

Inside the Mind of an ADHD Learner And Implications for Language Teachers

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I always knew something was different about me. I struggled to make friends or connect with my peers and it felt like nobody thought the way I did.

On every report card, there was a note along the lines of: “Saadiya is a pleasure to have in class. However, she often talks/disrupts her peers.” This would seem like I was not doing my work while also distracting others. However, it was quite the opposite. I often finished my work significantly faster than my peers and, being a bored child, I would want to talk with my friends. Throughout my life, I have heard things like “If you finished the test first, you probably didn’t double check your work” or “If you read this that fast, you didn’t actually read it.” This was so frustrating because I would reread and double check my work but still finish before everyone else. I felt so confused because I couldn’t understand why I was so different.

This wasn’t the only issue. I would often fall asleep in class. Teachers thought I was bored or didn’t care about class or stayed up all night playing games. But even in the classes I really enjoyed or the subjects I loved, I just couldn’t keep my eyes open. School eventually became something I dreaded because I was constantly having to alter myself to fit in. Once I got to middle school and was able to take honors level classes, a lot of my issues lessened. Between taking honors-level classes, and figuring out what helped me, I was able to combat a lot of my issues. However, I still struggled. Eventually, I came up with new methods to get through school. They involved adding multitasking elements to my ‘main’ activities. Sneakily putting in one earbud to listen to music while I work, bringing food so I could eat during the lecture, bringing other assignments so I could multitask... whatever problem came up, I got more and more creative.

Another major issue was that homework was always a struggle for me. It was not that I could not understand it or do it. I was capable of completing the homework. It was forgetfulness that was a major issue. If I do not complete a task when I am thinking about it, I might never remember to do it. I might start a task, get half way through, get distracted by something else, and never come back to complete it. My brain needs to complete a task before moving on; or else it will assume the task was completed. I often was told to make a list or write it down. However, for someone with ADHD, not only do they have to remember to write down their tasks, but they also have to remember to look back on the list. These are things that seem simple for non-ADHD individuals, but for someone with ADHD, this is unrealistic. Now, I set alarms for everything I do. However, I have to set my alarm at the exact moment, otherwise I will forget. This is why my teachers’ evaluations of me were quite high in every area except for homework and assignments.



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It wasn't until I was about 15 years old that my best friend brought up the fact that I probably have ADHD. I always brushed off the idea because I wasn't very hyper and didn't 'act' like someone with ADHD. But I found myself relating more and more to my best friend; who was diagnosed with ADHD as a child. Also with the rise of social media and people sharing their experiences, I began learning that behaviors and thought processes, completely normal to me, were not how most people thought, felt, or processed the world around me. It wasn't until I was 20 years old that I finally accepted that I have ADHD and I was able to get diagnosed and get medication to manage my condition.

What is ADHD?

ADHD stands for Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2025). A neurological disorder that one is born with, ADHD changes the way we process information and interact with the world around us. For many children, symptoms are obvious (e.g., super high energy, talkative, all-over-the-place). However, in children like myself, the symptoms are much less obvious. However, they still affect every aspect of their life, especially education. ADHD can lead to "poor self-esteem and impaired academic and social function in children" if it is not properly addressed (Harpin et al., 2016) and these issues can also affect adulthood. Symptoms like poor self-worth, sensitivity towards criticism, and increased self criticism can majorly affect an adult with ADHD (American Psychiatric Association, 2025).

Reading and writing for someone with ADHD is more complicated than reading and writing for a neurotypical person. Learning new concepts, taking tests, or even giving presentations can bring up all kinds of issues that not only the children, but the teachers also don't know how to address. Reading and reading comprehension is a core learning concept taught from a young age. However, for many children with ADHD, it can be their worst nightmare. Many teachers would have silent reading time where the class was completely silent, sometimes with light classical music playing, and we had to read for an hour to ourselves. As a child, reading in my head was significantly easier than reading out loud. However, it still came with some issues. Core symptoms of ADHD include inattention and poor working memory. So, while I could read very quickly, I often struggled with reading comprehension as I could not seem to remember what I read, sometimes despite reading the same paragraph multiple times. My ADHD also made it very hard to focus on the words on the page without other thoughts in my head or even external sounds distracting me. On the other hand, reading out loud was significantly more challenging for me. It often felt that my brain was moving faster than my mouth. I could read something in my head in a fraction of the time it would take to read something out loud. Other issues included reading words incorrectly, stuttering, and skipping lines, or even full paragraphs of text while reading aloud. This would be very frustrating for me as I often never noticed my mistake, even when it was pointed out to me. Feeling like something was wrong and nobody being able to explain why made me grow to resent reading for a while and I had to eventually learn to compensate in other ways.

