HELPING LEARNERS WITH DYSLEXIA READ IN ENGLISH

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Abstract

Dyslexia is a specific learning difficulty which resists conventional teaching methods. The phonological deficit hypothesis of dyslexia determines the present day focus on phonics targeting the primary area of difficulties experienced by learners with dyslexia – decoding. Phonological instruction, however, needs to be accompanied by the development of comprehension skills and presented within a rich language environment. Verbal memory and processing difficulties, typically associated with dyslexia, as well as other frequently co-occurring disorders require the adoption of a number of additional strategies for the teaching of reading to learners with dyslexia. The paper identifies a number of them: multi-sensory approaches, systematic (structured, cumulative and sequential) instruction, over-learning, reinforcement and metacognition. It recognizes the need of time, task and materials differentiation. The choice of particular teaching methods should take into account both the learner's weaknesses and strengths. Such individually adapted teaching makes the successful inclusion of learners with dyslexia possible in the mainstream classroom.

Key words: dyslexia, reading, teaching, inclusion, strategies, phonics, multisensory

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In increasingly inclusive educational settings, teachers are challenged to meet a considerable variety of learning needs, including those shaped by dyslexia. The estimation that around 10% of the population has a certain level of dyslexia implies that 'all teachers are teachers of dyslexic children' (BDA, 2014b). The main difficulties experienced by individuals with dyslexia are phonological awareness and establishing phoneme-grapheme correspondences. Snowling asserts that 'we can now take as established the fact that children with dyslexia have phonological deficits' (2006, p. 9), i.e. difficulties affecting what she calls the 'core dimension' of reading – decoding. Dyslexia, however, is a complex and non-homogeneous phenomenon that can be characterized by a combination of features. The British Dyslexia Association (BDA) links it to 'difficulties with phonological processing, rapid naming, working memory, processing speed, and the automatic development of skills that may not match up to an individual's other cognitive abilities' (BDA, 2014a). In a similar vein, England's influential Rose Report (2009, p. 10) associates it with 'difficulties in phonological awareness, verbal memory and verbal processing speed', and explicitly states that dyslexia is independent on intellectual abilities. In addition, the BDA (2014a) acknowledges that various other types of difficulties (e.g. visual and auditory) often co-occur with dyslexia. Importantly, it also stresses that all individuals with dyslexia possess a combination of strengths and weaknesses that affects its manifestation at the behavioural level. The BDA recognizes that dyslexia is usually uninfluenced by conventional teaching methods, but can be ameliorated by proper teaching adjustments. The article will explore some of the possible adjustments teachers can make when teaching reading to students with dyslexia.

Main principles of teaching reading to learners with dyslexia

According to the Simple Theory of Reading (Hoover & Gough, 1990), which has been chosen as the framework for literacy teaching in England since 2007 (Singleton, 2009), and to the developmental models of reading acquisition (e.g. Frith, 1985, Ehri, 2002), acquiring decoding skills is the most essential element of reading development. It is precisely this area that poses difficulties for the majority of learners with dyslexia. When addressing such difficulties, intervention studies highlight the role of **structured phonics** presented in a rich language environment. Besides the extensive focus on phonics, Rose (2009, p. 14) defines a number of other important principles to follow:

'highly structured, systematic, "little and often", using graphic representation, allowing time for reinforcement and encouraging generalisation'. Some other authors subdivide systematic instruction into **structured, cumulative and sequential**, adding some more elements such as **overlearning and metacognition** (e.g. Thomson, 1990, Townend, 2000, Walker, 2000, cited in Singleton 2009). **The multisensory approaches are** a major component of dyslexia-friendly teaching (Reid, 2011). As they combine the simultaneous or sequential involvement of the auditory, visual, oral and kinesthetic-tactile sensory modalities, they enhance memory and facilitate the achievement of automaticity (Walker, 2000).

Phonics and work on reading comprehension

Phonics involves developing phonemic awareness and knowledge of grapheme-phoneme correspondences and spelling patterns. Additional phonics classes are commonly arranged for learners with dyslexia as phonologically-based interventions are found to be generally effective (Brooks, 2007), especially in enhancing word decoding skills (Snowling & Hulme, 2011). The role of phonics is substantially emphasized in the Rose Review (2009) in its recommendations for the teaching of pupils with dyslexia. The Review recommends systematic phonics which involves:

- Teaching grapheme/phoneme correspondences in a clearly defined, incremental sequence;
- Applying the skill of blending phonemes in order, all through a word to read it;
- Applying the skill of segmenting words into their constituent phonemes to spell;
- Learning that blending and segmenting is a reversible process.

