

Research into the Level of Support Offered to Dyslexic EFL Learners in Polish Lower-Secondary Schools in Mainstream Education

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Summary

According to European Dyslexia Association approximately 8% of the world's population have dyslexia and a further 2 – 4% can experience severe dyslexic problems. Therefore, some efforts are made to ensure that dyslexic school populations are not disadvantaged by introducing regulations regarding curriculum provision for students with dyslexia. Nevertheless, in some countries, it is often almost solely the subject teachers' task to ensure that this support is put in place. In order to examine the level of support offered to dyslexic EFL learners in Polish mainstream education, the dissertation attempted to investigate how teachers tackle the problem of dyslexia in their classrooms by exploring educators' knowledge and implementation of provisions connected with dyslexia, as well as obstacles those teachers face in effective dealing with the problem of inclusive classrooms. This seems especially important as despite the pressure on teachers to create inclusive EFL classrooms, the area of research into EFL teachers' beliefs, understanding and practices regarding dyslexia is very much neglected in the field (Smith, 2008; Kormos and Kontra, 2008).

The research took a qualitative approach to data collection and contained two major stages. In the first one, a total number of 29 questionnaires regarding teachers' understanding of the problem of developmental dyslexia in EFL teaching and learning context were distributed among EFL lower secondary teachers in the Zachodniopomorskie region of Poland. The second stage employed semi-structured interviews and as in the case of the questionnaire items, the interview questions were based on existing literature in the field, which reveals that experience of working with dyslexic students, and the issue of inclusion is often neglected in teachers' formal training and the support offered to teachers by their schools is often inadequate. This may result in teachers lacking skills required to cope effectively with the demands of the dyslexics teaching context (Smith, 2008; Lemperou, et al, 2011). Additionally, a number of topics for the interview were chosen based on the emergent themes from the questionnaire data.

The results showed that overall the way EFL teachers deal with the problem of dyslexia in their classrooms is very limited. The range of forms of help the surveyed educators have at their disposal were few in number and at times inadequate with some of the forms listed by the teachers being rather controversial or likely to hinder learning. Furthermore, most teachers admitted not making any allowances for their dyslexic students, often explaining that they are not allowed, by either the school or the pressures of the education system itself. This shows that teachers are often unfamiliar with Polish educational policy which states that they are obliged to comply with guidelines regarding their approach to dyslexic students, an approach contained in the opinions issued by psychological-pedagogical counselling centres.

Surprisingly, despite those findings, 45% of the surveyed teachers believed that their knowledge of dyslexia is at least good.

Regarding obstacles in creating inclusive EFL classrooms, two main themes can be noticed. Firstly there is insufficient knowledge about dyslexia, which stems from lack of relevant training regarding dyslexia and dyslexia policy. Secondly, problems are often caused by organisational issues such as teaching in large groups, which does not allow a satisfactory amount of time for a teacher to devote to students' individual needs.

Impact

How could the research change attitudes?

- Clearly, there is a need for a change of teaching attitudes in the Polish context. The fact that such a high percentage of the surveyed teachers (45%) think they understand dyslexia at least well and that this self-assessed knowledge is not reflected in their answers is very worrying.
- Although a small minority, some teachers expressed somewhat negative attitudes towards their dyslexic students or the concept of an inclusive classroom. For example, asked to identify the main obstacles they encounter in teaching dyslexic students, one teacher responded: 'their unwillingness to improve their spelling skills'. This attitude demands addressing. Dyslexia is a life-long and chronic condition and although with appropriate help some of its features may diminish or disappear, the most fundamental behavioural symptom, a pronounced and persistent difficulty with skilful reading and spelling, often remain intractable (Nijakowska, 2010).
- The institutions' attitude towards the problem also needs revising as at the moment teachers do not seem to receive much help from schools, neither in terms of in-service training or the support offered by the school counsellors.

How could the research change classroom practice?

- In terms of EFL teaching practices, teachers should implement research-validated accommodations (Schneider and Crombie, 2003) and stemming from them recommendations from psychological-pedagogical counselling centres. Small changes, such as decreasing the amount of required material that dyslexic students are supposed to learn by requiring less vocabulary could bring about beneficial changes.
- Practices concerning teacher training with regard to dyslexia need to be reviewed and possibly changed. For example, two teachers mentioned that such training often involves a considerable amount of theory. In the researcher's view focusing on practical implications would be more pertinent. In the first instance it should concentrate on fairly straightforward research-validated principles of accommodations. For instance, only one teacher mentioned something often stressed in the literature, the alphabetic-phonetic principle, that is teaching the sounds of the language and the letter(s) those sound(s) represent.

How could the research change policy?

- Having a national policy regulating provisions for dyslexic students cannot be an end in itself. Despite the fact that Poland has such policy, teachers do not follow the guidelines issued by psychological-pedagogical counselling centres, raising the issue of their availability to EFL teachers or possibly their validity or clarity. Certainly, to help teachers adhere to this policy teacher training should have a compulsory element of dyslexia training and it should feature as part of continuous professional development courses.
- Outside of this context, dyslexia is something which has received scant attention in ELT research. It is not generally discussed on training courses or in classroom materials. Replicating the research in other ELT contexts (e.g. language schools in the UK, EAL contexts in the UK, other EFL teaching situations) could lead to useful results and the development of principled training materials for pre-service teachers.