

My child has been diagnosed as dyslexic. Should we develop reading and writing in one language and not two?

First, dyslexia is definitely not caused by bilingualism. There is no evidence that links dyslexia with being brought up as a bilingual or that ownership of two or more spoken languages exacerbates dyslexia.

Second, parents of a dyslexic child are sometimes advised to concentrate on the child's school language particularly in learning to read and write. Sometimes (e.g. in Wales) this is advice to acquire literacy through a phonetic language (such as Welsh) rather than English (which is irregular and partly non-phonetic). For a dyslexic child, learning to read via a consistent phonetic language has advantages in ease and speed of learning.

An example is a language where the same letter or combination of letters always makes the same sound (e.g. Italian). The dyslexic child learns the 'sound rule' quicker than a language (e.g. English) that is irregular. In English, one letter can be pronounced in different ways (e.g. 'a' in cave and have; 'e' in her and here; 'i' in pint and mint). In English, a group of letters may change seemingly arbitrarily in their sound (e.g. 'ough' in tough, through, bough). For dyslexics, English is a particularly complex and more difficult language to learn to read and write.

If the only school language is English (or another irregular language), then it is usually impractical not to concentrate on English reading and writing. If reading and writing in school is solely through English, then to ensure linguistic and intellectual development, English literacy must be stimulated.

Third, once a child has achieved reasonable literacy skills in one language there are two effects. (a) The child has gained confidence in reading. For a dyslexic, such confidence is important for success to breed an expectation of more success (e.g. learning to read in a second language). When there is repeated failure in learning to read, it becomes disheartening for the child and increases the literacy problem. (b) Having acquired some skills in reading and writing on one language, there will be a transfer of skills into the second language: recognizing that letters mean sounds, decoding words as parts and wholes, making sensible guesses at words, understanding the meaning of a word in a sentence from the whole sentence, and that there are clues about words from previous sentences and pictures.

This means that a dyslexic child should not be banned from becoming biliterate. It implies that, once there is a solid foundation of reading and writing in one language, the other language can be introduced particularly when there is sufficient self-interest, self-confidence and educational support. Often, the dyslexic child itself triggers an interest in acquiring second language literacy.

Fourth, should a dyslexic learn to read in two languages simultaneously? The answer is typically 'no'. For a dyslexic, learning literacy skills in one language is often slow and very difficult. Learning two different systems at the same time will usually compound difficulties: in acquiring the skills to read each language; developing at a fast enough rate to support curriculum learning; and developing confidence as a competent reader and writer.

Reference for further reading: Cline, T., 2003, Bilingualism and Dyslexia. *Bilingual Family Newsletter*, vol. 20, no.2, page 4.