Writing was another core learning concept I deeply struggled with as a child. Most writing tasks involved some sort of structure that didn't always align with how my brain worked. In addition, I was often overstimulated when assigned what appeared to be a large task. My brain has trouble categorizing tasks based on which should be completed first when they all appear to share the same level of importance. This meant that writing 5 page essays or long reports was scary for me. In addition, my brain does not work in a 'linear' way that I have noticed in my neurotypical peers. My brain jumps around from thought to thought with different things reminding me of others and I can often get off track or forget my original intention. This thought process used to reflect strongly in my writing. Even if my points were strong and my arguments were valid, I would appear to jump around in my papers and

it would be very difficult for others to read. I also often had issues with writing while talking or hearing people talking around me. I sometimes have issues filtering things out around me and this would reflect in my writing as well. I have had many issues with writing or typing exactly what I was hearing rather than what I was thinking. As mentioned before, my brain often seemed to work faster than my mouth, or in this case my hands, and this meant that while I meant to write something down, I would seem to forget that I never actually wrote anything. This made my writing difficult to read because words could be missing or sentences could be left incomplete.

Learning new concepts, taking tests, or even giving presentations can bring up all kinds of issues that not only children, but teachers also don't know how to address. A common issue that comes with ADHD is overstimulation and understimulation. Overstimulation involves irritability, anxiety, or even executive dysfunction; otherwise known as 'ADHD Paralysis.' Ultimately overstimulation can cause someone with ADHD to withdraw from a situation mentally or physically or shut down all together. On the other hand, when someone with ADHD is understimulated, it can lead to lack of concentration and lethargy. Whether they find the task interesting or not, their brain requires a certain level of dopamine from engaging with a task. Without that proper level of stimulation, you can have someone falling asleep in class or not focusing or finishing their tests and assignments. Another often overlooked symptom of ADHD is Rejection Sensitive Dysphoria (RSD). RSD involves intense emotional pain and distress from perceived rejection or criticism. The issue with this is that RSD does not lie in the words being said, but how the individual with ADHD perceives them. Whether or not the speaker was actually criticizing someone with ADHD, that individual may perceive it as rejection and have a very intense and strong emotional reaction. This coupled with the inability to regulate one's emotions can cause severe pain and distress.

ADHD is a neurological disorder that is often coupled with anxiety and depression. While not all individuals diagnosed with ADHD have anxiety or depressive disorder, it is possible they will still experience these symptoms, sometimes quite severely, as untreated ADHD can also lead to anxiety and depression. Many of the ADHD symptoms also overlap with the symptoms of anxiety and depression. These symptoms can include trouble sleeping, changes in eating habits, restlessness, memory issues, trouble concentrating, and difficulty carrying out tasks. All are very real symptoms of ADHD, but also symptoms of anxiety and depression. This can cause the individual to experience all three conditions while also not being properly treated for either; as it can be difficult to determine the root causes of their condition. If someone is experiencing anxiety and depression as a result of untreated or severe ADHD, then the ADHD should be treated first, however, it is possible for someone to have ADHD as well as an anxiety or depressive disorder, which can make it difficult to address the root, as there is not one individual root cause to their symptoms.

Suggestions for Teachers

Below I provide a few suggestions for teachers working with students who might have ADHD. These suggestions are based on my own personal experience and reading about the condition.

1. Know the difference between hyperactiveness and attention deficit

When you think of someone with ADHD, you normally think of a super hyper talkative, outgoing person. That would be the typical behavior of someone with ADHD leaning towards the *hyperactive* end of the spectrum. However, for children on the *attention deficit* end of the spectrum, they can appear introverted and quiet. They also lack focus, however, it manifests in a different way than hyperactive children. Hyperactive children tend to jump from one thing

to another with lots of energy. However, attention deficit children tend to get bored with things that don't stimulate them enough. They might not jump to something new, but they will quickly show lack of interest in completing whatever is asked of them. Children with attention deficit issues, often go undiagnosed and fly under the radar. These children tend to do quite well in school and often don't speak out about how their brain works. This often leads to them getting diagnosed much later in life compared to hyperactive children who are often diagnosed as children due to teacher or parental concern. This is because people with Inattentive ADHD, rather than hyperactive, quickly learn to cope and adapt to their environment. The older you get, the easier it is to mask and the more one gets used to masking to fit in. In fact, upon first glance, many couldn't tell I had ADHD without me mentioning it. It is often not until they meet someone else with similar experiences and a diagnosis that they begin to consider the possibility of being examined. In my case, I didn't consider it until I got to college, where I met many people from all different walks of life. Meeting people who experienced the same things I did, and could provide an explanation, changed my entire worldview and eventually led to me reaching out for a diagnosis.

