than others. My concentration in lectures can be limited, and structuring my ideas in essay-writing has proven to be a struggle. I often find it difficult to interact with my peers in seminars due to my slower processing speed. I tend to be very easily distracted, and looking up a word list in a dictionary can take me an hour. At school, I rarely finished written exam papers within the given time. My predicted grades for GCSE languages were set to C, and at one point, hope that I would go onto higher education was scarce. In the end, however, I achieved grades A* and A respectively for French and German at GCSE. I went on to gain A grades for French, German, and Spanish at A2-Level, in addition to A grades for English Language and Fine Art at AS Level.

In many ways, I believe I have benefited from an awareness and understanding of hidden learning conditions. I have, for example, an attention for detail, which I think helps me digest new grammar structures. I have the perseverance and determination to overcome difficulties, and seek coping strategies for these. Like many people with Dyspraxia, I have a creative side, and am so often brimming with ideas. At school, I frequently excelled in the speaking element of language-learning, as I can imitate sounds and accents authentically. I have found the confidence at University to make friends with Erasmus students from different European countries who are studying at Durham for at least one semester, developing my communication skills further.

I am very interested in education, particularly in language learning, as I believe foreign language learning should and can be inclusive and open to all. I do one-to-one voluntary tutoring through Durham University's Student Community Action

¹ This entailed dedicating half our weekly session to me learning Chinese, and the other half to me teaching basic German to the student, as well as informally discussing English linguistics and phonetics.

project, as well as having delivered projects in schools as an Ambassador with UK-German Connection and Routes Into Languages, to encourage and inspire an interest in languages and cultures among young people. This year, I intend to set up a link with a local school to work with a small group of students with specific learning difficulties, to encourage an interest in language and culture. As the Secretary of the University's Education Society, I am organising a guest lecture on managing inclusion in mainstream education.

I believe every child deserves to learn a language, and be supported in this, even if it is 'just' learnt through speaking. Children with a learning difference such as Dyslexia, for example, should not be put off the rich and fulfilling experiences that foreign language learning can offer - such as enjoying the pronunciation and rhythm of a new tongue. I believe the mentality of 'teaching to pass exams' can be extremely counter-productive and mentally detrimental for pupils with specific learning difficulties, who may not cope well with the stress of exams. Instead of solely academic, written exercises, such as comprehension or essay tasks, a more practical, hands-on approach to language-learning could help relate the importance and benefits to a young person.

Languages have helped me to find confidence in myself, and to some extent contribute to my sense of self – at times I feel more confident speaking in French than I do in English. Studying and speaking these languages has also helped to develop my social skills. I never truly felt as though I fitted in at secondary school (as being a 'language nerd' has only recently been a cool thing at university), though through having taken the plunge to participate in trips and extra-curricular cultural activities, I have gained so much, and have developed my interpersonal skills.

For Dyspraxia Awareness Week (11-17th Oct) and Meares Irlen Awareness Week (19th-23rd Oct) 2015, I posted articles on my blog² to raise awareness of what can be managed in terms of foreign language study, even when it may seem doubtful. With the right support, appropriate methods, and realistic milestones, success is achievable! Pupils with special needs also have special abilities – these should be considered equally when it comes to language learning.

'Misspraxic',

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(Published online in PDF format: <http://languageswithoutlimits.co.uk/ASN.html>)

² <https://misspraxic.wordpress.com/>