

Dyslexia in the L2 Classroom: Recognizing and Supporting
Undiagnosed Students in Japan

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Abstract

Although dyslexia is the most common learning disorder worldwide, official diagnosis and support from educational institutions for learners with dyslexia remains rare in Japan. Consequently, the understanding, identification, and accommodation of dyslexia remains elusive in the foreign language (L2) classroom. In many cases, even if a student with dyslexia has developed compensation techniques to overcome difficulties in reading, writing, and other academic areas in Japanese, these techniques do not transfer to learning a second language, especially orthographically deep and opaque languages such as English. Further, there is a growing movement in Japan for inclusive education, meaning accommodating students with learning disabilities such as dyslexia will be necessary in the L2 classroom.

In this paper, I will define dyslexia, how it can affect L2 learning, how to recognize if a student has dyslexia, and what L2 teachers in Japan can do to support students who may have dyslexia. Based on previous literature I will give general suggestions on how to design classroom activities and materials to accommodate L2 students with dyslexia, as well as more targeted advice based on students' preferred learning style.

Keywords: learning disabilities, dyslexia, second language, EFL, learning style, reading, writing, accommodation

Introduction

As foreign language (L2) educators, we have all encountered students who, despite their (and our) best efforts, don't perform to our expectations or as well as their peers in the areas of reading or writing. Are external factors such as family, peer groups, or socioeconomic issues creating barriers to success in the L2 classroom? Are they simply lazy, not putting in the necessary time to acquire the language skills expected at the

university level? Are they unmotivated, unable to see the future value of learning a foreign language? While the issues mentioned above could be the cause of poor L2 performance, there is mounting evidence that many underperforming foreign language students in Japan have undiagnosed learning disorders that are preventing them from achieving success (Tanahashi, 2011).

It is estimated that between 2-10% (some estimates put it as high as 20%) of higher education students in Japan have some form of undiagnosed learning disorder that can impact their performance in the L2 classroom (Singleton, C. & HEFG, 2001; Tanahashi, 2011). The most common learning disorder teachers encounter in the L2 classroom is dyslexia, with an estimated 80% of students with a learning disability having some form of dyslexia (Moritoki Škof, 2015; Tanahashi, 2011; Wagner et al., 2020). However, foreign language teachers in Japan do not always understand what dyslexia is, or they are not confident in how to accommodate L2 learners with dyslexia (Moritoki Škof, 2015; Tanahashi, 2011). In this paper, I will define dyslexia, how it can affect L2 learning, how to recognize if a student has dyslexia, and what L2 teachers in Japan can do to support students who may have dyslexia. Although I will focus mainly on English as a foreign language in higher education, many of the techniques described below will work in other classroom settings.

Definition

The complex and diverse nature of dyslexia makes it difficult to clearly define. Dyslexia has biological origins that manifest in altered behavior. Definitions at a biological, cognitive, or behavioral level are all acceptable and valid (Kormos, 2017). I will focus on the behavioral level of dyslexia with symptoms such as (but not limited to): poor reading, writing, and spelling; difficulty with organization; and raised levels of anxiety when confronted with novel tasks or unfamiliar concepts (Kormos, 2017; Mortimore, 2008). According to the Dyslexia Institute (2002), “Dyslexia is a developmental disorder which results in difficulties in learning to read, write and spell. Short term memory, (...) concentration, personal organization, and sequencing may also be affected.”

When describing dyslexia, (and learning disabilities in general), it is important to keep in mind that all the symptoms and deficits manifest on a continuum, and some do not manifest at all. Dyslexia ranges from mild to

severe, and everywhere in between. According to Mortimore (2008) and Pokrivčáková et al. (2015) a student may be on the dyslectic spectrum if he or she exhibits some or all the following behaviors (compared to the class average or expected level):

Reading

- Hesitant and labored reading, especially out loud
- Confusing letters such as b-d, m-n, p-d, u-n and those that sound similar
- Reading with a low level of comprehension
- Failure to recognize familiar words
- Missing a line or reading the same line twice
- Omitting or adding extra words

Writing

- Poor standard of written work compared to oral ability
- Poor handwriting with badly formed letters
- Confusion of upper- and lower-case letters
- Difficulty in taking notes in lessons

Behavior

- Poor organizational skills
- Frequently late or absent from class
- Often forgets lesson materials
- Disruptive in-class behavior

Why should L2 teachers be aware of dyslexia?

