

Mario Rinvoluceri

Discovers a solution to a problem many of us have not seen.

Dancing letters.

James Dyson realised that the wheel, in the context of wheelbarrows, is a pretty poor piece of design. It ruts the lawn, sinks deep into the mud, and compresses the earth. He replaced the wheel with a hardened plastic ball and called the new carrier a 'ball barrow'. The spherical solution is breathtakingly simple.

So is the solution to the problems of readers who look at a page of text and see mobile print. For readers with the Meares-Irlen syndrome, letters shift from line to line, words wander about the page and move off the edge, and letters double up at the line end. The whole text gets nearer and nearer and then recedes into the middle distance, maybe with blobs of colour floating in front of it.

The nightmare

Imagine the nightmare for a ten-year-old with this kind of visual perception being asked to read aloud in class. Imagine what it must be like for a Russian or Arabic-speaking learner trying to cope with the strangeness of western script as it leaps and cavorts all over the shop. Imagine not realising that other people just see orderly rows of static print.

Over the last thirty years, among the hundreds of people I have taught English to, there must have been a sizeable minority with this (dis)ability. How often have I been impatient with dancing letter students? I must certainly have often set them reading tasks and been unaware of the difficulty of what I was asking them to do.

Had I been aware of the unstable text problem at least I could have been more understanding. Had I been aware of the simple Dyson-like solution I could have done something to help.

Now I can.

The solution

I have obtained the transparent coloured overlays that dancing letter people can put over text to stabilise the print. All the person has to do is to choose from 20 colours and find, by trial and error, which colour or colour combination (two overlays, one on top of the other) does the best stabilising job for them.

In the workshop where I learnt the overlay solution, three of us out of 20 had the Meares-Irlen syndrome (also called the Scotopic Sensitivity Syndrome), with reading headaches, blurring of the letters, difficulty in keeping their place and poor concentration. Once each had chosen the right overlay for them, all three reported a startling improvement. We heard one of them reading first with his overlay and then without. The overlay reading was fast and expressive, while the unassisted reading was slower, more hesitant and with much less expression.

'Of course', he said, 'without the overlay, the letters started leap-frogging around again.'

It was wondrous and moving to see three people in their forties suddenly finding a solution to a chronic, hampering problem. One reported that the next day, he read 30% more than he normally would and felt a great deal less strain.

How widespread is some version of this syndrome? According to research done in Norfolk, UK, up to 50% of children in some of the county's primary schools found that their intuitively chosen

overlay improved the clarity of print, and about half these children (25%) continued to use them without teacher prompting for up to three months.

The application

How will I use my new knowledge? In language classes, I will tell students that I once had a learner who reported that he found reading in English difficult because the text would not keep still. I will ask them if they know of anybody with this kind of reading perception.

(The indirect approach is useful when you are trying to find out about a potentially embarrassing deficit.) I will then offer the overlays to help them tackle English texts.

In addition, with teacher trainees, I will use this as a striking physiological example of the obvious, but hard to grasp, concept that the impression a person has of something is not the thing itself, that the person's map of a territory is not the territory itself. To my mind, this truism is central to teaching and to all communication. If you naturally see dancing letters, it takes a leap of imagination to see them in static parallel rows. If you see static print, it is quite hard to imagine it quick sanding about.

Have fun using a simple solution to alleviate a complex problem. Think of the Dyson ball barrow .

The Meares-Irlen syndrome testing pack, including a set of overlays, is available from The Institute of Optometry, 100 Marketing, 56-62 Newington Causeway, London SE1 6DS, England.

Find out more about the use of overlays in UK schools from County Sensory Support Service, c/o Heartease High School, Marryat Road, Norwich NE7 9DF, England.
Tel +44 (0) 435709.

An information web site is: <http://www.Essex.ac.uk/psychology/>

Mario Rinvolutri, a veteran Pilgrims person, has finally escaped administration and works exclusively as a language teacher, teacher trainer and writer. His next book, co-written with Davis and Garside, will be *Ways of Doing* (CUP, September 1998). It deals with student process in and out of the classroom. His most recent book, with Burbidge, Levy and Gray, is *Letters* (OUP, 1996).