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TOWARDS EFFECTIVE FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING: FOCUS ON DYSLEXIA

This paper aims to overview the problems faced by dyslexic students learning a foreign language in the theoretical framework of foreign language teaching methodology (Berninger and Wolf 2009, Crombie 2010, Stasiak 2004, etc.) and psychology (Gardner 1983, 1999, Bogdanowicz 2002, 2004, Davis 1997, etc) The author of the paper is going to prove that dyslexic students benefit from the use of multisensory techniques (VAK) which stimulate their learning process by engaging students at multiple levels of perception. Special attention is given to the nature of dyslexia, its types and handicaps it results in. Numerous solutions to the problem are presented and analysed within the framework of Gardner's theory of Multiple Intelligences (MIT), which seeks to explore each student's strong intelligences to deal with those weaker ones. Accordingly, dyslexic students and their teachers should be challenged to recognise the hidden potential of dyslexia and see it as a gift to be explored. Moreover, the importance of safe classroom environment has been stressed, as once a dyslexic student feels comfortable in the classroom, the teacher can equip him with a range of techniques and strategies to deal with dyslexia successfully. In addition, a significant role of the teacher and parents in the process of teaching dyslexics is discussed. Finally, the author of the paper gives a number of practical tips how to deal with dyslexia and proves that foreign language teaching (FLT) can be both effective and enjoyable for those who encounter this handicap.

KEY WORDS: dyslexia, foreign language teaching, learner-based instructions, low-stress environment, multi-sensory stimulation, motivation.

Introduction

The introduction of a humanistic approach in the 60s of the 20th century launched a new trend in foreign language teaching (FLT). Conventional methods of teaching were replaced by a number of innovative methods which highlighted the importance of

perceiving each student as a "whole person" with a unique psychological background and physical environment. A new way of teaching stressed the importance of learner-based instructions and low-stress classroom settings. Consequently, to meet those requirements, foreign language teachers were

forced to update their teaching routine patterns by enriching them with a new insight. Although recently much research has been done into the ways of individual learning styles and strategies, the problem of dyslexia among foreign language learners has been given too little consideration. Teachers tend to underestimate the scale and scope of the problem blaming dyslexia upon students' laziness and carelessness.

The word "dyslexia" comes from Greek and means "difficulty with words or language". According to Medilexicon's medical dictionary, dyslexia is defined as an "impaired reading ability with a competence level below that expected on the basis of the person's level of intelligence, and in the presence of normal vision, letter recognition, and recognition of the meaning of pictures and objects."¹ Nowadays dyslexia is commonly accepted as an official term defining specific learning difficulties. Indeed, dyslexic learners are those who give a hard time both for teachers and parents because the nature of their problems is not yet well-known and understood. Sad but true is the fact that many dyslexic pupils have extraordinary talents and a huge potential that is never discovered. In his book entitled "The Gift of Dyslexia", Ronald D. Davis (1997, p. 4) claims that people with dyslexia have a greater potential due to their mental function that causes dyslexia: "The mental function that causes dyslexia is a gift in the truest sense of the word: a natural ability, a talent. It is something special that enhances the individual". This point highlights the importance of an early recognition of dyslexia in children so that they can be

properly approached and directed in the teaching process.

Since 1942, there has been a rapid development of numerous strategies and techniques to cope with dyslexia which has resulted in numerous scientific publications and hands-on courses. Dyslexia is no longer marginalized considering a growing number of dyslexic learners: recognizable forms of dyslexia are present in 10 % of children in the Western population; around 1 1/3 million children in Britain and almost 6 million in North America have difficulty with their first language (Hornsby 1992, p. 12). Given this, there arises a need to approach the problem collectively by uniting researchers, psychologists, teachers, parents, and dyslexic learners.

Dyslexia versus foreign language teaching

A primary role of every school is to create appropriate conditions to support children's learning by equipping them with a range of skills necessary to become full members of the society. While modern schools are challenged to recognize each student as an individual with a unique social and psychological background and a collection of different intelligences, the reality is far from the ideal (Gardner 1999, p. 193). Much too often schools are organized as if all students were the same – learners who cannot read and write well are perceived as failures and their slow progress is blamed upon their inattentiveness and laziness. Unable to keep pace with the rest of the class, many of them strive through their school years being labelled as lazy, clumsy and careless students, the ones who will "amount to nothing..."

In 1983 Howard Gardner challenged the traditional definition of intelligence by

¹ <http://www.medilexicon.com/medicaldictionary.php> (accessed on April 7, 2011)

pointing out that limiting “intelligence” to the abilities of logical thinking and spatial orientation – the skills which are primarily measured in traditional IQ tests – is erroneous. He proposed a theory of *Multiple Intelligences* (MIT), according to which there are basically 8 types of intelligences (logical-mathematical, linguistic, spatial, bodily-kinaesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, musical, and naturalistic). Every individual has a unique collection of intelligences which are developed throughout one’s life. What is more, Gardner (1999, p. 183) claims that people can use their strong intelligences to enhance their weaker ones. The appearance of MIT was revolutionary, bringing a new dawn for educational systems all over the world: syllabuses based on individual learners’ profiles have emerged paving the way to alternative approaches where mathematics is taught to pupils with strong musical intelligence through music and foreign languages are learned through bodily-kinaesthetic intelligence, etc. Indeed, MIT is revolutionary as it provides for an individualized way of teaching where each student is motivated to learn (Botwina 2010, pp. 17–18). Fortunately, more and more schools start introducing MIT in their practice, which brings good news for students with different disabilities, dyslexic children being among them.