While dyslexia is by far the most common learning disorder, statistics on how many students and adults have it are unclear. The National Working Party on Dyslexia in Higher Education (Singleton & HEFG, 2001) surveyed 80% of higher-education institutes in the UK and found that 1-2% of enrolled students present as dyslexic, although according to the researchers, there are probably many more dyslexic students who could not be identified. A survey of 200 public, private, and volunteer organizations discovered that at least 10% of adults have undiagnosed dyslexia (Moritoki Škof, 2015; Mortimore, 2008). Tanahashi (2011) estimates that as much as 20% of students in higher education in Japan may have some form of dyslexia. Furthermore, the dyslexia of over 40% of students

is not identified until they reach higher education (Singleton, 1999). Even if we take the most conservative estimates of 1-2% of students having dyslexia, that would mean dozens of students at each mid-sized university might have some form of undiagnosed dyslexia. A more realistic estimate of 10% would raise that number to hundreds of students.

The late or non-identification of dyslexia among university students and adults is partly because although students had been able to compensate for earlier literacy difficulties that enabled them to meet the entry criteria for university, they report that they remain disadvantaged by dyslexic differences. These differences can be challenges with reading, poor note taking skills, and difficulties with expressing ideas in writing, which only fully present themselves when they enter higher education or the workplace (Farmer, 2002).

Crucially for L2 teachers, while dyslexic students may have learned to compensate in their L1, when it comes to learning a new sound-symbol system of a foreign language (especially English), the difficulties with phonological and orthographic processing re-emerge (Nijakowska, 2010). For Japanese students learning English as a foreign language, problems are compounded by the complexity of the English language. English is classified as an *orthographically deep* language, meaning there are many-to-many sound-letter correspondences. In addition to being a *deep* language, English is also an *opaque* language because it has silent letters (Kormos, 2017; Nijakowska, 2010). In a comparative study which investigated the reading attainment of children at the end of first grade in 13 languages, students learning *orthographically shallow* and *transparent* languages such as German, Finnish, Greek and Spanish had close to 100% accuracy, while students learning orthographically deep and opaque English scored 34% (Seymour, Aro, & Erskine, 2003).

The Japanese writing system students learn in early education (hiragana and katakana) is orthographically shallow and transparent, which may give students with dyslexia time to form compensation skills to mitigate the effects of their learning disability when they eventually learn more orthographically opaque Chinese kanji characters (Tanahashi, 2011). When it comes time to learn English, the compensation skills students with dyslexia acquired in Japanese may not be applicable, since the phonology and orthography are dissimilar (Nijakowska, 2010).

Recognizing dyslexia in the L2 classroom

Official screening and diagnosis of dyslexia are carried out by psychologists and learning disability experts and is beyond the scope of this paper. However, identification of dyslexia can start with L2 teachers. Observations of classroom behavior, student work patterns, and study processes can be used in the initial stages of assessment and is arguably the limit of what many higher education teachers can do because of time or resource constraints (Kormos, 2017). Teachers can also use a checklist like the example in Figure 1 below, which was adapted from Mortimore (2008) and Pollock, Waller, & Politt (2004) for the L2 classroom. If, after observing student behavior and output, the answer to several of the following questions in Figure 1 is “yes”, additional steps to support the student may be desirable or necessary. These additional steps teachers can take will be discussed below. Answers to checklist questions are subjective and will vary from teacher to teacher. Therefore, to identify potentially dyslexic students as accurately as possible, teachers should compare student behavior and academic output to what is average and expected across the classroom, both behaviorally and academically.

Does a seemingly able and frequently articulate student:

- Have difficulties with expressing themselves on paper, i.e., poor and sometimes bizarre spelling, slow or poorly formed handwriting, untidy presentation?
- Seem resistant to or need extra time for written work?
- Frequently seem worried, “switched off” or lagging behind?
- Have difficulties with situations that involve memory (bringing the right textbooks, remembering spoken instructions, etc.)?
- Have difficulty in repeating multi-syllabic words?
- Have poor phonological awareness?
- Exhibit an inability to identify the constituent sounds in spoken words?
- Exhibit literacy skills lagging overall performance and apparent ability?
- Seem embarrassed by apparent difficulties?
- Have difficulty copying from the board or textbook?
- Have difficulty in structuring written work?
- Frequently arrive late to class?

