

Classroom - Based Interventions for Achieving 'Dyslexia-Friendly' Classrooms in Language Education: Pupils' and Teachers' Perspectives

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Abstract

Teaching English to pupils of other languages is a major area in education. The same applies for teaching children with learning difficulties. Although both language education and dyslexia research have significantly advanced, there is a limited number of studies specifically relating to the support of pupils with difficulties that learn a second or a foreign language. The aim of the present study was to explore English language teaching and dyslexia with a central interest on the inclusion of dyslexic pupils that learn English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Dyslexia-friendly practices were introduced in three Greek EFL classrooms with the intention to explore how these affected the performance and motivation of dyslexic learners. Because the context of this study was mainstream education, the impact these practices had on their non-dyslexic classmates was addressed. Apart from the pupils' views, teachers' views were also examined while a personal research diary assisted the researcher in focusing on the process of this intervention. Preliminary findings suggest that EFL (dyslexic and non-dyslexic) learners' motivation and performance improved while teachers gradually felt more confident in supporting dyslexic pupils.

1. Introduction

The area of special education and learning difficulties has attracted a lot of attention the last twenty years (Squires 2012) and numerous studies have focused on the development of practices that encourage the participation of learners with difficulties in mainstream contexts. As a result, new advancements in policy and practice have been accomplished (Reid 2009). However, there is a need for research to become more subject-specific so that teachers are prepared to work in inclusive ways and remove any possible barriers to learning.

The present study focuses on dyslexia and the way English language learning can be facilitated for Greek dyslexic pupils. Despite the fact that the occurrence of learners with dyslexic difficulties in the language classroom is a common phenomenon limited progress has been made towards the ways they can be accommodated in these contexts. Consequently, in many cases pupils with dyslexia are withdrawn from FL/SL/AL (Foreign Language/Second Language/Additional Language) classrooms. The latter narrows their opportunities in today's competitive society where everyone has to learn to speak and write in more than one languages. This project focuses on the English language since it is one of the most popular languages of the world. Moreover, English language teaching is the author's personal area of expertise.

2. Dyslexia and EFL

2.1. Dyslexia

The main models of dyslexia are the medical and the social one. The former focuses more on genetic factors while the latter suggests that pupils' difficulties are the result of an environment's attitudes towards literacy (Riddick 2001). However, we must not assume that these models are mutually exclusive since there are cases of learners where both medical and environmental factors interact and affect the learning processes.

The British Psychological Society proposes a working definition of dyslexia: "Dyslexia is evident when accurate and fluent word reading and/or spelling develops very incompletely or with great difficulty. This focuses on the literacy learning at the word level and implies that the problem is severe and persistent despite appropriate learning opportunities. It provides a staged process of assessment through teaching" (BPS 1999: 18). It is a definition different that corresponds to this study's framework since it enables specific learning difficulties to be identified in EAL children (Peer & Reid 2000).



2.2 Dyslexia and EFL/EAL/ESL

Research has shown that dyslexic FL/SL learners will find it challenging to learn reading and writing in English (Geva et al. 2000, Miller and Lundberg 2000, Helland and Kaasa 2004) while problems of perception (Hutchinson et al. 2004) and articulation (Yamada 2004) might also arise. The same might also apply for Greek pupils since English is more opaque than Greek (Goswami 2012).

There are studies that have explored the inclusion approaches for second or foreign language learners with dyslexic difficulties (Deponio et al. 2000, Morfidi & Reason 2000, Dimitriadi 2000). However, further research on this area is needed so that teachers are able “to meet the language and literacy needs of learners with EAL so that they can achieve educationally” (Kelly & Phillips 2012: 70).

But the issue of dyslexia inclusion should be at all times linked to pupils' self-esteem since it is negatively affected by the difficulties they encounter (Humphrey 2003). The latter is also significant for language learning as part of the broader concept of motivation (Dornyei & Csizer 2005) which influences the amount of language input language learners receive and how long they maintain L2 skills (Oxford & Shearin 1994). Because “English conjures up accuracy in spelling, writing, and reading” (Turner and Pughe 2003: 2), the difficulties that might arise for EFL learners with dyslexia are probable to negatively affect their motivation.

