

Dyslexia and language teaching

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The readers might rightfully ask the question what the authors of this article have to do with dyslexia: they are both language teachers and teacher trainers, not psychologists or special education experts. The fact, however, is that if we look around in our immediate environment, in no time we can find a dozen colleagues, students, friends, and relatives who tell us that either they themselves have apparent difficulties in reading or somebody they know very well is dyslexic. This is in complete accord with European statistics (Smythe & Everatt, 2000), according to which approximately 7-10% of the population is affected by this type of learning disability, which causes poor reading performance despite the fact that the person has appropriate intellectual abilities and received appropriate literacy instruction (Gordosné Szabó, 2004). Dyslexia is a kind of developmental disorder that can partly be overcome with the help of various remediation programs, the most well-known of which in Hungary is the Meixner therapy (Meixner, 1993), but it accompanies the dyslexic person all through his life. This means that no matter whether we teach adults enrolled in a company course or small children in a primary school, one in every ten students in the classroom might be dyslexic. When modern educational programs claim to be learner-centred, teachers simply cannot ignore the problems of possibly 10 per cent of the student population and delegate the responsibility of dealing with dyslexics to a speech therapist or psychologist. In this brief article we are going to argue that language teachers with little or even no prior training in special education can also help dyslexic students to acquire a foreign language. All that is needed is awareness of the problem, empathy, patience, and the application of certain remedial techniques that might be useful for non-dyslexic students as well.

Language learning causes a great number of difficulties to dyslexic students, and they do not only struggle with reading in a foreign language, as many people wrongly believe. These students have problems mastering their first language, therefore the general recommendation issued by Hungarian pedagogical advisory centers and the stipulations of the educational law say that dyslexic students should either be exempted from learning languages or that their performance in a foreign language should not be evaluated. This puts Hungarian dyslexics at serious disadvantage on the job market. Hungary is largely dependent on international investments and foreign trade; therefore it is almost impossible to find a well-paying job if one does not speak at least one foreign language. In addition, a certificate of intermediate level of proficiency in a foreign language is also a pre-requisite for obtaining a university degree (for more detail on this issue see Sarkadi, 2006). In sum, if the language learning needs of dyslexic students are not catered for, they are deprived of equal rights in education. This is the reason why the two authors and some of their colleagues, PhD and MA students who also have a training in special education and psychology, decided to embark on a complex project sponsored by the Hungarian National Office of Research and Technology, which involves investigating the language learning processes of dyslexic learners, surveying the effective teaching methods available for teaching these learners, and ultimately ensuring that students with learning disabilities have equal opportunities both in language learning and in language testing.

The general psychological deficits associated with dyslexia are weaker verbal fluency functions, poorer problem solving and organization, smaller short-term memory capacity, problems in auditory and visual processing and attention problems (Pothen & Kirk, 2004; Reiter, Tucha & Lange, 2005). In classroom learning, dyslexia manifests itself in a number of

ways (Ranaldi, 2003). Dyslexic students find it difficult to memorize sequences, remember people, places and names of objects, process information at high speed, understand complicated questions, hold of a list of instructions in memory, take good notes because cannot listen and write at the same time, and organize their thoughts clearly. In addition, they have poor organization as well as time management skills and tire more quickly than a non-dyslexic person.

In our interviews conducted with Hungarian language teachers, special education experts and psychologists, we found that dyslexic learners face an enormously difficult task when learning a foreign language. Ideally, children are diagnosed as dyslexic and are enrolled in professional intervention programs in the lower primary, long before they start learning a foreign language. In these cases head teachers or parents can and should inform the language teacher about the children's dyslexia, so that appropriate foreign language materials and tasks can be prepared for them. In some other cases, however, children develop excellent survival strategies which help them cope in the lower 4-5 grades, and it is possible that the symptoms of dyslexia only come to the surface in the 6th grade and in the foreign language classroom.

The specific symptoms for language teachers to look out for in the classroom are likely to be some or all of the following: The student is unable to repeat the new word after the teacher or the recording. They cannot copy from the blackboard. Their handwriting is very untidy and often illegible. They do not read what is in the book but either improvise or recite from memory. Making up comprehensible sentences from words poses a tremendous difficulty for them, and they absolutely cannot cope with 'fill the gap' type of exercises. Many of these students also have poor listening performance. They can learn very few new words at a time and forget them very fast. They constantly lag behind the others, are anxious and frustrated. They are useless in situational dialogues, in pair- and groupwork and their peers often refuse working with them.

