An Alternative Way to Teach Adults with Non-functioning Literacy

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In 2000, I assessed a female learner in the offsite Basic Skills area who had made little or no sense of reading and writing during her life. Since enrolling at college she had made only minimal progress. Her teacher was worried and asked for advice. It appeared to me that this learner fitted the dyslexia profile as many of these Basic Skills adult learners do. Having listened to what she told me about her past encounters with sounds, letters, reading and writing I decided to try a different teaching approach. In short, I abandoned my training (or set it on the' back-burner') that connected speech sounds to written symbols (phoneme/grapheme linking) as a starting point, in favour of using the alphabet as a 'fixed anchor' for my starting point.

I spent one whole session explaining to the learner the 'whys' and the 'wherefores' of the alphabet as a system, a difficult and illogical one. This seemed to work immediately and she said she was able to understand and had never been able to before (and smile!). I then spent one session with the teacher explaining this and handing over notes along with the teaching resources for more general use in the Basic Skills area (detailed below). Via regular feedback from the teacher, I heard that the learner was making excellent and continuing progress.

I used the same approach at another college where this time I worked with groups of tug- boat skippers or naval personnel. These students had competent practical skills and verbal language but literacy had remained inaccessible throughout their lives. By laying out the alphabet as a system at the outset, the reactions were the same, Le. they could see some sense for the first time and 'everything' seemed to fall into place. This is not to say however that literacy did not remain a struggle, or that everyone learned to read and write immediately. I think also that using this approach might be more suited to adults who are within an average range of verbal competence and intelligence rather than young children or lower-ability adult academic learners.

With this second college, I measured progress regularly using both standardised tests and other literacy benchmarking, with set start and end points, including phoneme/grapheme recognition, reading and spelling goals. In one case study, an adult male who was too distressed to attempt 3 letter words at the outset, went on to achieve Level 1 Literacy *and* Numeracy and both within one year, although literacy remains a struggle for him and it will no doubt always be so. For myself though, finding a way, which seems to, at the least, enable some sort of 'unlocking' of the literacy mystery, has been one of the most satisfying experiences of my teaching career.

Earlier teaching approach
The dyslexics with whom I have been mostly involved over the past 18 years have been in the 16 to 18 year age range or Secondary school students, with a full academic programme to deal with. Coursework deadlines; exam techniques; important spellings and reading skills were always 'the thing' however. My students have been in agreement with me that a 10 minutes 'sub-skills' teaching section at the beginning of a one-to-one lesson helps to shore up some of their underlying cognitive deficits (or so I hoped). This followed the principles of my training in Specific Learning Difficulties [SpLD] and Linguistics and involved a timer, and, for example: minimal pair phonemes drills; nonsense and real word encoding and decoding dictation, visual tracking exercises; sight word recognition; in the hope that this would help make language more accessible and reliable in their day to day lives.

Following my experience from the Basic Skills teaching though, I would be inclined to go about things in a different way.

How I have come to understand dyslexia for practical teaching purposes?
As a practitioner, I have often thought that the best way to understand dyslexia (and explain it to others) is to see It as a deficit often, if not always, implicating the short-term memory (STM) both auditory and symbolic, but which varies with each individual.

With regard to written language, dyslexics have reported seeing rows of dark symbols set upon white spaces, or even letters jumping around where weak visual convergence or instability is present. Few meaningful patterns may emerge and the dyslexic learner will therefore have to attempt to decode, by using mostly phonemic decoding, the symbol groupings letter by letter, then word by word. Inevitably the memory 'gives out' and meaning is then lost before they reach the end of a short sentence. As I understand it, a dyslexic's brain doesn't process or retain 'patterns'. For instance, recurring patterned chunks such as 'th' or 'ing' or 'tion' are something most of us don't have to think about or struggle with. After some practice - the non-dyslexic acquires an automatic and unconscious response to the majority of high frequency letter string patterns. Without this patterning ability though, for the dyslexic, every time words are encountered they would appear to be unfamiliar and as such it must parallel encountering a foreign language for the first time.

Added to the lack of symbol/letter pattern retention, there may also be an unreliable auditory memory function, which makes it challenging when trying to tie up, (or tie down) discrete phonemes, or strings of phonemes, or when trying to sound out words, that a competent reader can revert to, briefly, when faced with a word that isn't familiar. I have also found auditory perception difficulties are most predictably In the short vowel sounds and the 'liquid' range of consonants (e.g. 'l' *l'w'* /'r') that have a similar acoustic quality to short vowels.