Figure 1. Example L2 classroom dyslexia checklist

Using a checklist is meant to be a guide, and not as a definitive answer to whether a student has dyslexia. For instruction on how to create a customized checklist for a specific learning environment, age group, and demographic, please refer to Reid (2003; 2017) and Turner (2008).

The specific types of official support the student can receive from their educational institution requires a diagnosis from a learning disability expert and the process varies from institution to institution. If, after carefully observing a student's behavior and academic output, the teacher identifies a student as potentially having dyslexia, they may decide that the student requires further observation, screening, and diagnostic interviews from a learning disability professional, which would lead to official support from their educational institution. Since a more detailed description of these measures is beyond the scope of this paper, please refer to Mortimore (2008), Nijakowska (2010), or Dyslexia Action's website (<https://dyslexiaaction.org.uk/>) for further guidance. Fortunately, outside of official diagnosis and institutional support, there are a variety of actions the teacher can take in the classroom to support students who may have dyslexia. These actions will be discussed below.

Accommodations for students with dyslexia

Whether a student has been officially diagnosed with dyslexia or, after classroom observation an L2 educator suspects one or more students of having some form of dyslexia, there are several practical changes that can be made in the classroom to accommodate those students. There are a few caveats before I begin. First, the ideas presented below are not uniquely helpful to students with dyslexia, meaning that everyone can benefit. A teacher's time will still be well spent if they apply these to a classroom setting and it turns out that none of their students have dyslexia (Kormos, 2017). Second, while we try to support students with dyslexia, we don't have to simplify content: "dumbing down" is not necessary to improve dyslexic student performance. Third, the ideas presented below are not necessarily novel or new. In fact, I'm sure many educators already employ at least some of the following techniques. The aim in the following section is to give evidence of empirically tested support for techniques that educators may already "feel" are helpful. Finally, the following suggestions are complimentary, meaning teachers should feel free to pick and choose as many as they want to fit their students' needs, demographics, teaching

style, and classroom (Mortimore, 2008). It is my hope that teachers will find a few of these useful or apply already familiar techniques with more confidence knowing they may help students with dyslexia or dyslexic tendencies.

I will start the accommodation section with general L2 classroom and classwork advice and suggestions that may benefit any student with dyslexia or dyslexic tendencies based on published literature. These are aimed toward educators who have large classrooms where individual student observation would be too difficult, or class time is too limited. The goal is to efficiently and effectively adapt existing classroom materials to accommodate potentially dyslexic students and non-dyslexic students alike. As mentioned above, many students with dyslexia struggle with anxiety around complex reading, writing, and traditional assessments. Below I will outline some L2 classroom activities and ideas aimed at reducing anxiety in these areas, allowing dyslexic students to build confidence and gain a more positive attitude toward foreign language learning.

After I describe general pragmatic advice, I will offer more targeted ideas catered toward specific learning styles of students with dyslexia. While there are a myriad of learning theories and specific learning programs catered to students with dyslexia, four main learning styles and subsequent pragmatic recommendations have been identified: *wholistic*, *analytic*, *visual*, and *verbal* (Mortimore, 2008; Riding & Rayner, 2016). It is important to keep in mind that each learning style is not discrete: they are

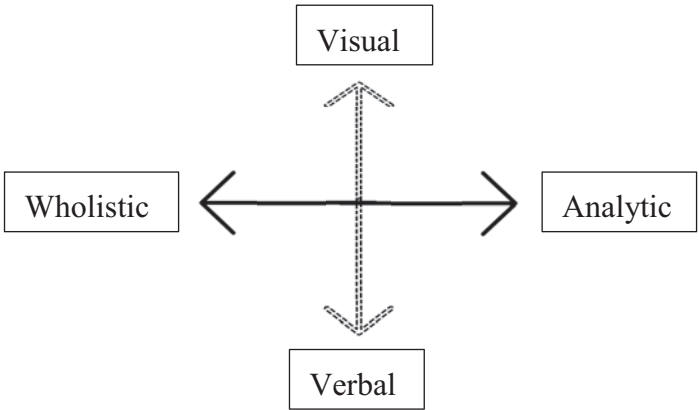


Figure 2. Learning styles as a continuum (adapted from Riding & Rayner, 2016)

all on a continuum: wholistic/ analytic on one axis, and visual/ verbal on another (Figure 2). An L2 student with dyslexia can be a wholistic or analytic learner (or somewhere in the middle) who prefers visual or verbal learning techniques (or doesn't have a preference). *Verbal* is not a fully descriptive label. While visual techniques refer to images, graphics, charts, videos and other visual learning materials, verbal techniques refer to both auditory learning aids and written support.