2. Learn to notice ADHD in children and teens

ADHD in children and teens can manifest in different ways depending on the individual and their symptoms. Looking back on my adolescence, I now see that the signs of my ADHD were quite strong (my doctor actually said that I had “textbook ADHD”), but with the lack of resources and information about attention deficit disorders compared to hyperactive disorders, it was no shock that many people didn't notice. My distracting my peers after completing my work should have been the first sign. People with ADHD often can process input much faster than neurotypical people. For example, they can typically read and write much faster than non-ADHD people, leading to them completing assignments or tests sometimes in half the time of their peers. Also, people with ADHD often require much higher levels of stimulation in order to focus compared to their peers. Once a child finishes a test or assignment and has no other stimulation, their brain will often do one of two things: search for stimulation elsewhere or shut down. When I was in class and it was quiet with nothing but the teacher talking about a concept at the front of the class, I often was not receiving enough stimulation. At the same time, things like doing other assignments, listening to music, or using my phone were never allowed, so my brain would just shut down and I would fall asleep.

Finally, my forgetfulness regarding homework—despite my high academic capability—should have been a clear sign. I often participated in class and grasped concepts quite well. It was clear, I was smart enough to complete the homework but I was just always forgetting to do it. I never had a teacher question why I was forgetting and most assumed that I was just choosing not to do it. Had one of my teachers talked to me, they could have learned that I genuinely just forgot. In addition, I would always try to finish my homework in class or at school, because otherwise, I would always forget. I can understand teachers not picking up on the signs as it requires a working knowledge of ADHD and how it manifests in different ways. However, I think there are certain behaviors that were dismissed rather than looked into or directly addressed that could have led to a much sooner diagnosis. Even if one teacher only noticed one symptom, over time, the accumulation of symptoms would have raised flags that something was going on.

3. Help students with ADHD thrive

As a student turned teacher, I see so many accommodations I wish were incorporated into the classroom, such as allowing students to listen to their own music during individual work time if desired or playing music during work time to give some light stimulation.

Students with ADHD will process information much faster than their peers so giving them additional work after they finish their main assignment or allowing them to work on assignments from other classes can not only help them be productive, but also stop them from disrupting other students.

In neurotypical people, it can be very hard to believe someone can be doing multiple things at once and paying attention to all of them. However, for someone with ADHD, this is the norm. There is a large array of different fidget toys that can help students with ADHD. Allowing students to have something in their hands to mess with or paper to draw in during lecture or long periods of sitting, not only helps them stay focused, but also absorb information. Stimulation doesn't only affect a student's ability to pay attention, but their ability to actually absorb the information being spoken.

People with ADHD often mention having a lot of 'voices' in their head. With the negative connotations with mental disorders like schizophrenia, most won't speak up about this. However, the voices are normally your own voice constantly making comments about everything going on around you. Every little thing your brain notices, a voice mentions it and it becomes very difficult to focus when a student's internal voices are much 'louder' than the external input they are receiving. Listening to lectures or reading is often most affected by this symptom. Having a read-along track or eBook to accompany reading materials or playing baroque era music can help drown out a lot of the internal dialogue students with ADHD experience.

Another way to help a student with ADHD is to simply be patient and ask them what they need. A lot of their behavior is not their fault nor something they can control. As frustrated you are as a teacher, you have to also consider how much more frustrated the student is. ADHD isn't just something that causes students to interrupt their peers or forget their homework; it is a condition that can be very distressing and depending on the severity, it can affect every aspect of their life everyday. As a teacher, if there is any way for you to help your student thrive just like their neurotypical peers, it is your responsibility to help.

References

American Psychiatric Association. (2025). *What is ADHD?* American Psychiatric Association. Retrieved January 15, 2026, from <https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/adhd/what-is-adhd>

About the author

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