

Picture this

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A system that uses models to represent difficult-to-grasp words is claiming remarkable success in treating dyslexia, reports **Matthew Brown**

Ashley Harris hated maths at school. In fact, he didn't get on too well with any subject, nor with his teachers. He was one of those pupils who was always in trouble, disrupting classes and constantly making excuses for not doing his work. When, eventually, the police hauled him in for fighting, Maureen, his mother, feared the worst. She had been through it all before with her elder son, who was expelled from school and has since been in prison. "Oh no," she thought. "I can't go through all that again."

But Ashley's brush with the law proved a turning point in his life. Instead of being charged, he was referred for an assessment, and when he was diagnosed as dyslexic, it confirmed what Maureen had long suspected. "I knew it," she says. "His writing was diabolical; at 15 it was worse than my grandson's. But the teachers would say he's just naughty."

It made sense to Ashley, too. "I'd go into lessons with a positive attitude, and try to do the work," he remembers. "But I couldn't understand the instructions. I'd say, 'Sir, I don't get it'. And they'd just say I should have been listening; read it again. I did, but it didn't make sense to me, so I'd get bored, and throw rubbers and stuff. It's not that I didn't want to work, but I couldn't."

Discovering his problem was only the first stage of Ashley's transformation. He left school - a comprehensive in Witney, Oxfordshire - without a GCSE to his name. The real breakthrough came a few months ago, when, aged 16, he attended the Davis Dyslexia programme as part of his Entry to Employment (E2E) course at Abingdon and Witney FE college. He went to see Hilary Farmer, a former FE lecturer who runs five-day one-to-one tuition courses that claim to "correct" dyslexia using clay modelling, furry rubber balls and imaginary energy dials.

The Davis Dyslexia Correction Programme was devised in California in 1982 by Ron Davis, a man so severely dyslexic that aged 12 he was officially labelled "mentally retarded". The premise of his programme, which claims a remarkable 97 per cent success rate and is used in more than 30 countries, is that dyslexics think mainly in three-dimensional pictures rather than words and are gifted in this way.

"Picture thinking is something we all do, from birth," explains Mr Davis, "whereas verbal thinking is something we learn. Most human beings can do both." But the speed of visual thinking, as opposed to the relatively slow process of verbal thought, can make dyslexics immensely talented and creative, he says. The problems come with letters, numbers, symbols and written words, especially with abstract words they can't visualise such as "a" and "the". English has 217 of these "trigger" words - so-called because they leave the dyslexic with a mental blank - making virtually every sentence confusing.

The programme helps dyslexics fill in the blanks by creating clay models of the key words and their meanings. Ms Farmer explains: "Picture thinking explains why teachers are baffled by the child who can read 'dinosaur', but not 'saw' or 'was'. The clay is fundamental because it allows them to create a 3-D model so they can visualise those words that can't be pictured."

The student might model two people holding hands to represent "they", for example, with clay versions of the letters spelled out correctly beneath it. A person standing at a fork in the road might be "which", and so on.

Clay is also used to master the alphabet, punctuation, the basic concepts of maths, and time. "Dyslexics need to form mental pictures which they can use to think with," says Mr Davis.

Making models was hardly what the streetwise, 16-year-old Ashley expected, but it seemed to work. "The first day I walked in I was like, 'Why is there a tub of clay?' I was used to copying out of textbooks," he says. "But the course was fantastic. I loved it." One week later he read a book for the first time. "I could read the words before but I couldn't understand what I was reading," he says. "But I read the whole thing properly. I was dead chuffed."

Mrs Harris was pretty chuffed, too. "The first time he left me a note I got a lump in my throat," she says. "It

was all neat and correct, it was amazing. He's a changed person; he's calmer, he sits and reads, he's not so distracted or fidgety, and not frustrated. It just makes me so cross that it took him getting into trouble to get it sorted out. All those years of schooling were wasted."

Ashley's E2E is a government initiative managed by the Learning and Skills Council. Students receive a training allowance of £40 a week if they attend for a minimum of 16 hours, and they can mix and match subjects and courses to suit their needs. So far around a dozen E2E students from Abingdon and Witney College have received help with dyslexia from Ms Farmer as part of their agreed programmes since the course started in 2002.

As well as carpentry, bricklaying, and mechanics, Ashley, now 17, is doing fractions in maths and writing letters in English: "Legible ones, spelled correctly, with the right punctuation, capitals, paragraphs and everything.

I had never done that before," he says. "I used what I'd learned on the course and I was proud of myself. The difference a five-day course has made is unbelievable. I like maths now."

Unlike Ashley, David Jamieson's dyslexia was discovered early, at the age of six. Now a 17-year-old A-level student at St George's college in Weybridge, Surrey, he was given an extra hour's tuition every week through primary school in an attempt to improve his "appalling" and slow handwriting. But it wasn't until he was 15, when he went to a Davis tutor, that it began to improve.

