

Dyslexia: Is it Always Phonological Awareness?

It looks like I was onto something when I recently posted the following statement:

There is orthographic dyslexia. This occurs when someone has average or above average phonemic awareness, but they can't translate that ability to the written word. I always look at the writing first...it tells me everything I need to know about what the child understands about the written language.

Orthographic Dyslexia

Instead of a dry, boring explanation of what I am referring to as orthographic dyslexia, I'm going to describe a real student who fits the description:

Meet Javier. He's an adorable, engaging, very bright (gifted) and extremely motivated young man who is ten years old. He's attended school consistently, had supportive and attentive parents, stable home life, and no major illnesses or head injuries.

Javier has had an IEP since the third grade for unexpected reading difficulties. Spelling difficulties were evident but not included in the IEP. He remained on that IEP for two years and made no progress. One thing that perplexed the team was his average to above average performance on phonemic awareness tasks. In fact, he scored in the above average range in phonological awareness and phonological memory on the CTOPP-2, but he still struggled to read, and he was spelling entirely phonetically. Interestingly, he was able to spell perfectly phonetic words like *brandish*, but not the word *who*. So, could it still be dyslexia if his phonological skills are intact? Yes, yes, yes!

This type of reading difficulty is what I am classifying as orthographic dyslexia. Now, I may use the term a little differently than others. According to the Oxford dictionary, orthography is the conventional spelling system of a language. Understanding English orthography requires that students understand how words are structured which does require a basis in phonology, but if the student is unable to translate their adequate phonological awareness skills to the written word, then it stands to reason that they have an orthographic processing deficit, and the intervention should focus on how the written language is structured. This is orthographic dyslexia. Uta Frith proposed the orthographic stage as the stage during which a reader has adequate phonological skills and begins to use the words stored in their visual word form area to read previously seen words rapidly. I believe dyslexia can occur when a student fails to make the transition from the phonological stage to the orthographic stage. Their difficulty is understanding the language, not the inability to visually memorize words.

In this situation a student should be focusing on the underlying structure of the language and all the 'whys' of spelling which will then transfer to reading. If they are not, it could be because they lack an understanding of the language, not phonological awareness. These readers need to

ORTHOGRAPHIC DYSLEXIA

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focus explicitly on the structure of written language because if they can spell a word, they can read it, while the converse is often not true.

Let's look at an example. Let's say Javier spells the word *every* as *evry*. We've all seen that before, right? This is a great example, because it shows quite perfectly that Javier has great phonological awareness. He has correctly identified that we actually pronounce that word /*ěvrē*/, and no one says ev – er – y. So, we know he hears the different phonemes, and he has accurately represented all the phonemes; however, he spelled it wrong. He spelled it incorrectly for two reasons. First, he is under the mistaken impression that words are a perfect representation of spoken phonemes. He is also unaware that words are spelled based on their meaning first and their phonology second. All we have to do with Javier is have a conversation about what *every* means (and stop over-enunciating - that doesn't help him understand the language). During this conversation he will realize that the base of *every* is *ever* and when he adds a suffix <-y> he will get the word *every*. Then phonology kicks in, he can spell *ever* based on the grapheme/phoneme correspondences and then add the suffix <-y>, while also identifying what phoneme is represented by the <-y> at the end of a multi-syllabic word. No, Javier will not have to do this with every word in the English language, but each word he does investigate will help him deepen his understanding of orthography. When you add word sums and matrices to the lesson, the multisensory techniques play their part as well.

Spelling ability is often tossed-aside and ignored. Technology is usually offered as a way around spelling. which may be an acceptable accommodation, but if you really want to know what a child understands about the English language, take a look at their writing. Their writing is the window to their individual dyslexia. If we spent more time teaching the structure of English instead of teaching that *a* 'says' /*ā*/ as in *apple* (letters don't talk, and *a* represents many more sounds than the initial sound in *apple*), our students would walk away with the investigative tools they need to spell and read (pronounce) almost any word they come across, or at least have the knowledge to understand that there is a reason for every spelling. Even if that reason is not immediately apparent, we now know there is no such thing as a sight word...