In general, students with dyslexia respond more positively to visual aids (Mortimore, 2008; Nijakowska, 2010) than verbal aids. However, this is not always the case. To accommodate preferences for visual and verbal learning techniques, the most accepted avenue is to use a *multisensory approach* where more than one learning pathway (auditory, visual, and tactile-kinesthetic) is activated (Nijakowska, 2010; Pokrivčáková et al., 2015). It has been shown that students with dyslexia learn faster and retain more L2 information when more than one pathway is used. In fact, the more pathways that are used, the better the performance (Kormos, 2017; Nijakowska, 2010). Therefore, I chose the following learning techniques based on the multisensory approach, and to encourage students to use as many learning pathways as possible. In the following sections, I will discuss multisensory learning strategies for wholistic, and analytic learners broken down into three sections: input, processing, and output.

General accommodation- the classroom

The following suggestions on classroom accommodation are meant for L2 educators that have identified students who have dyslexic tendencies as outlined earlier. They have been adapted from Mortimore (2008), Nijakowska (2010), and Pokrivčáková et al. (2015). There are many cases where official institutional support and identifying the student's specific learning style is not possible because of classroom size or time constraints. In this situation, the following suggestions can help support the student in an efficient and effective manner.

1. Many students with dyslexia struggle with jumps in logic that many non-dyslexic students find intuitive and natural: a structured, linear, sequential approach to each lesson is often preferred.
2. The information itself should include visual aids in addition to text.
3. Teacher generated handouts of key information from the class allows

students to focus on the material as it's presented, instead of using their energy trying to write down salient points- even deciding which points are important can take significant effort for these students and may distract their attention from the lesson.

4. While the merits for and against providing an all-L2 classroom environment can be argued, for many dyslexic students of L2, providing instructions (verbal and written), at least for more complex tasks in their L1 have been shown to be particularly beneficial.
5. Modeling behaviors that you would like students to emulate is also encouraged. For example, using class time to review previously covered materials can show dyslexic students the merits of reviewing at home.
6. Relying on traditional methods of assessment can be particularly challenging for students with dyslexia. Thus, adding alternatives such as verbal assessments to the L2 classroom avoids many of the issues these students have with reading and writing. Another easily incorporated concept is to reduce or eliminate surprise assessments or tasks focusing on output such as reading aloud in class.
7. Allowing typed responses to writing assignments rather than handwritten responses reduces anxiety since it allows for the use of spellcheckers and reduces embarrassment over poor penmanship.

General accommodation- designing materials

The design of materials such as handouts and PowerPoint presentations is another area of dyslexic student support that is relatively easy for teachers to consider. The following suggestions have been adapted from Daloso (2017), Nijakowska (2010), and Pokrivčáková et al. (2015). The most important question L2 educators of dyslexic students can ask themselves when developing materials is, "how can I make this activity as clear and straightforward as possible?"

1. Many dyslexic students find that clear, simple, "user-friendly" text is the easiest to process: fonts such as verdana, arial, and calibri are generally preferred. Avoid using italics, cursive, and serif fonts.
2. Using larger text sizes and more spacing between letters, words and lines are also helpful.
3. Numbering notes and important points makes it easier for students to

process the information in a linear way.

4. Color coding reduces the strain of categorizing the new information and allows students to focus on the content.
5. Creating hierarchical worksheets where tasks are arranged from easiest to hardest.

Targeted accommodation- wholistic learning style

According to Daloiso (2017) and Mortimore (2008) students with dyslexia often do not see themselves as successful learners and suffer from higher anxiety levels in academic situations. They feel less confident than their non-dyslexic peers. In order to decrease stress levels and provide opportunities for successful learning, dyslexic students often need to be able to predict what will occur in the lesson and use a framework where new information can be added. Therefore, a wholistic, i.e., “big picture” approach to learning is often successful. Wholistic learners find the following particularly helpful:

1. Schema or overviews
2. Memory aids
3. Scaffolding frames
4. Co-operative learning techniques

Wholistic input

To help develop reading for comprehension and specific information, the SQ3R (Survey, Question, Read, Review, Respond) approach has been proven to be useful for many types of students, especially those with dyslexia who favor a wholistic approach (Mortimore, 2008). Simply put, SQ3R can focus dyslexic students’ attention on step-by-step reading techniques that will provide results the fastest, with the least amount of effort. SQ3R can also help develop metacognitive skills that students with dyslexia may find difficult to implement.

