

УНИВЕРЗИТЕТ „ГОЦЕ ДЕЛЧЕВ“ - ШТИП
ФИЛОЛОШКИ ФАКУЛТЕТ

UDC 81
UDC 82
UDC 008



ISSN: 2545-3998
DOI: 10.46763/palim

ПАЛИМПСЕСТ

МЕЃУНАРОДНО СПИСАНИЕ ЗА ЛИНГВИСТИЧКИ,
КНИЖЕВНИ И КУЛТУРОЛОШКИ ИСТРАЖУВАЊА

PALIMPSEST

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL FOR LINGUISTIC,
LITERARY AND CULTURAL RESEARCH

PALMK, VOL 7, NO 14, STIP, 2022

ГОД. VII, БР. 14
ШТИП, 2022

VOL. VII, NO 14
STIP, 2022

ПАЛИМПСЕСТ

Меѓународно списание за лингвистички, книжевни
и културолошки истражувања

PALIMPSEST

International Journal for Linguistic, Literary
and Cultural Research

Год. 7, Бр. 14
Штип, 2022

Vol. 7, No 14
Stip, 2022

PALMK, VOL 7, NO 14, STIP, 2022

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.46763/PALIM22714>

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The International Scientific Journal “Palimpsest” is issued twice a year in printed form and online at the following website of the web portal of Goce Delcev University in Stip:

<http://js.ugd.edu.mk/index.php/PAL>

Papers can be submitted and published in the following languages: Macedonian, English, German, French, Russian, Turkish and Italian language.

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DYSLEXIA & LANGUAGE TEACHING

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Abstract: Successful teaching is directly dependent on the teacher's ability to recognize the needs and difficulties of students and teach them appropriately. Therefore, it is essential to be aware of the range of difficulties caused by dyslexia in the language learning process. Dyslexia as a learning difficulty is still largely unrecognized in Macedonia and it is scarcely referred to as part of the educational process at any level. Herein, in this paper, we review the most common problems of dyslexic students and suggest possible solutions through some of the most common methods used in language teaching and teaching in general.

Keywords: *dyslexia; foreign language; mother tongue; fluency.*

Introduction

One of the essential elements of a good teaching process is the teacher's ability to engage all the students in the classroom and to successfully explain and transfer the new material. The first step toward an inclusive and engaging teaching and learning process is teacher's awareness of the individuality of each student in relation to student's personality, learning style and certain difficulties they might have. In this paper we will focus on the difficulties that arise for dyslexic students in the language learning process for both the native or mother tongue (Macedonian) and the foreign language (English).

Dyslexia in Macedonia entails numerous problems that need to be overcome in order to have an appropriate and satisfactory inclusion of these students in the educational institutions at all levels. Briefly, the problems can be summarized as follows:

- Lack of awareness by teachers in general about the presence of dyslexic students in the classroom,
- Lack of understanding of what the term 'dyslexia' stands for,
- Incorrect perception of dyslexic characteristics as intellectual deficiencies,
- No certified specialists on dyslexia in the educational institutions (primary and secondary schools, universities),

- Very low inclusion of this topic in the universities' curriculum for future teachers such as the faculties of pedagogy, faculties of philology etc.
- Non-existent guidelines, advice or additional materials available for the teachers for these types of students,
- Absence of dyslexia in the curriculum for both primary and secondary schools for the subjects of Macedonian, English or any other subject.

The above-mentioned challenges that dyslexic students need to surpass are only some of the key difficulties that are present in the educational process. Therefore, offering one simple solution to help dyslexic students and resolve all their difficulties seems to be impossible. This complex educational, teaching and learning issue can be approached and ultimately resolved solely through multiple actions in multiple areas of education in general.

Dyslexia as an educational problem

The range of learning difficulties caused by dyslexia can be resolved by a range of actions. The only immediate action that can be conducted is an eventual initiative by Ministry of Education to organize and enable training for all language teachers by a certified dyslexia specialist. This training should be mandatory for all language teachers in primary and secondary schools and should present the basis of dyslexia and the most common characteristics of dyslexic students. All teachers, especially language teachers, need to be able to recognize dyslexic students quite early during their teaching lessons and need to be equipped with resources, materials and other support in order to ease the students' learning process and help their advancement. Furthermore, psychologists, pedagogues and speech therapists that are being present in every school in Macedonia should be included in those training sessions and should offer additional help to language teachers during the school year.

These types of workshops or lectures should also be offered to university students majoring in primary and secondary education as well as to future language teachers. Essentially, everyone majoring in teaching should attend at least one training or lecture of such type. Faculties of pedagogy and philology need to incorporate the topic of dyslexia in their study programs and further educate students on methods which are considered to be useful in terms of this learning disability. Although one or a few sessions would not be enough, it may improve the current situation in our education system where dyslexia is rarely taken into account, and it might eventually motivate more teachers to explore and individually educate themselves on the topic.

The two main notions that the training is to introduce to current teachers and future teachers are the following: there is a certain number of dyslexic students in almost every classroom and dyslexia is not a disease but a learning difficulty. After establishing these two basic notions teachers would easily choose the appropriate methods and techniques that they can use during the language teaching process.