"It had an immediate effect," he says. "She gave me a whole new way of writing; it was legible and I could write faster. It was brilliant, a relief." David describes the course as "a bit like Zen for dyslexics".

Playing with clay is "a bit strange at first", he says, though there's much more to the course.

The key is learning to control the mind's eye so the distortions of perception that give rise to dyslexia symptoms - reversing letters, twisting words, confusing directions - can be "switched off". According to Ron Davis, it's this disorientation that also gives dyslexics their "gift": an ability to see things intuitively, spatially, from more than one point of view. Davis students also learn to control their energy levels using a mental dial; to improve their co-ordination and balance using balls; and to become more relaxed, attentive and organised.

It's certainly different to the phonics-based approach used in some dyslexia teaching. Ms Farmer, who became the UK's first Davis facilitator in 1997, says she was "completely knocked out" when she read Ron Davis's book, *The Gift of Dyslexia*. "It was a different way of thinking about it.

It explained why these things were happening, it got to the cause of the whole thing. The idea with conventional methods is to try to find a way round it. With Davis you tap into the way dyslexics think, and give them a way of learning from scratch."

Ms Farmer, who has about 25 students a year, compares it to the difference between conventional and complementary medicine. Although there are now 25 Davis facilitators in the UK, the methods are still little known or understood here. The UK arm of the Davis Dyslexia Association was set up only in July 2003 and, not surprisingly, the established organisations are wary.

David Pruden of the British Dyslexia Association, while welcoming "all sorts of approaches", says there are more tried and tested methods available. The Dyslexia Institute's specialist tuition, for example, is based on a multi-sensory approach, and most teachers, assistants and special needs co-ordinators are taught to use phonics and the mind-mapping techniques invented by Tony Buzan.

Renee van der Vloodt, now a Davis facilitator herself, came across *The Gift of Dyslexia* when she was trying to help her nine-year-old son. "He'd been through all the conventional support in schools - extra tuition and phonics-based reading schemes. It was well meant but it never saw dyslexia from the inside out. It was a superimposed solution. The great thing about the Davis programme is that it mobilises people's own resources, puts them in control."

The Davis Dyslexia Association is hoping to introduce methods based on the "correction" programme into primary education, and will be holding a workshop for up to 30 teachers in Worcestershire in June 2004.

"The idea is to use the techniques we use with people who are dyslexic with all children before it becomes a problem," says Mr Davis. He is convinced that teaching children under eight with his methods can solve all sorts of "dyslexia-related problems" and other learning disabilities.

That may sound fanciful, but during a seven-year pilot of the Davis learning strategies in seven US schools, not one pupil needed special education, compared to the usual 20 per cent. What's more, the approach helped all pupils, at every ability level, whether dyslexic or not. Up to 40 per cent of children later went on to accelerated learning programmes, for example. The norm is 5 per cent.

"All children benefited because it allowed all children to think naturally," says Mr Davis. "School usually teaches children to think verbally only; it never takes into consideration that there is more than one way." According to Richard Whitehead, director of DDA-UK, the Davis approach is not a challenge to the current curriculum, but "a set of tools for delivering it". "If I'd been offered this when I was a teacher I'd have said, 'Gimme, gimme, gimme'," he says.

The Davis Dyslexia Correction Programme costs between £1,000 and £1,400, including assessment, tuition and follow-up. A course for key stage 1 teachers, heads and classroom assistants is being held in Worcestershire in June. Contact: Davis Dyslexia Association, tel: 08700 132945, or www.davistraining.co.uk. The Gift of Dyslexia, by Ronald D Davis, is published in the UK by Souvenir Press, £12.99. Davis Dyslexia Association International at www.dyslexia.com. NIACE (the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education) is researching the range of learning approaches used with dyslexics in further education institutions around the UK. The results will be published at the end of March, when a website hosted by the DfES will be launched to give teachers information about all the methods available. British Dyslexia Association: www.bda-dyslexia.org.uk. Dyslexia Institute: www.dyslexia-inst.org.uk

Dyslexia: the facts

* Dyslexia affects about 10 per cent of the UK population. Up to 4 per cent - some two million people - have severe dyslexia, including 375,000 schoolchildren.

* If one parent is dyslexic there is a 50 per cent chance that any of their children will inherit dyslexia.

* Commonly associated with reading, writing and spelling difficulties, symptoms also include poor handwriting, problems with mathematics, difficulties with time, direction, sequencing and personal organisation, clumsiness, poor concentration, and poor short-term memory.

* According to Ron Davis, at least 20 per cent of people have the dyslexic "talent" to some extent.

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