Overall then, a dyslexic's experience of both phoneme and grapheme language is perhaps like feeling in the dark. It is disjointed - indecipherable at worst, unreliable at best - and I have come around to thinking that it can be counter productive to attempt to bind verbal and written language too tightly together when teaching them.

Why I think that the alphabet works best as the first step
a) The alphabet is fundamentally a fixed set of symbols, and this at least ought to give it a teaching advantage when dealing with the cognitive nature of dyslexia.

b) It helps too, when the alphabet is presented in the form of visual whole, since in my experience dyslexics are usually good with visual wholes. It is also presented with the vowels set apart from the consonants by colour, creating a further layer of systematic teaching.

c) It must also be reassuring to have it confirmed how illogical the written language actually is, as this is how dyslexics perceive and experience it.

d) Speech and distinct phonemes are more problematical than I first reckoned - there are too many inconsistencies so that it might be counter productive, even annoying, for a dyslexic to assume this as a 'strength'.

The Practical Materials:
It would be far easier to demonstrate and more fun for everybody, however for those who might want to try this, I describe here what I did.

The Basic Skills Pack: (see below for list of resources)
The resources pack for Basic Skills, was intended to be practical and suitable for use by non-trained SpLD teachers and/or a Learning Support Assistants [LSA] once s/he had received an initial training session. The packs were also for independent use as a self-help pack for learners (with an initial one to

one session, and some ongoing teacher guidance).

Where to start teaching

-The alphabet as a fixed system
When presenting the alphabet system I used the 'alphabet arc', but there is no reason why it has to be done in this way as long as the alphabet is taught and understood, and is not bound too tightly to verbal language and speech sounds at the first stage of teaching.

Most SpLD teachers will know the alphabet arc, but in case you are not familiar with the method it is described here.

The alphabet arc
I draw an 'Alphabet Arc' on an A4 card (or paper). This is a semicircle with the capitalised letters A to Z written along the top of the 'Arc'. The letter M is above the line at the centre of the 'arc', and the remaining letters are spaced evenly across the curve.

The lower case letters are placed below the upper case letter and below the line.

I prefer to use a pencil, as it is tricky to judge the correct spacing at first.

All the shapes of each letter must be made clear and distinctive, but not embellished.

After the pencil sketch, all the vowels are coloured red (along with the matching the upper/lower case letter), and consonants coloured black

*Although there should always be a good reason for teaching something, where something is very difficult or learning it does not come naturally, there has to be a **very** good reason.*

Reasons for the alphabet as an arc layout
The arc is approximately the extent of our visual field - i.e. about as far as you can *see* when you keep your eyes at a fixed point.

It also allows you to get control of the letters 'as a whole'.

It tries to give the idea that the alphabet isn't at all easy.

Some facts about the alphabet: - this doesn't all have to be covered in one session. **Make it** interactive as with everything - and integrate the learner's knowledge about the alphabet.
With the arc in front of you, point out that:

These are the symbols we've got for writing.

The sounds of the language don't match the symbols.

The alphabet is very difficult and not always logical.

It may help to think of the alphabet as an unfamiliar foreign language.

There are only 26 letter symbols, but 44-46 speech sounds-depending on a specific accent.

Some letter symbols are not needed for the sounds we use (see below).

Most consonants and long vowels are more distinctive as speech sounds.

The brains of some people don't pattern symbols very well, even though their verbal language is good.

Visual appearance of symbols: - to talk over
Two different lots of symbols - upper case (capital) and lower case (small).

Explain that symbols just happen to look the way they do - any symbol could have been used but it just so happens we had to learn to remember a particular one. For instance, the letter 'D' or 'd' could equally have been drawn as another shape, e.g. '⊿.' or 'δ' so you would have had to learn that when writing that sound.

Look at the shapes - which letters are sharp?
Which letters are round? Which ones do they like/dislike?

Which letters have similar shapes?

Compare upper and lower case, looking at which are similar, e.g. 'M' and 'm': and which are different, e.g. 'A' and 'a'.

* Let speech sounds weave in and out naturally, but keep mostly to symbols at this stage.

* If the learner knows the alphabet s/he might want to say it, but don't ask them to.