Integration of dyslexic students in the educational process

A successful educational process can be achieved only through a complete integration of all the students in the classroom, which implies the integration of dyslexic students as well, regardless of the level or the type of dyslexia. Hence, the process of integration depends on the teacher's ability to recognize dyslexic students and their difficulties, then on their ability to create a pleasant and inclusive learning environment and to offer variable and appropriate resources, activities and materials.

First, teachers need to comprehend and accept the notion that dyslexia is a learning difficulty. A well-accepted explanation of dyslexia is the definition proposed by the International Association of Dyslexia, which is as follows: "Dyslexia is a specific learning disability that is neurobiological in origin. It is characterized by difficulties with accurate and/or fluent word recognition and by poor spelling and decoding abilities. These difficulties typically result from a deficit in the phonological component of language that is often unexpected in relation to other cognitive abilities and the provision of effective classroom instruction. Secondary consequences may include problems in reading comprehension and reduced reading experience that can impede growth of vocabulary and background knowledge."

The learning difficulty of dyslexic students derives from their short attention span and short-term memory capacity. A short attention span means that a student is incapable of focusing on one particular topic for longer periods of time which for example makes it impossible to follow long lectures or instructions, to read or listen to longer discourse etc. On the other hand, the short-term memory capacity means that it is difficult for dyslexic students to remember a range of new information about a new topic during the lesson, learn new words, facts, and dates etc. in one 45 min lesson. If the teacher is aware of these difficulties, appropriate teaching strategies can be employed to mitigate them. These two disadvantages must not be misunderstood as characteristics of low intelligence, but only as learning problems that can be surpassed. After establishing the fact that having dyslexia is simply having a learning disability, it will be easier for teachers to approach and ponder on how to provide dyslexic students with an environment that will improve their ability to learn.

Secondly, the teacher must take certain precautions in order to create a good classroom environment. Certain dyslexic students have visual and auditory sensitivity, so the teacher should be aware of the noise in the classroom and the quantity of information presented on the board or whiteboard and of the colours used in the presentation of the material, whether it is written on a board or presented through certain IT device. The maintenance of a satisfactory classroom environment in a combination with routine activities in the teaching and learning process creates a well-integrated and inclusive classroom environment.

Thirdly, teachers need to carefully plan the structure and the presentation of the subject material and other exercises. It is advisable to use short and simple lesson plans, shorter exercises and repetition of the key new information. The

lessons should be clearly outlined, thus they might include daily review and weekly review of the new material and always make slight adjustments that will provide additional help for the dyslexic students. The meticulous planning, presentation and adjustment will certainly help satisfy the individual needs of all the students, which also indicates that these activities are helpful not only for dyslexic students but for all the students in the classroom. However, it needs to be acknowledged that certain teachers, especially experienced teachers, are aware of some of these techniques and they apply them regularly without making any connection with the students' difficulties and dyslexia.

Finally, it is of great importance to introduce variable forms of exercises and activities that will suit all students, since dyslexia covers a range of different difficulties expressed through variable degrees of intensity. Teachers should always be aware that dyslexia can be expressed in multiple forms and in order to be able to understand and help a dyslexic child it is important to know how the dyslexia manifests in that particular individual and to what degree (Shurbanovska, 2016, p.210). Therefore, the application of different types of activities and teaching methods will help find a suitable and appropriate form for each student and it will consequently ensure a faster pace toward language fluency.

Dyslexia and language learning

Although dyslexia includes multiple learning difficulties that further vary in type and degree for each student individually, it is still possible to separate the most common disadvantages and use them as a guide to determine if a student is dyslexic or their learning problems derive from a different origin.

In general, the dyslexic learning disadvantages refer to difficulties in pronunciation, spelling and encoding which means that dyslexic students have difficulties in reading, writing, listening and speaking comprehension. These areas that are influenced by the dyslexic learning difficulties are the core areas in language teaching regardless of whether it is a mother tongue or a foreign language. Moreover, if the learning difficulty is not tackled early during the mother tongue acquisition it will further grow into a more complex problem with the foreign language acquisition and ultimately will influence the general academic progress of the student. Hence, it is clear that addressing dyslexia in the educational process is of utmost importance and it is something that cannot and must not be overlooked.

In the initial stage of learning the mother tongue or Macedonian, dyslexic students might present difficulties such as:

- connecting a letter to a sound,
- mixing up letters,
- slow recognition of syllables and words.

In the later stages of the language learning process, the difficulties evolve into:

- slow or inaccurate reading,
- spelling mistakes in writing,
- inability to comprehend longer spoken or written discourse.

However, the degree to which these difficulties are observable in a student can be mild or very low as well. For example, the matching of a letter to a sound would be easier in Macedonian for dyslexic students since each letter stands only for one sound; consequently, this might not be a large obstacle for some dyslexic students. Moreover, sometimes mild dyslexia cannot be observable in the learning of the native language since students are more exposed to the language in every area which eases the learning process, but the learning difficulties will be observable in the foreign language learning process.