3. The present study

The mainstream context this study took place were three EFL classrooms in Greek primary education. Three EFL teachers received some dyslexia training and were asked to use dyslexia friendly practices (McKay 2004). The focus was on teaching and learning processes. The original aim of the project was to examine whether these practices were developing a supportive environment for dyslexic pupils with a focus on their performance and motivation in EFL. However, because “dyslexia friendly practice is, in fact, good practice for all” (BDA 2010 – DFS pack) their influence on the non-dyslexic pupils was also addressed.

As a result, the main research area was:

How do dyslexia-friendly practices work in an EFL context? Are they 'friendly' to dyslexic and non-dyslexic EFL learners?

The sub-questions were:

1. How do 'dyslexia-friendly' practices affect dyslexic and non-dyslexic EFL learners' performance in English language tasks?
2. How do 'dyslexia-friendly' practices affect dyslexic and non-dyslexic EFL learners' motivation towards learning English language?

Although there is literature that has looked into teachers' views towards inclusion (Vlachou and Barton 1994, Moltó 2003) little has been done around mainstream teachers' views of dyslexia approaches. Because the EFL teachers formed a large part of this research their views on the processes started to appear as rather significant for the project. Consequently, another important theme emerged: EFL teachers' response to developing dyslexia friendly environment. This led to an additional research question:

3. How do EFL teachers respond to dyslexia training and towards employing dyslexia-friendly practices in their classrooms?

4. Data collection

The study was divided in two parts: exploring issues of motivation and performance before and after the use of the practices. This allowed the researcher to trace and appreciate the processes of change on both issues. The author employed several qualitative data collection methods since the research questions were explored from the teachers', the pupils' and the researchers' views. The data collection processes were the same in both parts of the study. Teacher interviews, pupil interviews and focus groups were used for examining the teachers' and the pupils' perspective while classroom observations and a research diary recorded the researcher's. The data are being currently analysed with the use of NVivo 9 software while thematic analysis techniques are sometimes utilised too (Braun & Clarke 2006).

5. Initial findings

Initial findings suggest that there have been positive changes in the motivation of learners with dyslexia and their peers. Pupils with dyslexia gradually seemed to find English language learning less difficult and

demanding while their views of their EFL teachers appeared to be more positive. The latter applies for the non dyslexic pupils too who also seemed to enjoy the lesson more than before. Regarding pupils' performance, positive changes have been traced as well but not equally significant. This might have been due to time restrictions.

Although at the beginning of the study two of the teachers seemed hesitant towards the dyslexia training their interest gradually increased. However, they were showing greater interest in the dyslexia friendly practices maybe because they needed "something more practical" (teacher M, school B). At the final interviews all three of them were in favour of the practices mostly because –as they said- they saw positive changes in pupils' attitudes towards EFL learning. Moreover, by the end of the study the teachers sounded more confident in supporting learners with dyslexia although all three of them stressed the need for more dyslexia training.

6. Conclusion

The present research will provide a detailed investigation of the way dyslexia friendly practices work in EFL classrooms and on the differentiation approaches these learners might need. Moreover, learners' performance and motivation are associated since these are rather significant in both areas of language teaching and dyslexia. As a result, new developments on both these educational domains might arise.

The support of ESL/EFL teachers has important implications for policy measures. The need for the association of language teaching and learning difficulties in a policy level is posed so that all 'different' learners (McKay 2004) are included in the English language classroom. The originality of this study lies on the fact that the interest is on the exploration of applying specific techniques in classroom settings so as to provide future directions for research in the ESL/EFL contexts. In this way, "any classroom based intervention made on behalf dyslexic learners has the potential to enhance the learning of a majority of pupils especially as it enshrines the notion of responding to learning differences by changes in teaching" (British Dyslexia Association 2010).

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