Rose, 2009, p. 59

However, Rose (2009) points out that a learner's progress in decoding does not necessarily accompany his/her progress in reading comprehension. That could be caused by insufficient mental resources because of effortful decoding – fluency assists comprehension and the effort learners with dyslexia need to put into reading words accurately can disrupt the flow of their reading and hamper comprehension (Reid & Green, 2007). Other reasons could lie in insufficient syntactic awareness, lack of print exposure, underdeveloped strategies for reading comprehension, or poor vocabulary (Rose, 2009).

The implications of such findings are that in addition to sound-letter-based activities learners with dyslexia should be exposed to a rich language environment and involved in *reading comprehension* activities. Teachers should make them familiar with techniques of skimming or scanning a text. Learners may also be asked to repeat written pieces of text in order to realize that reading should sound like talking, i.e. to develop a sense of prosody. Automaticity of reading could be improved through exercises targeting both reading comprehension and word recognition, such as 'find the odd word out' (Reid & Green, 2007).

To facilitate comprehension, long sentences are very often cut shorter and vocabulary is simplified (Reid & Green, 2007). This, however, should not lead to overusing simplified books based on phonological or phonetic patterns. Continual oversimplification of texts may disrupt the learners' acquisition of more sophisticated vocabulary. Therefore, Reid and Green (2007) recommend that children with dyslexia are encouraged to additionally read books above their level – individually, as well as in paired reading or with an audio book, in order to enhance their comprehension skills and active vocabulary.

The time factor

Slower word processing slows down decoding and hinders comprehension (both in terms of correctness and speed). Therefore, students may need more time to reread a text, 'may produce quality of work or quantity, but not both' (Massey, 2008, p. 35). They may lose the gist of instructions or totally 'switch off' when their brain is overloaded (ibid). The crucial strategy is *time*. Teachers should pace the delivery of the lessons, repeat instructions, allow extra time, give breaks for students to process and retain the new information, not reproach ostensible daydreaming as it might be a subconscious break to assimilate information (ibid).

Systematic instruction

The principles of *sequential, cumulative and structured* teaching can be applied in strategies targeting difficulties with short- and working memory. To facilitate short-term memory, it is important to give instructions *one at a time*. Materials and tasks need to be broken into *small steps* and follow a logical sequence (Reid & Green, 2007). The information should be interspersed with questions and answers, each section repeated

as many times as necessary before proceeding to the next level (Massey, 2008). Also, it is important to keep learners with dyslexia involved while their classmates are reading, for example, by asking them questions and identifying their level of literal, inferential, creative or critical understanding (Reid & Green, 2007).

Students with dyslexia need to be helped with *time-management, organization, and planning*, so checklists and to do lists might be of considerable help (Reid & Green, 2007). Students can keep track of their tasks by having a personal diary. Notes taken during classes or using a dictaphone are good strategies to cope with memory deficits, especially if reviewed shortly after being recorded (ibid). Notes handwritten by the pupils must be checked for accuracy. There should be sufficient opportunities for revision.

Individuals with dyslexia often cannot make the *connection between old and new knowledge*, so these have to be reinforced by making the students reflect on what they have already learned and what they still need to find out (Reid & Green, 2007). For the embedding of information in the long-term memory, the pupils' interest should be provoked and links with previous knowledge should be explicitly made (Farrell, 2006). Self-monitoring and self-correction should be encouraged as students need to ensure themselves that they have mastered one level before going onto the next one. Checklists can help them monitor their progress (Reid & Green, 2007). *Metacognition* is essential and students are encouraged to get to know themselves as learners, to become aware of their preferred learning style and of the strategies they can apply when facing reading difficulties outside the classroom.

Multisensory approaches

The multisensory principle can be applied by involving multiple modalities while presenting and reinforcing new information. *Visual* aids support memory and provide structure. It is recommended to use illustrations, charts and diagrams, mind-maps and spidergrams, video recordings (Farrell, 2006). Mind-mapping is particularly effective as it not only helps organization but also encourages lateral thinking and creativity (Reid & Green, 2007). As learners with dyslexia often have poor auditory memory, new material should be provided in a visual form, instructions should be written down. Auditory processing problems may result in difficulties perceiving rapid sounds (Massey, 2008). This area can be targeted through a combination of phonic approaches (by training

phonemic awareness) and multisensory techniques (e.g. visual aids as well as gestures supplementing the spoken word) (Farrell, 2006). Printed hand-outs should be preferred to asking students with dyslexia to copy from the board – it may take them more time than the rest of the class, it might be inaccurate and it may give them a sense of failure (ibid). Vocabulary can be consolidated with flash cards of important words. Key words can be highlighted with colour or bold. The *auditory* channel can be used, for example, by complementing reading activities with audio recordings (Farrell, 2006). Role-play, mime and gesture, drama can create opportunities for the *kinesthetic* learner to get involved (Farrell, 2006; Reid & Green, 2007). With younger learners, the *tactile* sense can be utilized by handling artefacts (Farrell, 2006), e.g. shapes of letters, or by constructing things following the principle 'Doing is better than hearing it!' (Reid & Green, 2007).

