Foreign Language Learning and Dyslexia

Msc. Zamira Mërkuri
Msc. Aleksandër Boboli

Eqrem Çabej” University of Gjirokastra, Albania
Faculty of Education and Social Sciences

Abstract
This article presents English language learning pupils with the opportunity to communicate with speaking peers on equal terms: to use the gift of communication to promote a common understanding and share visions and plans for the future. It is not simply an ideological educational theory designed to gain acceptance of a common curriculum for schools. However if we are to promote the idea of foreign language learning for all, we must question if it is really possible to give all our young people access to this area of the curriculum and if we can make the experience a worthwhile one which results in effective learning. If we can answer, “Yes” to this question, then the next question will inevitably be “How”? Inclusion in the modern languages classroom is about much more than having a presence and being exposed to another language. It is about feeling accepted and involved in a worthwhile learning experience whatever the level that can be achieved. One dilemma faced is whether we should present all young people with a common modern language curriculum irrespective of any additional support needs which they may have, or deprive pupils of what may prove to be a worthwhile and satisfactory learning experience. Early research into the learning of another language suggested that because dyslexic pupils normally manage to cope with the spoken and listening aspects of their own language, there was no reason why they would not cope with a foreign language.

Why should dyslexic pupils learn another language?

For dyslexic pupils who have struggled to learn their own language, and who may still be coming to terms with the finer points of reading and writing, we must ensure we are not imposing an unbearable burden that could result in further failure, de-motivation and subsequent behavior problems. True inclusion in the modern languages classroom is about much more than having a presence and being exposed to another language. It is about feeling accepted and involved in a worthwhile learning experience whatever the level that can be achieved.

The benefits of learning another language are fairly clear: an extended range of employment and recreational opportunities as well as the less tangible benefits of achieving a closer understanding of others by communicating in the other language instead of just their own. By depriving any pupils of such opportunities, we may create the anxiety we seek to avoid.

Should all dyslexic pupils study another language?

One dilemma which we face is whether we should present all young pupils with a common modern language curriculum irrespective of any additional support needs which they may have, or deprive pupils of what may prove to be a worthwhile and satisfactory learning experience. The difficulty in solving the dilemma is one that permeates educational practice. All pupils are not the same, and all dyslexic pupils are not the same. Because one dyslexic pupil succeeds does not mean every dyslexic pupil will. What works for one may not work for another. Early research into the learning of another language suggested that because dyslexic pupils normally manage to cope with the spoken and listening aspects of their own language, there was no reason why they would not cope with a foreign language (Crombie, 1995; 1997; 2003). The environment in which dyslexic pupils learn their own language is generally quite different from the classroom conditions which most pupils experience in the teaching and learning situation. Total immersion which exists for pupils learning English in schools, does not exist in many classrooms, and it is only when pupils attend specific language schools or go to live in another country that they have a chance of reaching anywhere near the level of immersion which they had for their first language. The age at which immersion takes place too may be a critical factor in producing the most favorable climate for learning. There are few schools which teach foreign languages to pupils under the age of eight.

Trying to anticipate learning abilities

The level of a pupil’s difficulties in mother language may give an indication of the likely difficulties in foreign language
learning, but it is certainly not the only indicator. Motivation, attitude, learning style, self esteem and determination are as always crucial to learning. If we can convince pupils to believe in themselves, we may make the difference between success and failure. Even when all the motivational and attitudinal conditions are right, there is still the possibility that we may not succeed in achieving the learning we hoped.

Because of the phonological difficulties which the vast majority of dyslexic pupils exhibit, they are likely to have problems with the phonology or the new language. Auditory discrimination may be problematic. There are other reasons too why dyslexic pupils differ in their learning abilities. Processing time is a crucial factor. The fact that dyslexic pupils often take more time to process language information is one which has been confirmed by research (Ackerman & Dykman, 1996). We cannot therefore expect dyslexic pupils to absorb information at the same rate as their peers. Slowing the rate at which we expect dyslexic pupils to speak or listen in the foreign language may not be exactly natural but it does give the dyslexic pupil time to process during the initial stages of learning.

Working memory and short-term memory difficulties that affect dyslexic pupils’ learning could be expected to affect foreign language learning. If a pupil has difficulty in accessing a word such as “hospital” and instead says, “hosital”, this muddling of polysyllabic words which is not unexpected in dyslexic people generally is likely to overlap into the new language.

Short-term memory difficulties make it likely that learning vocabulary too will pose problems for the dyslexic pupil. Combined with the extra time required to access words from memory, the pupil may have problems in maintaining concentration for sufficient time to decode, comprehend and respond. This factor of requiring extra time may remain until the pupil reaches the stage of being able to think in the other language. Pupils, who have mild difficulties in learning to read, write and master the phonology of their own language, may find some difficulty in tackling whatever foreign language they choose, but will probably reach a reasonable standard if they persist.