If the teacher does not know what causes these symptoms and reacts impatiently, gives bad grades or uses disciplinary measures, she may only make matters worse. Children are not likely to reveal that they have a learning deficit even if they know that this is their problem. They are much more likely to either withdraw and become completely inactive in the foreign language lesson, giving the impression that do not care, or, conversely, they try to get everyone's attention by misbehaving or acting funny. Making these children sit in the back row or sending them out of the classroom is no solution to the problem. Before taking action, language teachers do well to first get some information about the child from the child himself, from the other teachers and the parents. If the problems are indeed caused by dyslexia, cooperation between speech therapists, school psychologists and teachers can help a great deal.

In our research so far we have been convinced that dyslexics can also learn a foreign language, but they learn differently (see also Ormos 2004). Many students with learning disabilities are taught in an integrated school system, but most EFL practitioners are not in a position to cope with the special needs of these students for several reasons. First of all, they frequently lack the knowledge about the nature of their students' special educational needs. Secondly, they are not aware of those affective and cognitive strategies which dyslexic students use to overcome the difficulties that language learning poses for them. Finally, teachers are not equipped with the appropriate language teaching tools including techniques, tasks and materials, to help these learners. Following some of the suggestions and teaching tips listed below might turn out to be useful in coping with a number of difficulties EFL practitioners face in their everyday practice.

Tips and techniques:

- ◆ Start the foreign language course with an extended oral phase: use songs, rhymes and TPR activities extensively. Multisensory activities, the use of rhythm, action, motion or mime help dyslexic learners memorize words, phrases and structures and can boost the students' confidence.
- ◆ Reduce course objectives: teach less but teach it thoroughly. Dyslexic learners learn at a much slower pace. They can learn the material only by practicing it in many different ways up to the point of overlearning.
- ◆ Choose a course-book with a very clear and transparent layout. Since reading is difficult for most dyslexic learners, the reading passages in the book should be short and printed in big sized letters.
- ◆ Select shorter passages for reading comprehension. Dyslexic students read slowly, and finding the answers to reading comprehension questions takes them much longer than it takes other students. It is better to give them a shorter text which they can cope with than a longer one which will only frustrate them.
- ◆ Use the blackboard: Do not expect the students to take notes on their own. Write everything on the board for the students to copy into their exercise books. Use big block letters and write legibly. Use coloured chalk for various kinds of information.
- ◆ Do not expect dyslexic students to be able to listen and write at the same time. Give them time to copy words from the board and check if they copied them correctly.
- ◆ Avoid the use of "fill the gap" or other puzzle-like exercises with dyslexic learners.
- ◆ Use 'naming' tasks sparingly. Recalling words promptly is a very difficult task for a dyslexic.
- ◆ Note that recognition tasks such as choosing, linking and matching tend to be relatively easy to perform for dyslexic learners as well.
- ◆ Prepare tasks and tests in shorter versions for learners with special needs and in longer versions for others. However, do not let students think that the shorter version is for the "dummies". Rather say that there are bonus points to gain for those who do the longer version.
- ◆ Provide lots of in-class practice. Dyslexic learners take a long time to become autonomous. It is not their fault if they sit over the book for hours and still do not manage to remember the material the next day. It is no use telling them to try harder: they would if they could.
- ◆ Check the exercise-book of dyslexic learners before the end of the lesson to correct spelling errors and incorrect copying to make sure that what they learn, they learn well.
- ◆ When marking the homework of a dyslexic learner, focus on the positive and use your red ink sparingly. Disregard spelling errors if the message is comprehensible.
- ◆ Tell your students to write in pencil in class. Walk around with an eraser and correct inaccuracies on the spot.
- ◆ Let students diagnosed with dyslexia use a laptop in class (if available), and accept homework written on the computer. Teach them how to use the spell check and the grammar check functions.
- ◆ Explain grammar. Dyslexic students will not learn the grammar through communication. They need explanations, examples and lots of overt practice. Modelling, colour-coding can also help.
- ◆ Do not give your instructions in a long series of sentences. Use visuals or demonstration to ease comprehension and storing.
- ◆ Use lots of visual aids, use coloured paper and big print for your handouts if you can. If not, use a coloured overlay. You can also use colours and shapes for coding various language features, e.g. parts of speech, gender, or structures.

- ◆ Dyslexic learners thirst for success and praise. Give students with special needs tasks they can perform so that you can praise them for real achievement.
- ◆ Vary your methods and use different learning channels. Work on shaping your method to the needs of the children and not on shaping the child to match your method.

Those who deal with dyslexic learners regularly know that these students come in all shapes and sizes, and no two are the same. A teaching tip that can be usefully applied with one dyslexic student might fail with another. It requires a great deal of patience and determination both on the teacher's and the students' part to develop the strategies that work best for each individual learner. It is only motivation and hard work that can lead to success and for this the language teacher will also need the support of colleagues and parents. There are enough positive examples to prove that there is no need to exclude dyslexic learners from the language learning experience. By sharing our experiences and learning from each other we as language teachers can do a lot towards providing equal rights to dyslexic language learners.

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