

# ELT



## Ireland bulletin

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# Irlen Syndrome: How to lift the hidden barrier to learning

by Marianne Jordan (Pronunciation.Club, Content Writer, Teacher Trainer)

A learning difficulty not only interferes with basic skills such as reading and writing, but it also has implications for self confidence and social skills at all ages. I have included links about this to personal stories of adult learners at the end of this article and included a brief story of my own child who was in remedial reading for dyslexia throughout primary school, until he was finally diagnosed with 'Irlen Syndrome'. As a mother, I had no idea what 'Irlen Syndrome' was and worried what this meant for my child. As a TEFL teacher, I had no idea what Irlen Syndrome was and wondered how it would affect my students' English language learning.

As English is not a phonetic language, it can be very difficult for learners of English to pronounce the words they are reading, never mind understand them. Imagine how much more difficult this can be for our students who have reading and learning difficulties in their own native languages. When they start to learn English, they have those same learning difficulties. They also have the added difficulties of learning a non-phonetic language. Few of our adult students want to admit they have learning difficulties (see "Overcoming the Shame of my Learning Disability" and "Experiences of Adults with Learning Disabilities: Positive and Negative Impacts and Outcomes"). According to Understood younger children have no idea they have a problem, but know what it is like to be bullied for being 'different'.

Some common reading and learning difficulties are due to; specific learning disorder with impairment in reading (dyslexia); central auditory processing disorder; language disorder; developmental coordination disorder; specific learning disorder with impairment in mathematics (dyscalculia); speech sound disorder; attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

Symptoms include;

Difficulty with reading comprehension or math skills; trouble with open-ended test ; questions and word problems; disliking reading and writing; avoids reading aloud; poor handwriting; difficulty remembering; poor attention span; trouble following directions; poor hand-eye coordination; difficulty with concepts related to time; problems with staying organised; difficulty focussing; difficulty sequencing.

However, some of the above reading and learning difficulties are not what they seem. They have been successfully treated by a very simple method - 'The Irlen Method'.

## When it Looks Like ADHD or Dyslexia But Isn't

My own youngest son was diagnosed with ADHD and dyslexia in primary school. I had his eyes tested annually and they were perfect, yet, he spent his entire primary school life in remedial reading classes. Every school holiday was spent doing extra reading with him at home. At age 11 he did a national reading test in preparation for Intermediate school and was found to have a reading age of a 7 year old. I then took him to an educational psychologist to get him the professional help he needed. The results revealed that my son did not have ADHD nor dyslexia. He had excelled in the maths, memory and spacial awareness tests. He recommended getting tests done by a specialist optometrist. The specialist optometrist tested him again for normal vision tests, which my son passed again. Then he produced a briefcase full of rows and rows of a graded rainbow of coloured lenses. I was fascinated!

## How the Science of Colour Transforms Lives

I had just completed a teaching module in "Accelerated Learning" where I learned and experienced the positive effects of using colour in the classroom and handouts. Seeing this array of coloured lenses certainly got my attention and I wondered what it was all about. The optometrist carefully chose a selection of coloured lenses for my son to read some text. I nearly jumped out of my seat when he eventually started to focus on my son's favourite colour - purple! His diagnosis: "Your son has 'Irlen Syndrome' ".

## Irlen Syndrome

Irlen Syndrome is not a vision problem. Irlen Syndrome is a perceptual processing disorder caused by the brain's inability to process specific wavelengths of light.

Light is an energy beam that moves in wavelengths. Some of these wavelengths can be seen as colours (visible light). The colour of the light depends on the frequency. All the colours (see image above) can be seen in a rainbow or a prism. When we see an object we are actually seeing reflected light. When light hits an object some of the wavelengths are

**“Imagine how much more difficult this can be for our students who have reading and learning difficulties in their own native languages.”**

absorbed by that object and some are reflected. When we see a green apple, for example, the apple is absorbing all the colours of light except for the green colour. The frequency of light that we see as green is being reflected and we see that apple as green.

Black and white are different. White is a combination of all colours. When we see white this means the object is reflecting all the colours of the light the same. Black is the opposite. This means almost all the colours of light are being absorbed by the object.

People with Irlen Syndrome have problems processing a particular colour or combination of colours. This makes reading difficult when light is reflected off white paper.

