

# **‘SPECIFIC’ LEARNING DIFFICULTIES in PRISONS**

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## **BOOKLET 6**

### **SUPPORT FOR FOREIGN NATIONALS who may have SPECIFIC LEARNING DIFFICULTIES**

The full set of BOOKLETS comprises

1. Introduction and Resources for Specific Learning Difficulties
2. Overview of Specific Learning Difficulties
3. Principles of Support for Specific Learning Difficulties
4. Support for English/Literacy and Maths/Numeracy
5. Support for ICT and Virtual Campus
6. Support for Foreign Nationals who may have Specific Learning Difficulties
7. Specific Learning Difficulties in the contexts of Disability / Equality / Diversity / Accessibility
8. Work Preparation and Resettlement

The term ‘Specific Learning Difficulties’ refers to a family of conditions, namely Dyslexia, Dyspraxia, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder and Dyscalculia

ALL BOOKLETS are available on [www.dyslexia-malvern.co.uk](http://www.dyslexia-malvern.co.uk)

# SUPPORT FOR FOREIGN NATIONALS WHO MAY HAVE SPECIFIC LEARNING DIFFICULTIES

1. A Language or an SpLD Issue?
2. Screening and Assessment for Specific Learning Difficulties
3. Support for ESOL Learners
4. CASE STUDY

## 1. A Language or an SpLD Issue?

There is a confusing array of acronyms for foreign learners studying English

- ESL learner (English as a Second Language, now less common)
- EAL learner (English as an Additional Language)
- ESOL learner (English for Speakers of Other Languages).

The final option reflects the fact that English may be the third or even fourth language – this is the term used in the *Skills for Life* initiative (2001 onwards) and in this Booklet.

The *Skills for Life* initiative highlighted the specific needs of this group by devising an ESOL curriculum for them. This is laid out like its basic skills counterpart for native English speakers. It may be that some learners in custody are inappropriately working through an adult literacy curriculum unaware that ESOL programmes are available

It is all too easy to attribute the difficulties of ESOL learners to their incomplete grasp of English, plus various cultural, educational and emotional factors, rather than exploring whether there might also be complications such as dyslexia.

Lara's situation illustrates this point.

Lara is from the Ukraine and regards herself as an entrepreneur. Her spoken English is adequate for everyday purposes but she never acquired written English at school and was unsuccessful academically. In the literacy class, she seemed unable to retain the letter symbols and would often produce a mirror image when copying letters – not only 'b' and 'd' but 'm' and 'w'. This was put down to differences between the Russian and English alphabets but further dyslexic indicators emerged such as muddling number sequences, including her prison number. A simple checklist showed that several key dyslexia indicators applied to Lara.

## 2. Screening and Assessment for Specific Learning Difficulties

Conventional Dyslexia / SpLD screening and testing materials in English are clearly not appropriate for foreign nationals unless they are completely fluent in English.

A number of factors further complicate the matter

- 1) the level of literacy in the home language
- 2) 'language interference', i.e. features of the individual's first language which can contribute to the difficulties mastering another language

3) the nature of the first language; for example there are language skills required in English (such as awareness of rhyme) which do not arise in the same way in other languages.

These factors may mask dyslexia, compound it or simulate it making this a specialist area.

Fortunately the *Do-IT Profiler* tool can be administered in a number of languages and will provide a holistic assessment of the difficulties faced by the individual.

[www.doitprofiler.com](http://www.doitprofiler.com)

Useful guidance is provided in *Dyslexia and the Bilingual Learner*; this publication includes the following features:

- a checklist, suggesting the questions that tutors should pose
- a ten page diagnostic interview format
- graded reading passages for miscue analysis
- diagnostic spelling dictations and sample assessment reports.

Further sections cover approaches to teaching and strategies for learners.

If learners find that the majority of the dyslexia checklist items relate to them, they are regarded as 'showing signs of dyslexia'. Only a full assessment will confirm whether dyslexia is indeed an issue. For those with weak English language skills, the assessment should ideally be carried out in the home language. Until recently this service has rarely been possible in offender settings. Now, as mentioned, the *Do-IT Profiler* may be available in the required language – this tool is developing all the time, with the addition of further facilities.

One group of foreign nationals that had been growing in Women's Prisons is Jamaican women, convicted of bringing in drugs. Although they would not seem to fit the ESOL category, their language clearly differs from Standard English in many respects; the grammar, phonic system, pronunciation and spelling all demonstrate this fact. Where there are difficulties in gaining English literacy skills amongst this group, they tend to be attributed to differences between Jamaican and Standard English, but could dyslexia also be a factor, in some cases?

### **What does 'Dyslexia' mean to foreign nationals / ESOL learners?**

The terms 'dyslexia' or 'Specific Learning Difficulties' may have different implications in other languages and cultures. In Russia, for example, 'dyslexia' and 'dysgraphia' may refer to the reading and writing abilities of slow learners – I have come across the term 'secondary dyslexia' to convey what we mean by dyslexia in the UK. Left-handedness has been treated as a disability in some countries, and 'corrected'; while in other countries specialised programmes were offered to left-handers.

Useful guidance on these differences in approach is given in the following publications:

- NIACE e-guidelines 8: *E-learning for teaching English for Speakers of Other Languages*
- *The International Book of Dyslexia* Smythe, Everatt & Salter (2004) Wiley-Blackwell

It is important to be aware of the **stigma surrounding learning difficulties and disabilities** in many countries. For that reason it may be better to refer to a 'learning style' or 'differences in learning' when discussing learning problems with individuals who display characteristics associated with dyslexia or other SpLDs.