At the early stages of learning the new language progress may be quite acceptable. However, as the demands rise, memory may become overloaded, and if the pupils do not understand the necessary strategies and techniques to employ, what was initially a pleasurable experience can become extremely stressful, with the possibility of breakdown not just in learning but also in motivation and self-esteem.

For the person with dyslexia, the process of learning to read can break down with reading mechanics or comprehension, and at any of the specific skill levels. It is important to note that pupils with dyslexia do not always acquire skills in the normal developmental sequence. If an individual does not develop adequate phonemic awareness during the pre-reading period, effective decoding may not be possible, which influences the development of fluent reading and comprehension skills. Also, pupils with dyslexia often come to the reading task with oral language comprehension problems. When assessing and planning for instruction, consideration of these oral language comprehension problems may facilitate acquisition of reading comprehension. No single reading method will be effective for all pupils with dyslexia. Most individuals with dyslexia will benefit from the application of a variety of methods.

The Challenges for teachers

For teachers, the challenge is to find the most effective methods of teaching foreign languages to dyslexic pupils as well as all the others in the class. Research which emphasizes a systematic structured approach to a multisensory nature, suggests that this is the most effective method for poor language pupils. This Multisensory Structured Language (MSL) approach is described by Ganschow, Sparks & Schneider (1995) in the International Dyslexia Journal.

Teachers should be able to appropriately and systematically modify or combine methods, and utilize them in order to meet an individual’s changing needs. Selecting the appropriate program to apply to the pupil is not a simple matter, and requires a careful assessment of where the pupil is in the developmental process. It is not uncommon, for example, to observe an individual with all the pre-reading skills, numerous comprehension skills, and simple decoding skills acquired during the pupil’s progression through mechanical reading instruction. Because there may be a lack of understanding of the sophisticated decoding skills needed, reading with fluency suffers. Pupils with dyslexia should be provided with sound strategic approaches that empower them as readers, rather than be allowed to learn and internalize incorrect practices.

Methods

A significant part of selecting appropriate instructional approaches is: understanding the learning profile of an individual. A diagnostic program is necessary to identify pupils with dyslexia. A cognitive profile is also necessary to determine precisely what pupils’ needs are, their strengths and weaknesses, whether they have difficulty with working memory, if they have inadequate language skills, etc. Pupils with dyslexia need to be taught strategic approaches explicitly. They
need to have ideas made conspicuously clear to them.

Pupils with dyslexia who need to work on reading mechanics frequently respond to explicitly taught code-emphasis developmental reading methods such as phonic, linguistic, or multisensory approaches. Some of the most popular approaches are briefly described below.

**The MSL (Multisensory Structured Language) approach** is based on the work of Gillingham and Stillman (1960) and is not unlike the type of approach recommended for teaching first language skills to dyslexic pupils. Grammar, syntax, and language phonology require to be taught through a program that emphasizes hearing, seeing, speaking and writing the language. A major challenge to teachers is of course to determine how these methods can be employed in a busy modern languages classroom. One answer is to use the techniques with a whole group of pupils so that in addition to the direct teaching being given, pupils can also practice among themselves to give the over learning necessary for retention between written aspects and the sounds they make. This method assumes that some pupils learn best when content is presented in several modalities. Multisensory approaches that employ tracing, hearing, writing, and seeing are often referred to as VAKT (visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and tactile) methods. Multisensory techniques can be used with both phonics and linguistic approaches.

**Phonics approach.** The phonics approach teaches word recognition through learning grapheme-phoneme (letter-sound) associations. The pupil learns vowels, consonants, and blends, and learns to sound out words by combining sounds and blending them into words. By associating speech sounds with letters the pupil learns to recognize new and unfamiliar words.

**Linguistic method.** This method uses a "whole word" approach. Words are taught in word families, or similar spelling patterns, and only as whole words. The pupil is not directly taught the relationship between letters and sounds, but learns them through minimal word differences. As the pupil progresses, words that have irregular spellings are introduced as sight words.

**Neurological Impress Technique.** This is a rapid-reading technique. The teacher reads a passage at a fairly rapid rate, with the teacher's voice directed into the pupil's ear. The teacher begins as the dominant reading voice, but gradually the pupil spends more time leading these sessions. Pupils who have learned mechanics without adequately learning reading fluency frequently benefit from this, as do pupils who read slowly or who hesitate over a number of words but are able to identify most of the words in a sentence. A pupil is directed to read a passage without errors. This method functions most effectively when it is practiced for short periods every day.