### Triggered by the Environment

Irlen Syndrome is also known as "Scotopic Sensitivity Syndrome". It can be triggered by glare, luminance, light sources such as bright or fluorescent bulbs, bright colours (including highlighters), patterns and stripes, too much detail (such as on maps) and the amount of print on a page (size, font and style). Another huge trigger is high contrast such as using the colours black on white!

How many of our course books, handouts, brochures, leaflets etc are on white paper with black writing?

### How to Recognise the Signs of Irlen Syndrome

Irlen Syndrome is often confused with other reading and learning difficulties with similar symptoms. Here are some of the specific symptoms of Irlen Syndrome which overlap with other reading and learning difficulties: reading problems, attention and concentration problems, strain and fatigue, headaches and migraines, print or environmental distortions and problems with depth perception.

**“When we see a green apple, for example, the apple is absorbing all the colours of light except for the green colour.”**

What significantly differentiates Irlen Syndrome is the inability to process light waves. This is why it is important to go to an optometrist that also specialises in light wavelength testing for Irlen Syndrome. S/he will be able to identify the specific problem colour(s) for each individual.

### Instant Help

Once someone is diagnosed with Irlen Syndrome, their identified colour is used to help filter specific wavelengths of light to improve their brain's ability to process visual information.

A coloured overlay, placed over any text that consists of black writing on white paper, absorbs certain wavelengths from the light spectrum so that they are not reflected back into your eyes from the white page. This reduces the amount of energy required by the brain to cope with the reading on the white page.

It is also possible to use coloured paper to minimize the effects of lightwaves. The colour would need to be the colour diagnosed by the specialist optometrist.

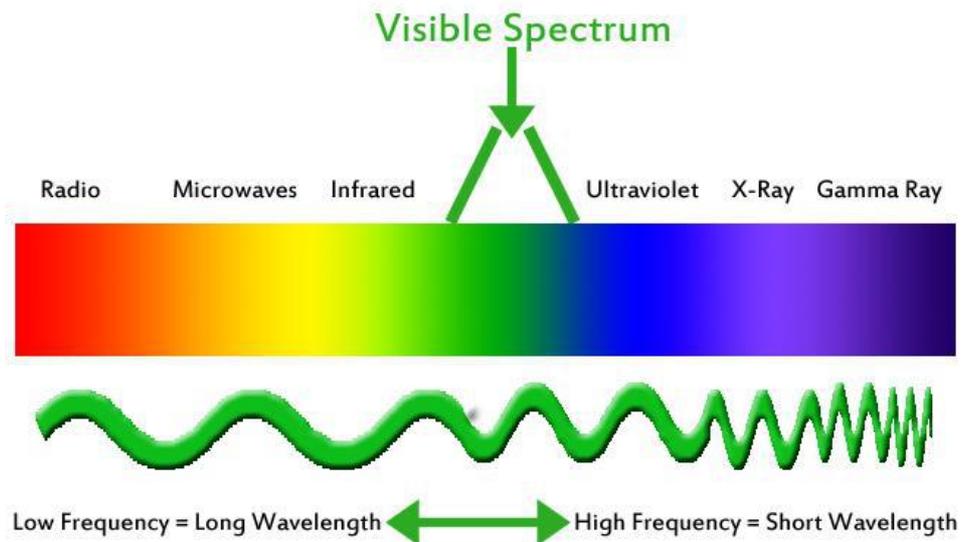
In my son's case his colour was double purple. Interestingly, not only was this his favourite colour, but I had just redecorated the house and he chose his favourite colour purple for the walls and furnishings in his room. It was like a little sanctuary for him and he was calmer and more relaxed in there than his normal hyperactive self in other

rooms in the home and garden.

His school was kind enough to copy worksheets onto the ream of purple paper I supplied them with. We also used a purple overlay for reading books. This helped greatly, until his special double purple coloured lenses arrived.

### Instant Results

As soon as my son's new glasses arrived we went back to the optometrist to try them out. They were just like normal sunglasses except they were tinted purple. When you wear them (yes, I tried them on too!) you do not see everything coloured purple. They are like anti-glare glasses and very easy on the eyes.



Seeing the light:

Finding the source of reading difficulties.

Pic from google image labelled for reuse

The optometrist then asked my son to read a selection of text with the glasses with the special lenses. He compared the results with the tests he had done a few months previous.

