

# The unfair advantage of having dyslexia

An educator reflects on his experiences with this learning difficulty and how he learnt to work with incomplete information and draw inferences.

## Issac Lim

I was sacked from my school's prefect council in Primary 3.

My form teacher asked me to walk to the front of the class and instructed me to remove my prefect tie. As I undid it, she told the class she would consider making me a prefect again if I changed my ways. Although this episode happened nearly 40 years ago, the humiliation still feels fresh.

My crime? Untidy handwriting. What also remains vivid from that day was a classmate who consoled me when I returned to my chair. Her empathy made a horrible situation bearable, and provided a comfort that has lasted a lifetime.

Yes, a lifetime. It turns out that I have dyslexia. This is a learning difference that is not something you grow out of, but adapt to. It has meant that I have always struggled with school tasks and have sometimes been branded unintelligent.

People with dyslexia have brains that process words on the written page differently. However, the problem is linguistic, not visual. When people without dyslexia read a word, their brains process the sounds of the letters (phonemes) and the written symbols (alphabets) instantly. There are 44 phonemes in the English language. When they see the word "bat", their brains

quickly identify the sounds of the letters "b", "a" and "t" and blend them automatically. For us dyslexics, this process is much more circuitous. The meanings of words do not come automatically. We have to rely heavily on recognising the overall shape of a word, contextual clues or the big picture to guess the meanings.

I'm sharing my story to raise awareness, as October is World Dyslexia Awareness Month. In Singapore, it is estimated that 10 per cent of the population has dyslexia. In a class of 40, an average of three to four students could be dyslexic.

### 'MUST TRY TO IMPROVE'

Early identification is vital, but this was not around in my day.

Yes, our handwriting is messy. Take that Primary 3 teacher. Her annoyance was permanently etched on my report book: "Must be more attentive in class and improve your handwriting. Untidy in his work. Must try to improve."

My teachers in Primary 4 and 5 joined the chorus. "Untidy in his work. His handwriting needs to improve." "His work will improve once he improves his handwriting. Try to improve on your results."

Secondary school was no better. Teachers didn't seem to believe that I worked hard. I missed only two out of 726 days in school. They often told me to work harder, work more seriously and put in more effort.

English and mathematics were especially hard. My grades from Secondary 1 to 4 for these subjects were 54.2, 52.9, 51.6, 46; and 55.1, 44.8, 45.4 and 43, respectively. Many teachers returned test scripts in descending order of our marks. It was terrifying.

Reading was exhausting. I managed to finish Enid Blyton's *The Wishing-Chair* only after several attempts, and it remains the only fiction book I've ever finished. A teacher in secondary school sniggered when she saw me reading Charlotte's *Web* by E.B. White. I didn't understand



People with dyslexia have brains that process words on the written page differently. This is a learning difference that is not something you grow out of, but adapt to, says the writer. ST FILE PHOTO

why until a few years ago, when the same book was assigned to one of my children in Primary 3.

The most challenging aspect of school was copying notes from the blackboard. Following teachers' verbal instructions and copying notes meant that my cognitive resources were quickly used up. In 2023, after decades of searching for an explanation for my "hearing problems", I was diagnosed with auditory processing disorder (APD).

Dyslexia and APD tend to co-occur. People with APD have normal hearing, but our brains struggle to differentiate between sounds and utterances. So background noise, such as low humming from classroom fans or background chatter at a restaurant, wipes out my ability to have a proper conversation.

### AT POLY, I FINALLY THRIVED

My parents rightfully had very realistic expectations of my O-level results. My dad was primarily concerned about my punctuality. And my mum had prepared for the worst, reminding me that I had to repeat one more year if I failed my O levels.

My results somehow turned out okay enough for both polytechnic

and junior college. I opted to enrol in a polytechnic because I desperately wanted a fresh start. The feeling of being a perpetual laggard in class was crushing.

At polytechnic, I flourished. For the first time in my life, I felt I could do well in school. I found the latitude given in project work and the practical orientation of polytechnic education liberating.

It turned out that I was exceptionally poor at rote memorisation, and seemed to have developed an allergy to highly structured instructions. But at polytechnic, students need to be comfortable with ambiguity and the open-ended nature of project work. This suited me, as I had by then developed other skills and coping mechanisms to survive.

Although I long suspected that I had dyslexia, I did not get a diagnosis until I was 28 while studying in the US. A professor urged me to see an accessible education specialist on campus. My reading speed was in the third percentile, which meant that 97 out of 100 people could read faster than me.

Like many individuals with dyslexia, I have limited working memory capacity. Working memory is essential for reading,

writing and listening. With a smaller working memory, holding and manipulating visual and audio information in my mind requires much more effort.

On the plus side, because I could never copy down notes fast enough or hear spoken words in their entirety, I became adept at working with incomplete information. I became a natural at making inferences, finding alternative sources of information and drawing connections between seemingly unrelated phenomena.

I am in my 40s and some things remain unchanged. Reading and writing may get slightly easier with lots of practice, but they remain a struggle. Dyslexia and APD will not go away.

Given my challenges, I do not think choosing a profession – I am a social scientist – that requires one to read and write extensively was the wisest thing to do. But, as I like solving complex social puzzles, I'll have to make do. Everything takes longer for me. I took eight years to complete my doctorate at Oxford; some of my classmates took less than half that time. At times, I feel embarrassed just thinking about it. I learnt to avoid making social comparisons, and focus on micro improvements and progress. A mantra I learnt from a mentor of mine – one thing at a time – is calming when I feel overwhelmed. Look for people who believe in you. And, as with most things, you need good luck – of which I had plenty.

The power of words to encourage or cause dismay has also remained unchanged. One teacher with whom I have kept in touch is from my Primary 6 year. We recently met before he flew to Australia for work. In my report book all those years ago, he wrote: "A serious worker who is able to obtain better grades in the PSLE (Primary School Leaving Exam)."

### WHAT EDUCATORS AND PARENTS NEED TO DO

To educators and parents,

children with dyslexia must put in several times more effort to achieve what may seem effortless for other children. We are not lazy. Your responsibility is to help young minds find their strengths and an environment that allows them to flourish. Help us experiment with different tools, technologies and environments.

Thankfully, schools today provide a much better environment for students who learn differently. Every primary and secondary school has at least one special educational needs officer.

However, modes of assessment and methods of instruction would benefit from greater attention to the varied goals of education beyond academic excellence. As a parent of three school-going children, and an educator myself, I constantly remind myself not to confuse the goals of education with those of preparing for high-stakes examinations.

Education's primary remit is to prepare students for life. Activities that do this are different from those that prepare them for exams. Recent developments in AI (artificial intelligence) make an overwhelming case for schools to move away from assessments that favour rote memory, hotheadedness and other mechanical activities.

We can never out-memorise or outrun what large language models can do. Parents and educators must prioritise creating environments that allow compassion, empathy, curiosity, critical thinking and collaboration to flourish.

To students with dyslexia: keep showing up. I think our time has come. We can use AI tools to augment our very particular set of skills. I think we have an unfair advantage.

• Issac Lim is the founder and social scientist at Anthro Insights, a consultancy. He has a DPhil in Education from Oxford University, and teaches organisational behaviour at his alma mater, the NUS Business School.