

BILINGUALISM AT WHAT COST?

Learning to read and write can be challenging. This is a fact for people who have dyslexia. Dyslexics are estimated to represent up to twenty-three percent of the population.. If learning a first language can be difficult, try adding a second language.

It does not necessarily follow, however, that a francophone dyslexic should refrain from learning English and that an anglophone dyslexic should refuse to learn French. Depending on the type of dyslexia one has, the second language may actually prove to be easier than the first. It may actually be beneficial to switch to the second language as the main language of learning.

Since many people don't know much at all about dyslexia, here is a general introduction before getting into the particular issue of bilingualism.

Dyslexia

Dyslexics aren't slow learners. They just learn differently. Their I.Q. ranges from average to superior.

Dyslexia can be verified by a brain scan. For people without dyslexia, the two brain hemispheres are asymmetrical: the left side is larger than the right. For people with dyslexia, the two hemispheres are symmetrical. Because the left side of the brain is the seat of sequential, linear thinking prevalent in reading and writing, dyslexics tend to have problems in these areas. However, because the right side of the brain is the seat of intuitive, creative, and visual thinking, dyslexics tend to be favored in this domain, like Albert Einstein, Leonardo da Vinci, Alexander Graham Bell, and Walt Disney to name only a few.

Whereas the average person summons around 150 images per second, the dyslexic can muster from 1500 to 4000 images per second. Faced with a veritable onslaught of visual imagery, selecting the right word to keep up with the flow of images can be extremely challenging for the dyslexic.

This visual ability also translates not only into quantity but quality. Dyslexics can see in 3-D. When looking at an object, they can view it simultaneously from different perspectives. This is good for creativity, but bad for reading. If you look at a pencil upside-down, it's still a pencil; if you look at the letter "p", it becomes a "b" or a "d". This shifting of visual vantage points can give the impression that the letters are literally jumping. Some people will actually place their hands flat open against the printed page in an attempt to keep the letters in place long enough for them to be able to read.

Besides affecting the visual system, dyslexia affects the auditory system and more specifically, phonological awareness. This is the capacity to segment into phonemes or to hear the smallest units of sounds contained in any given word. For instance, the word

“cat” consists of three phonemes: “kuh”, “aah”, and “tuh”. If you can’t hear the sounds of spoken language which is learned naturally and unconsciously, how do you go about consciously learning to match these sounds with the corresponding letters, particularly when different letters or groups of letters make the same sound?

Dyslexia also affects laterality. This follows from the lack of brain dominance discussed above. Dyslexic children tend to be more awkward in both gross and fine motor movement than children without dyslexia. This in turn can translate into the loss of memory relative to the movement required to write a letter. For example: on which side of the straight line does one make a ball for a “p”?

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