There should be a conscious effort to establish a balance between the active and passive aspects of learning (ibid). As early as 1972, Craick and Lockhart (cited in Massey 2008) suggested that the efficiency of transference is facilitated mostly not by repetition but by the manner in which it is transferred. Utilizing different mediums of instruction and a variety of activities provides opportunities for *reinforcement* and *overlearning* – major principles recommended in dyslexia-friendly teaching.

More on visual aid

Though wrongly equated with dyslexia, certain *visual problems* often co-occur with this specific learning difficulty. Some of them are difficulties with convergence (coordinated eye movement to receive a unified image of the written letter), accommodation (adjusting the focus of the eye to the changing distance from the print), and tracking (keeping one's place within the text) (Farrell, 2006). Another problem which may co-occur with dyslexia is Scotopic sensitivity, or Meares-Irlen Syndrome – 'the presence of a visual defect that can be treated to difficulties with light source, glare, wave lengths and black and white contrast' (Fawcett & Reid, 2009). According to Fawcett and Reid (ibid) and Farrell (2006), these difficulties might be ameliorated in some individuals by using coloured overlays or tinted glasses. However, Singleton (2009, p. 24) claims that visual stress is *not* neurologically linked to dyslexia and 'coloured tints cannot be recommended as a generic treatment for dyslexia because in most cases they will not help the child'.

While use of colour tints is subject to debate, making the text more visually accessible is an indispensable tool that benefits all learners, especially those with dyslexia. Students need to navigate effortlessly through the page. Worksheets have to be organized with *well-spaced out information and larger print* (Reid & Green, 2007). Dyslexia-friendly fonts are usually Times New Roman, Century Gothic, Comic Sans. A font specifically designed for readers with dyslexia and downloadable for free is the Dyslexie font (Dyslexie Font, B. V., 2015). The individual preferences should be established by asking the learners themselves (Reid & Green, 2007).

The classroom environment

If students with dyslexia have memory deficits, they are more vulnerable to distracting noises. They may find it difficult to filter out background noise, and as a result receive faulty or incomplete information in their short-term memory (Kelly & Phillips, 2013). Usually, they learn more effectively if they sit at the front, next to a well-motivated study buddy, with reduced background noise or visual movement, in an adequately lit room, with well-spaced displays (ibid). They should be given opportunities to express their preference for the environment they feel most comfortable to work in (e.g. regarding light, temperature, sound, classroom arrangement) (Reid & Green, 2007).

Boosting learners' self-confidence

Boosting learners' self-confidence is a significant factor determining their engagement with the learning process and the outcome of it. Reid and Green (2007, p. 86) suggest that as students with dyslexia often develop a so-called 'learnt helplessness', convincing themselves of not being able to complete certain tasks, it is important to make sure that they *experience achievement and success*. The authors point out the importance of providing opportunities for students with dyslexia to demonstrate their competence. That can be done by involving them in activities that do not require a significant amount of reading, such as: investigation in groups, debating, making posters, brainstorming, quizzes, videoing, role-play, fieldwork and enquiring, oral presentations, learning in pairs, comic strips, drawing pictures, computer work, songs and poems. Learners with dyslexia are often imaginative, curious, good lateral thinkers, skillful with design and technology, drama and sport, able to bring together the missing pieces of a bigger picture, to reconstruct the whole (Massey, 2008). BDA

(2014a) and Massey (2008) stress the importance for the learners' strengths to be recognized and employed in order to successfully facilitate the learning process, making new knowledge more accessible to them but also building up their self-esteem, nourishing their interest and motivation.

Conclusion

As dyslexia tends to resist conventional teaching methods, teaching styles need to be accommodated to meet the individual needs of learners diagnosed with this specific learning difficulty. Decoding skills are both a corner stone in the acquisition of reading and the primary area of difficulties for learners with dyslexia. Intervention studies confirm the role of phonological awareness and letter-sound correspondence in reading development and produce evidence that a highly structured phonics instruction is of benefit to all learners struggling to read (Rose, 2009). Phonological instruction, however, needs to be accompanied by the development of comprehension skills and presented within a rich language curriculum. Additional principles such as systematic (structured, cumulative and sequential) instruction, multi-sensory approaches, over-learning, reinforcement and metacognition have been recommended in the teaching of learners with dyslexia. In addition, students' preferred learning styles and strengths need to be taken into account. Their significance lies not only in bootstrapping the learners' weaknesses but in providing them with self-confidence and opportunities to express themselves beyond the restrictions imposed on them by their dyslexia. Only such kind of individually adapted education can make the successful inclusion of learners with dyslexia possible in the mainstream classroom.

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