### 3. Support for ESOL Learners

Many of the principles on supporting learners with Specific Learning Difficulties [BOOKLET 3] apply to foreign nationals with SpLDs studying English - but some additional points are worth noting.

It is important to **correct faulty sound patterns in pronunciation** because these can affect spelling. Letter names, sound symbol relationships, common blends, segmentation skills and rhyming need to be taught systematically.

Flashcards or other types of **visual prompts** are also useful, in order to introduce new learning items and recall known vocabulary associating word and image - this is especially helpful for visual learners.

Building up a **personal dictionary** helps reinforce the spellings needed in everyday life.

**Culturally relevant images** have a greater impact on learning than non-relevant material, because of the personal link.

ESOL learners should be supplied with **reference materials** of various types, such as bilingual lists of sequences of the months of the year (since they may not be secure with these sequences in their own language) and charts containing frequent use information, such as the verb To Be. This back-up takes the load off the short-term memory, which is often weak.

It is important to **'overlearn'** items of personal difficulty, and more interesting if these are presented in a variety of ways. **Games** are often incorporated into language teaching sessions and programs for reinforcement.

**Computer programs** also allow for individual progression rates and the option of revisiting difficult language items. These can incorporate self-checking exercises which protect self-esteem. Tick boxes or matching exercises can also check understanding by drawing on the skill of word recognition rather than the more demanding skill of recall.

Progress is promoted by **bringing dyslexic strengths into play** – a practice which does not disadvantage non-dyslexic class members but should make the session more interesting and enjoyable for everyone.

This overlooked approach involves incorporating the following skills:

- the ability to gain an overview and see the overall pattern
- a talent for making unexpected links and associations
- artistic ability, originality and creativity
- an affinity for fantasy and visualisation
- a feel for colour
- lateral thinking and troubleshooting skills
- a natural rhythmic sense
- learning by doing – acting it out



In this way abilities are employed to offset areas of difficulty, as in the following example:

The class had been learning vocabulary for the weather and seasons; as they practised words and phrases some members of the group found that these seemed to suggest certain rhythms. The phrases were rearranged and chanted as rap, which was later set to background music composed by a member of the group and performed. The result was original, lively and entertaining. The applause must have provided considerable encouragement and bolstered confidence. Moreover the rhythmic, repetitive approach reinforced the phrases successfully.

Two useful resources must be flagged up:

1) **The Shannon Trust Reading Plan** is a paired reading scheme (mentor and learner) using the **Turning Pages** manual. It starts from the very beginning with letter sounds and is appropriate for prisoners with very poor English. It should always be offered to those who are not currently receiving education. The mentor will be chosen from other inmates, with careful thought given to who would be good in this role and work well in the pairing.  
[www.shannontrust.org.uk](http://www.shannontrust.org.uk)

2) **Language Behind Bars**, a European project arising out of the communication problems facing foreign nationals and prison staff. It is described as a 'multi-lingual, inter-cultural learning programme'. Three main resources are available, in a number of languages: a workbook, visual dialogue builders and flashcards.  
[www.LBB-Project.eu](http://www.LBB-Project.eu)  
[http://lbb-project.eu/fileadmin/user\\_upload/End\\_Materials/EN/Languages\\_Behind\\_Bars.pdf](http://lbb-project.eu/fileadmin/user_upload/End_Materials/EN/Languages_Behind_Bars.pdf)

In conclusion, it is clearly more difficult to separate out the underlying causes of difficulties with learning in the multilingual individual, than in the native English speaker. But with the appropriate expertise and assessment tools it is possible to determine key areas of difficulty, and then provide suitable support to promote learning.

#### **4. CASE STUDY: Rudi (Romanian)**

Rudi's Key Worker describes him under stress:

"I'd known Rudi for a bit. He was a clumsy lad, big and all over the place somehow. Anyway he'd got quite wound up about the Adjudication. When the governor asked him some questions to clarify the situation Rudi didn't seem able to answer without striding about the room waving his arms about, as though he had to use his whole body to help the words out.

His English was good, - he'd been over here quite some time – he was always getting books out of the library.

And I don't know what happened to his volume control! His voice came out very loud and aggressive. He rambled on and on as though he was trying to avoid the question.

Rudi kept staring at these scruffy notes he'd brought in with him but didn't seem to be able to make sense of them. By the end he was almost weeping with frustration. I really felt quite sorry for him."

***The Features of Rudi's behaviour indicate that he could be dyspraxic.***

This Case Study is a reminder that Foreign National prisoners may also have a Specific Learning Difficulty.

#### **Ways Forward and Reasonable Adjustments could include:**

Measures to help reduce stress at the Adjudication (or a Parole Hearing)

- Questions to be provided to Rudi in advance of the Adjudication.
- Rudi should be allowed to bring his Offender Manager, or a friend.
- An agreed signal to remind Rudi that his voice is getting too loud.

Generally helpful measures

- Train him to word process using a voice recognition program, to get round his problem of poor handwriting and scruffy written presentation.
- Encourage Rudi to take regular exercise and/or a yoga class.
- Careful consideration of how his skills could be developed.

As his English is good, he might wish to train as a Shannon Trust Reading Plan mentor at some stage and help another foreign national prisoner to read.

These measures should raise self-esteem and improve Rudi's well-being.