In Macedonia, English is introduced as a foreign language as early as primary school. In order to achieve fluency in English the materials provided include numerous and variable resources that should help the student learn and improve their reading, writing, listening and speaking abilities. Due to the variability and specificity of the exercises and materials that are used, the learning difficulties of dyslexic students are exposed and usually more observable. The teaching and learning materials for English as a foreign language are always divided into sections that focus particularly on reading, listening, speaking and writing.

Reading comprehension is very often presented through long texts followed by questions for particular information or vocabulary mentioned in the text. Listening exercises usually involve short but multiple conversations that are again followed by questions for the overall listening activity. Speaking and writing activities often represent short task description that needs to be fulfilled in a particular time frame. Herein, all of the activities in the different sections feature long discourses, a multitude of new words or information and a time frame that create pressure and stress on the dyslexic student, often resulting in unsuccessful response. Therefore, the core change that needs to be employed by teachers is to try to simplify those aspects of the material or i.e., to shorten or section the long discourse, decrease the number of new words and information and create more flexible time for completing the exercises.

In order to respond to all the difficulties that dyslexic students might face, teachers have tried a variety of different methods, teaching strategies and tools. As Rief and Stern (2010) suggested, teachers can help students by adaptations or modifications of the learning materials and testing process, that is to say teachers need to approach the teaching and learning process with a differentiated means of instruction such as: multisensory instruction, choices about topics of study, ways of learning and modes of expression, accommodations and modifications for individual students, varied approaches to lesson presentation etc. (p. 232).

Multisensory teaching instruction includes a combination of direct instruction and the activation of various sensory channels and it is effective for dyslexic students (Gosiewska, 2022, p.74). It is based on the idea that dyslexic students have a greater chance of accessing the curriculum when they are taught using all senses simultaneously. This allows the student to process the information using their strongest senses and at the same time strengthening their weaknesses. According to the International Dyslexia Association, multisensory teaching involves the use of visual, auditory and kinesthetic-tactile pathways simultaneously to enhance memory and learning of written language.

Beside the multisensory method, there are many teaching strategies that can be used to improve a particular part of the language learning process. Crombie (1999) considered mnemonics, analogous reading, modeling and the use of computers and technology as being helpful to all students including dyslexic students. Mnemonics is a strategy of using letters, ideas or associations to remember something; therefore, it is very useful in learning new vocabulary or new information.

Kormos and Smith (2012) introduced some basic principles of teaching vocabulary to students with a special learning disability, which include the following:

- “limited amount of vocabulary in a lesson,
- explicit teaching, extensive practice,
- multi-sensory presentation and practice techniques,
- frequent revision,
- separate the teaching of similar sounding words and words with similar meaning,
- teach sound-meaning correspondence first” (p. 133).

In relation to reading, it is very important to differentiate between word reading ability and reading comprehension. “Word-reading skills are essential to enable reading comprehension to develop, but we have seen from the work on poor comprehenders that successful comprehension does not develop automatically once word reading is in place (Oakhill, Cain, 2019, p.38)”. Students need to acquire word reading skills first and then work on their comprehension abilities and difficulties. As Pelleriti (2018) advised, “they should be asked to demonstrate they are able to look for key information (reading for gist), as opposed to searching for specific content (reading for detail)” (p. 1487).

Some dyslexic students might not have difficulties with comprehension, but with expression of their intended meaning both in speaking and writing. Hence, in relation to writing activities, Pelleriti (2018) suggested that “students should not be penalized for their often-illegible handwriting and/or for spelling mistakes” (p.1488). Hence, the actions that need to be taken with the aim of improving the teaching process refer not only to lessons and lectures, but also to the assessment process.

An important tool that can be used to improve all these aspects that cause difficulties for dyslexic students and to provide them with additional help after the official lessons or lectures is IT. The information technology devices and the internet are inseparable parts of contemporary teaching and represent a useful advantage for dyslexic students. They can be used to obtain clear visual presentation, repetitive auditory activities, memory activities, sound and photo connections, sequencing, pronunciation, reading and listening repetitions, etc. Also, all of the additional activities and resources can be made available at all times through the internet.

It is clear that there are many methods, strategies and activities that can contribute positively to language teaching and to the educational process in general. The key factor is the teacher and the teacher’s ability to facilitate the appropriate teaching process for all students including dyslexic students.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that dyslexia is a learning difficulty and consequently an educational problem. The core influential factor in the improvement of the educational process for dyslexic students is the teacher. A complete integration of dyslexic students in the educational process can be conducted only by teachers that are aware of and educated on the topic of dyslexia. The complete integration procedure that teachers need to fulfil includes the following actions:

- discover the individual learning difficulties of their students,
- teach the students how to learn and find their own learning style,
- use different strategies to transfer their knowledge which will consequently improve and accelerate the students' learning abilities,
- create an inclusive environment,
- use IT devices as additional helpful tools.

In summary, the solution for the dyslexic difficulties of students is the teacher's ability to facilitate an inclusive and integrated environment, choose and apply a combination of teaching methods and strategies that suit the students' needs.

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ГОД. VII
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ПАЛІМПСЕСТ

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VOL. VII
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