First, students quickly *survey* the reading passage’s main information: title, pictures, headings, first and last sentence, and any questions that were set. Second, students *question* themselves: what do I know about this topic already? Dyslexic students who favor a wholistic approach are often adept at piecing things together and making assumptions. From questioning, students can start to predict what they will find in the reading, which may reduce the amount of decoding they have to do. Third, *read*,

review, respond: while reading, allowing students access to aids such as highlighters or small dry-erase whiteboards may aid comprehension. For a more complete review of the SQ3R approach, please refer to Mortimore (2008).

Wholistic processing

For processing learned information, organization is key. *Mapping* and using *structures* have been shown to be effective ways to organize important information that can be used to review for exams or other types of assessment (Daloiso, 2017; Mortimore, 2008; Pokrivčáková et al., 2015).

Mapping can be done in a variety of ways. The most common is a concept map, or “word web”. The main idea of a reading, listening or video should be written in a circle in the center. Radiating out from the circle should be categories related to the main idea. From the categories, specific details can be linked. The main aim of these types of maps is organizing information into a more visual representation that can be quickly reviewed at a later date. Concept maps can be enhanced with visual aids such as pictures or symbols to further facilitate retrieval. Having students share their individual maps with partners or in groups can further reinforce mapping techniques.

In addition to maps, *structures*, such as timelines or cycles have also been shown to be effective tools in the processing, storing, and reviewing of key information from a reading, listening, or video. Timelines can help organize disparate pieces of a story into a more understandable and cohesive whole, especially when events are not presented chronographically in the original material. Cycles can be used to show sequences of events and how they are interrelated or causally connected.

Wholistic output

Students with dyslexia often fall into two categories when it comes to written output. Either they have too many ideas and they cannot put them down concisely, or their minds go blank when it is time to write. A successful solution to these two problems comes in the form of *writing frames*: a bridge between brainstorming ideas and the final, written text (Mortimore, 2008) (Figure 3). They provide an organized shape for a student to follow. For students and teachers who favor a wholistic approach, *block writing frames* have been found to be the most useful. Block frames are writing templates that can be adapted to suit different

situations and subjects. Frames also provide phrases and connectives appropriate for the task. Frames are particularly helpful for students whose sequencing skills are weak, or who struggle with expressive language. Frames not only help with written output. They can also be used as cues to help with oral presentations and PowerPoint prompts.

How to make chicken soup	
You will need: vegetables chicken _____ _____ _____	
1. First, cut the vegetables.	2. Then _____
3. Next _____	4. _____
5. _____	6. Finally _____

Figure 3. Example of a frame (adapted from Mortimore, 2008)

Targeted accommodation- analytic learning style

According to Mortimore (2008) and Pokrivčáková et al. (2015), analytical learners find linear, sequential, step-by-step learning more intuitive than a wholistic approach that favors the “big picture”. They focus on each piece of information, then build towards a unified idea. Methodically accumulating details before reaching a conclusion is more natural than lateral intuition. While non-dyslexic learners can adapt and use this step-by-step approach effectively, dyslexic learners find it difficult or impossible to bring disparate data or ideas together into a whole. They will often miss what many students would consider an obvious or quick solution, or find wholistic approaches confusing and random. Analytic L2 learners with dyslexia may have difficulties with the language of time, cause and effect, and proper use of prepositions.

Analytic input

For some analytic learners with dyslexia, wholistic methods described in the previous section can be beneficial and expand their repertoire of learning techniques. For example, analytic learners will benefit from the SQ3R approach outlined in the previous section. An alternative input method is to use a *question word grid* (Figure 4) which is used with reading exercises or listening tasks. The question word grid encourages analytic learners to use their sequential, linear thinking to create a simple picture of the story or listening (Mortimore, 2008; Pokrivčáková et al., 2015).

Who	What's happening	Where	When	Mood/ atmosphere	Important lines/ voice	Message
	1.					
	2.					
	3.					

Figure 4. Question word grid

A more visual alternative to a word grid is a *hierarchy*, which can take the form of a horizontally segmented triangle (Figure 5). The most fundamental, general details are located on the bottom, increasing in specificity as they go up to the peak. Another way to use a hierarchy for a reading or listening passage would be to clarify character relationships. The most important or powerful characters are at the peak, while the least important or powerful characters are at the base.