** Keep **'the letter** case' on the desk to the side of you so that either of you can take out letters to experiment / reinforce what you are talking about.*

* Working with 3 sounds at a time is ideal but if someone wants to pick out an 8 letter word that is also fine. The lesson should be student led.

Problem symbols:
Some of the letters do not uniquely correspond to individual sounds - 'c' for instance - since we already have those two sounds ok' - kit and 's' - city.

You can put a feint pencil stroke through C /Q/ X to show that they are not needed though you need to point out why this is. Q = K+W (quiz) (X = K+S (mix). Say the sounds slowly and clearly, just to demonstrate, not to teach.

Some speech sounds do not have a symbol at all - "sh" for instance so we have to push two letters together and treat it, or 'pretend' it is one symbol. You need to write these out to demonstrate, then ask him/her to take the letters from **the letter case** - (saying the sounds will always crop up but keep it subservient to the symbol).

Learner makes his or her own arc at some point, either at the first session or later,

Tell the student to 'layout the letter arc and go over it again ideally before every session Allow about 10 minutes for this. Use a timer here.

Beginning to link sounds to symbols (phoneme/ grapheme but don't push sounds too hard)

I explain this activity as the 'sharpening' skill with sounds, and liken it to a tool or musical instrument. This must be low key and abandoned if the student does not follow. (Problematical sounds are the short vowels and liquid consonants (l/w/r) but not in a Scottish accent where the 'r' is 'rolled'.

Try to make the phonemes longer and/or more distinctive when you say them so "sh" becomes 'Shhhh' - and keep repeating them. All of this should be light hearted with the learner joining in, but not they're too embarrassed.

When playing with letters/sounds, add one more if you think they are able to cope, e.g. add a single sound to 'sh', - 'a' making 'ash' then remove again.

OR

With his/her eyes closed ask him/her to listen to, "s' and "sh' to see if s/he hear a difference.

A list of minimal pairs of phonemes helps, but it's not essential

Keep everything simple-if it starts to feel confusing, abandon it.

Using the Letter Case:
For teaching guidance, it is useful to have a Developmental Chart (i.e. the order in which young children learn to articulate the speech sounds) - again it helps to systemise the alphabet.

It's important that the learner is in joint control of the lesson but try to steer clear of difficult words unless s/he is really desperate to attempt a difficult word.

Use nonsense syllables as well as 'real' words. Just replace one sound at a time systematically: pit / dit / kit OR pot / dot / kot.

Reinforce with the sounds, but don't overdo this - be led by the learner.

Follow on teaching [1 to 4 are described below]
1 and 2 I see as essential, for 3 and 4, I have found these features worked for me. However it is a flexible system - all experienced teachers will have their own ideas.

Materials provided for basic skills area

1. **Alphabet arc** - as above.
2.**Edith Norrie Letter Case** - with colour coded vowels and consonants.
Encourage hands on manipulation of the symbols: this is student led, but follows a developmental chart for the order in which children developmentally are taught to articulate speech sounds.

There is a need to confine early work to 3 sounds at first: vowel + 2 consonants, then build upon this.

Use randomly presented nonsense words alongside real words e.g. dot / dit/: sot / sit / set.

3. **Wooden letters and canvas bag** (or the student can close their eyes)
For use where there are especially tricky symbol problems.

4. **Lined Writing Book** (guided formation of middle; ascender; descender strokes) this is intended mostly for copying.

Encourages slow deliberate letter formations and words; and an attractive outcome since the letters are guided by the lines.

Good for confidence as well as controlling fine motor problems.

5. **Pens and Pencils**
Because of fine motor weakness, and individuality, the use of the 'correct' pen or pencil is worth investigating - if someone is susceptible to fine motor problems, the correct pen or pencil can often result in an instant improvement.

Check directional slant, since this can also alter (improve) handwriting immediately.

6. **Visual Tracing/Scanning material**
Can either be bought from a supplier - or made from teacher / learner's own text.

Track words of similar patterns / common regular words etc.

Pre-prepared circling of patterns e.g. 'tion' 'ed' 'ing'.

Any written material for self help 'homework' trace letter patterns/words in colour.

7. **Coloured Overlays**
High gloss coloured overlays (e.g. old type OHP overlays) can also be helpful. I have used these since the early 1990's. They are now more difficult to source but for some students these seem to be the only ones that make a difference to the stability of the text. The softer toned Wilkins type overlays also work for some students.

8. **Resource text:** Solving Language Difficulties ISBN 0-8388-0326-1.

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