### **My son's reading increased by 60% instantly!**

He was still behind with spelling but, after less than a year of wearing the glasses, he caught up with all his school work. He stopped wearing them completely after about two years. He was ready to start High School at the same level as fellow students.

Results from others who have used these special Irlen filters:

Improvement in the following areas; music; fatigue; spelling; math; driving; listening; reading; sports; headaches/migraines; attention and concentration; light-sensitivity to name but a few.

### **How can us teachers help?**

As teachers, we are already aware of some of the learning difficulties our students may have. Many may not admit this. Some will and others you might identify through observation and regular class testing. It may be useful to give them the Irlen Syndrome website link. They can get all the information they need and even do a quick self test.

Be aware of the percentages of people affected by Irlen Syndrome:

- 55% with head injury, concussion or whiplash
- 46% of individuals with reading and learning difficulties (such as dyslexia)
- 33% with ADHD
- 33% with autism
- 12-14% of the general population

### **Classroom Modifications**

Whiteboards: Try to choose grey or brown (not easy as most 'white'boards are white!), use coloured markers or chalk (red and yellow are hard to see) and write in columns.

Paper: Use recycled, off-white, non-glare and different colours for different people (after diagnosis).

Computer/Projectors/reading books: Use coloured overlays (Apple offers colour screen filters for mobile devices).

Lighting: Avoid fluorescent lighting, use incandescent lighting, use dim lighting or use natural lighting.

All of the above points will greatly help our learners with difficulties. We already constantly monitor our students' learning but we can be more aware of those students who are too embarrassed to admit they have learning difficulties. Also keep in mind that ADHD or Dyslexia might actually be Irlen Syndrome which, once diagnosed, has a very simple solution: the use of coloured overlays and tinted glasses. Suggest the Irlen Syndrome website to them as it is worth a try. With world-wide centres, including one now here in Ireland, there is immediate help available. It certainly helped my own (ex) remedial reader child who is now excelling as a fully qualified Engineer (says a very relieved and proud mother).

The Irlen Syndrome method may not suit everyone. However, it may be beneficial for some of our students. It may decrease their learning difficulties and help increase their learning outcomes.

As a possible 'win win' I think it is definitely worth passing on.

### **Further Reading:**

Irlen Syndrome, <http://irlen.com/what-is-irlen-syndrome/> (Accessed 24/10/2017)

Irlen Syndrome Ireland, <https://www.irlen.ie/> (Accessed 24/10/2017)

Irlen Syndrome Self Tests, <http://irlen.com/get-tested/> (Accessed 24/10/2017)

Irlen Syndrome Success Stories, <http://irlen.com/success-stories/> (Accessed 24/10/2017)

"Experiences of Adults with Learning Disabilities: Positive and Negative Impacts and Outcomes" by Isabel Shessel Ed D., Henry B Reiff, Ph D <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.2307/1511264> (Accessed 03/01/2018)

"Learning Disabilities Facts, Trends and Stats" by Amanda Morin <https://www.understood.org/en/learning-attention-issues/getting-started/what-you-need-to-know/learning-disabilities-facts-trends-and-stats> (Accessed 03/01/2018)

"Overcoming the Shame of my Learning Disability" by Leana Greene, CEO of [KidsInTheHouse.com](http://KidsInTheHouse.com) [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/kidsinthehousecom/overcoming-the-shame-of-my-learning-disability\\_b\\_6803024.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/kidsinthehousecom/overcoming-the-shame-of-my-learning-disability_b_6803024.html) (Accessed 03/01/2018)

"Discovering Dyslexia" by Lukasz Koper, a dyslexic learner of English speaking at "English Talks", Dublin, 2017

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HJUOYNN4FFU&feature=youtu.be> (Accessed 24/10/2017)

"Top 5 Emotional Difficulties of People with Learning Disabilities" by [LDPrize.net](http://LDPrize.net), created by Liz Bodgod, an adult learner with learning disabilities. <http://www.ldpride.net/emotions.htm> (Accessed 03/01/2018)

**Useful Devices / Apps:** Irlen Coloured Overlays: <https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.irlen&hl=en>

Apple offers a colour screen filter for mobile devices: <http://irlen.com/apple-color-screen-filter/> (Accessed 24/10/2017)

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