

Talking about neurodiversity

Hi! You may have seen that I've been posting quite a lot about working with dyslexic learners. Well, there are lots of different ways of talking about dyslexia, and I'd just like to take a few minutes here to try and unpack some of the terminology, and explain why I make some of the language choices that I do.

The different ways of talking about a topic are often called 'discourses' and, of course, over the years, language evolves and it changes to suit the different circumstances that we find ourselves in. In the past it has been quite common to talk about dyslexia as a disability or a disorder, but now many of us are coming to the understanding that this deficit discourse is not really appropriate, not really helpful, and certainly not very encouraging for dyslexic people. So there's a move much more towards talking about dyslexia in terms of neurodiversity and difference, and I think it's a really positive thing.

Dyslexia is also often described as an SpLD - a 'specific learning difference' or a 'specific learning difficulty'. The two terms are very similar. They both remind us that dyslexic people will probably have something quite specific that they find more challenging than other people. It's not a global learning difficulty. In fact, to my mind, it doesn't have to be a difficulty at all, if we can find the right way forward. So that's why I prefer the term 'specific learning difference', because that highlights that, actually, as teachers, we need to find a different way of teaching some things. But I have to acknowledge that there are some students - I think particularly teenagers - who don't want to be different, but they would like us to acknowledge that they are experiencing difficulties in some aspects of their work. So the two terms are quite useful, and in different situations we might choose to use one or the other.

Now, dyslexia doesn't normally travel on its own - it has friends. So as a teacher, when I meet students who have been identified as being dyslexic, I need to be aware that although the report says 'dyslexia' actually, there are other things going on. There may be some characteristics of dyspraxia, dyscalculia, they may be further along the autism spectrum than the rest of the class. And so that's why it's really useful to have an umbrella term like 'specific learning difference' or even 'neurodiversity'.

And I really like the term 'neurodiversity' - I think it's a really useful addition to the discourses in this field - because it reminds us that actually the human population is neurodiverse. We're all slightly different in the way that we think about things, the way that we process information. We find some things easier, some things more challenging, but it won't be the same for everybody. That's neurodiversity. So you might be saying, 'Well, why do we need to flag up neurodiverse students, if we're all neurodiverse?' and that's a good question. But there are some people who are *more* different than the rest of the population, and we could characterize those people as 'neurodivergent'. So if we think about the human population on a normal distribution curve those are the outliers - they're not like the rest of the population.

So in terms of the discourses around the field of dyslexia, if - like me - you're working with English language learners and multilingual people, I think we have to be really careful about which words we use. Because remember that not all of these terms are going to translate very easily, or if they do translate it may come with different connotations, that we might not be expecting. So we have to pick our words very carefully. And, although I can't tell you which words would be appropriate in your context, I think as a general rule of thumb, we should consider who are we talking to, what's the message that we want to put across, and then how can we do that really clearly and with respect. And if we keep those things in mind we'll probably make the appropriate language choices.

If you are now curious about neurodiversity and you'd like to know some more, why don't you come over to the [ELT well website](#) where you can find all sorts of resources and information for inclusive language teaching. And also, you can find online courses, including a brand new course called 'Understanding Neurodiversity'. And whether you're an educational professional, or a parent of a neurodiverse person, or perhaps you are neurodiverse yourself, and you'd just like to know a little bit more about how it all fits together, this 10-week course, I think, would be really helpful.

I hope that's clarified a few of the terms that are often bandied about in this field, and if you've got any questions, of course, do get in touch with me. I'd love to hear from you. This is actually my favorite subject - so always happy to have a chat about this!