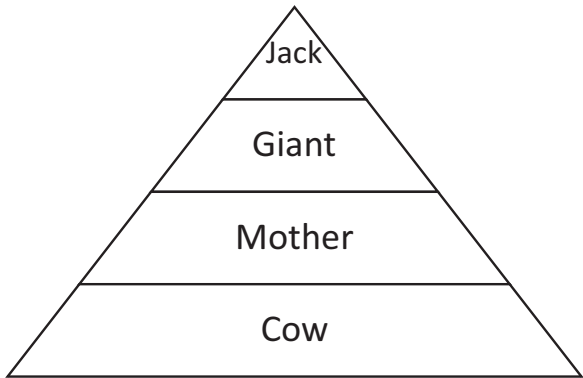


Figure 5. Example of a story hierarchy

Analytic processing

As with wholistic learners, analytic learners with dyslexia may benefit from mapping or structures (described above) because they allow for a simpler visual representation of complex reading passages that can be easily accessed later for reviewing. However, maps may be less effective or overwhelming to analytic students because it may be difficult for them to see the connections between items on the map and understand why they are grouped the way they are. An alternative to wholistic maps is to use a *grid, board, or tree* (Mortimore, 2008).

For many analytic learners, group work is a challenge, and individual work is preferred. However, for L2 students with dyslexia, group or pair work is still an invaluable means of learning since it can reinforce what they have already learned or give them more complete information if they were unable to finish a task (Pokrivčáková et al., 2015). In the L2 classroom, group work also helps to show these students that there isn't necessarily only one answer to a task or question. Group work can reduce anxiety brought on by singling out students for answers and potentially embarrassing the student in front of their peers.

Analytic output

As described earlier, the process of writing using *brainstorm-> writing frame-> final text* can also be helpful for analytic L2 learners with dyslexia. However, these students may be unable to “see the forest for the trees” i.e., they get too involved in the details of the story creating the writing frame and cannot produce a cohesive account (Mortimore, 2008). In this situation, *storyboards* can be a helpful activity. A simple storyboard will have eight or so sections. Each section will contain a drawing or graphic depicting a part of the story. Storyboards have two potential benefits. First, students who struggle with writing can clearly get their ideas down as pictures before they start writing. Second, limiting the composition to eight (or however many you decide) sections gives the writer clear boundaries and helps them define where the beginning, middle, and end should be. If the student is a verbal learner, keywords can replace the drawings or graphics, or they can be used together.

Conclusion

In an era which emphasizes class integration and inclusion of students

with learning disabilities in the L2 classroom, as well as the prevalent underdiagnosis of dyslexia in Japan, L2 teachers in Japan will benefit from a better understanding of dyslexia and techniques to accommodate students with dyslexia. L2 teachers can expect about 10% of their students to have some form of dyslexia. L2 teachers commonly misinterpret student issues such as chronic tardiness, poor work output, underperformance in reading and writing, difficulty focusing on tasks, and poor organization as a reflection of laziness, low motivation, or problems in their personal lives. While these explanations can be valid, undiagnosed dyslexia can also cause these issues. By using classroom observation, checklists, and review of student output, L2 teachers in Japan can identify students who may have dyslexia and modify their class materials and teaching methods to accommodate these students.

After a potentially dyslexic student is identified, teachers can modify class materials to support them. Providing class notes that are categorized and color-coded helps students when it is time to review for an assessment. Simplifying text using easy to read fonts and including graphics, as well as giving written directions in a clear, sequential way in their L1 can keep the dyslexic student on-task and reduce frustration and anxiety.

Class activities can be altered to support potentially dyslexic students in the L2 classroom. General techniques such as providing visual aids, modeling desired behaviors, avoiding surprise assessments, and offering alternatives to traditional assessments can increase confidence and output, and reduce anxiety when learning a second language. After student preference for wholistic or analytic learning is decided, specific class activities can be created based on a multisensory approach: visual, auditory, and tactile-kinesthetic pathways being engaged. Specifically creating multisensory class activities targeting a preferred learning style will allow L2 students with dyslexia to engage with the material and may also benefit their classmates that do not have dyslexia. It is my hope that L2 teachers in Japan approach teaching students with dyslexia as an opportunity to try new teaching techniques, increase student confidence, improve student output, and reduce student anxiety when learning a second language.

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