**Language experience approach.** The language experience approach uses pupil's spoken language to develop material for reading. This approach utilizes each pupil's oral language level and personal experiences. Material is written by the pupil and teacher for reading using each pupil's experience. This can be done in small groups and individually. Familiarity with the content and the vocabulary facilitate reading these stories. Each pupil can develop a book to be read and re-read. This approach helps pupils know what reading is and that ideas and experiences can be conveyed in print.

**Reading comprehension support.** Dyslexic pupils who need work on reading comprehension often respond to explicitly taught strategies which aid comprehension such as skimming, scanning and studying techniques. These techniques aid in acquiring the gist, and then focus is turned to the details of the text through use of the cloze procedures. The cloze procedure builds upon a pupil's impulse to fill in missing elements. With this method, every fifth to eighth word in a passage is randomly eliminated. The pupil is then required to fill in the missing words. This technique develops reading skills and an understanding not only of word meaning but also of the structure of the language itself.

**Modeling** involves someone in acting as a model while the pupils follow. Reading along with the teacher helps the pupil gain confidence, paired or peer tutoring, taping of a passage which the pupil can take away and follow at home, etc.

**Learning Styles** takes account of how a pupil learns best – small group, individually, seating position, light sensitivity, motivational factors etc.

### Strategies

The following strategies are likely to be helpful to many pupils, not just those with dyslexia:

- Adopting a meta-cognitive approach
- Thinking about and understanding the language structure.
- Understanding the way in which they learn.
- Analogous reading
The notion of onset and rime can be extended to languages other than English though is clearly not suitable for all languages. Make use of words which fit into families to minimize the need for new learning: e.g. bright, sight, might, light in English.

What's best?

Having considered a number of issues and the options, there is still no easy answer to the initial questions. We cannot generalize from one dyslexic pupil to another. Language learning is unlikely to be easy for any dyslexic pupil but few areas of school learning are for most. Appropriate teaching will undoubtedly make an enormous difference. Clearly structured teaching of the type generally recommended for teaching native language skills may make language learning very much more comprehensible to the dyslexic pupil. It seems the message therefore is that while all dyslexic pupils are at risk of encountering difficulties in the foreign language classroom, close monitoring will ensure that these difficulties are minimized. For most dyslexic pupils there should be some success. If however, the learning situation becomes intolerable and pupils find themselves totally unable to master even the most elementary aspects of a foreign language, then alternatives may need to be considered. Finding a more appropriate alternative within the curriculum, could cause major problems for timetabling and supervision, but is very necessary if the stress and frustration felt by an otherwise capable pupil is not to be allowed to adversely affect behavior and self-image. With imagination and persistence the right alternative can be found and many difficulties can overcome.

When the decision is made to proceed with foreign language learning, this will have to be kept under regular review. It is desirable that dyslexic pupils be given awareness of the culture of the country whose language they have been studying. The early stages of language teaching will introduce cultural aspects as well as the language. Some dyslexic pupils will go on to enjoy their language learning albeit they may struggle at times to keep up with their peer groups. Others will be unable to maintain the program. It is important for these pupils that we are ready to find alternatives before any lasting damage is done to overall motivation and self-esteem. The importance of language specialists and additional support for learning staff understanding the likely difficulties which dyslexic pupils may experience is vital if dyslexic pupils are to reach their potential in all languages, including their own. Considerable collaboration will be required to reach a fuller understanding of the most appropriate methodologies for dyslexic pupils. Further research into foreign language learning will be required if we are to be assured of the most appropriate and best solutions. It looks as though we are already discovering that methods which are best for dyslexic pupils work for most if not all others. Dyslexic pupils however are likely to need more of them for a longer time to reach success. Variety is one key if we are to prevent dyslexic pupils from reaching the point of boredom.

Conclusions

Pupils with dyslexia will typically require a variety of instructional approaches in order to make their educational experiences more productive. There is no one best approach to teach reading to pupils with dyslexia. There are many reading methods available with ongoing debate about which one is preferable. It is critical that teachers understand both the pupil and the various reading methods available if the pupil is to have the best possible learning experience. The importance of a comprehensive evaluation that will result in prescription for intervention cannot be over-emphasized. The notion that teachers must have the ability to effectively and systematically alter various methods to meet the needs of individual pupils with dyslexia is of the same importance. Language teachers are recognizing that explicit teaching of linguistic structures is needed to correct the defects of the communicative approach and to facilitate clear and skilful communication. Teachers may therefore find it profitable to give more attention to the phonological aspect of language that is the interface between the spoken and the written word. I have suggested that such an approach will help pupils of all abilities to relate the manifestations of the language in the four skill areas and thereby significantly improve their ability all-round. As vocabulary topic areas become less central to the conception of language enshrined, textbooks will no doubt give greater space to explicit analysis and practice of phonological structures. Nowhere would this be more beneficial than in a course book that drew upon the research available on dyslexia.
References