Nowadays the broad term of dyslexia is divided into *developmental dyslexia* and *acquired dyslexia*. Acquired dyslexia applies to conditions where adults lose their mastery of language due to some brain damage (Bogdanowicz 2004, p. 43). This paper will exclusively concentrate on developmental dyslexia, which will be understood in the sense of M. Bogdanowicz (2004, p. 44) namely as learning difficulties which appear

from the very beginning of school education. V. M. Berninger and B. J. Wolf (2009, p. 110) differentiate three types of developmental dyslexia: **phonological dyslexia, dysgraphic dyslexia, and orthographic dyslexia/dysorthographia**. These types of developmental dyslexia are diagnosed on the basis of special diagnosis tests which measure not only the scale and scope of dyslexia of the children who are already recognized as dyslexic but also identify those students who are potentially endangered.

Maria Bogdanowicz (2002, p. 43) has introduced the term “risk of dyslexia” which suggests that, if diagnosed early, a child with the risk of dyslexia may be directed with a special consideration of the areas of potential difficulties. The term applies to “younger children who display selective disorders in their psychokinetic development, conditioning the appearance of specific problems in reading and writing. [...] the term can also be used with a reference to the schoolchildren who encounter their first intensive problems at school despite their overall level of intelligence, well-functioning senses and proper care received both at home and at school” (Bogdanowicz 2002, p. 43). Specially designed questionnaires evaluate gross motor skills, fine motor skills, speech and auditory functions as well as orientation and concentration abilities (vision, reading, spelling, hearing, speaking, writing, balance and movement and memory, problems with single word decoding, spoonerism, sequencing, trouble telling the time, and physical clumsiness). Once the risk of dyslexia is diagnosed, teachers may equip themselves with a number of strategies and techniques to approach it successfully.

Based on the assumption that dyslexic children normally manage to cope with

the spoken and listening aspects of their first language, there should not be any reason why they would not learn a foreign language. On the other hand, “each case of dyslexia is different” because “dyslexia is a self-created condition” (Davis 1997, pp. 4–6). This highlights the importance of an individualized programme for dyslexic children also in foreign language classrooms. Margaret Crombie (1999, p. 3) argues: “One dilemma which we face 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 students of what may prove to be a worthwhile and satisfactory learning experience. All young people are not the same, and all dyslexic young people are not the same!”² This suggests that each dyslexic child should be treated individually.

Although teaching a foreign language to dyslexic children is different from teaching it to students without any disorders in a number of respects, Halina Stasiak (2004, p. 11–14) claims that dyslexic children can become equally successful at foreign language learning as their peers without dyslexia. What is important, is to recognize the special difficulties that dyslexics face and choose teaching methods and techniques accordingly. Moreover, it is important to keep an appropriate sequence of learning language skills. Since listening seems to be the least problematic skill for dyslexic students, it seems reasonable to base the learning process on this skill as the first skill, whereas speaking, reading and writing should succeed it in this process.

Another troublesome area is the problem with concentration encountered by dyslexic learners, which may cause learning difficulties in a foreign language classroom. Consequently, the teacher who works with dyslexic children should use repetition of the learned material: students should be asked to repeat single words and whole expressions as many times as it is needed. The materials used should be friendly in terms of colours and layout. Dyslexic children benefit from the use of colourful pictures, glossy paper, colourful crayons, etc. As dyslexic children’s span of attention is limited, teachers should introduce many short breaks during lessons to let dyslexic children relax. Above all, when working with dyslexic children, teachers should use *multi-sensory stimulation* which involves the use of all means in the process of learning (Reid 2005, pp. 63–70).

Based on a combination of aural, visual, tactile, and kinaesthetic aspects, multi-sensory stimulation aims at the improvement of the learning process and is successfully used with different types of learners. In other words, multi-sensory teaching techniques and strategies stimulate learning by engaging students at multiple levels of perception. What is more, not only does it emphasize a direct way of teaching but it also maintains student-teacher interaction by suggesting that the content ought to be mastered so that a student gives an automatic response.³ For example, while learning the alphabet, dyslexic students are asked to imagine the letter A, write it in the air and say its name and sound – all actions are done simultaneously. In a foreign language classroom, the use of

² [Http://www.languageswithoutlimits.co.uk/resources/Dxa1.pdf](http://www.languageswithoutlimits.co.uk/resources/Dxa1.pdf) (accessed on March 10, 2011)

³ <http://www.dys-add.com/teach.html> (accessed on April 7, 2011)

multi-sensory teaching involves stimulating visual reasoning and learning. During the teaching process, the teacher should introduce the following means: visual aids such as classroom realia, pictures, posters, models, etc. Computers and overhead projectors should become the media through which the material is introduced, practised and revised. Pronunciation problems should be dealt with by the means of films, video, multi-image-media, finger spelling and sign spelling. Poor spelling should be coped with by introducing the use of markers and highlighters, clay alphabet, and drawings (Reid 2005, p. 69). Dyslexic students also benefit from revising the same information in different ways which will allow to direct the items from the short-term memory to the long-term memory. The following activities may be used: searching for keywords in the text; singing nursery rhymes; free-writing; putting flashcards with syllables into words and reading the words aloud (Reid 2005, p. 70).

Moreover, activities designed for FLT should be based on Gardner's MIT. Practising their linguistic skills through the intelligences they can boast of, dyslexic students should be introduced with a great variety of exercises involving the use of different intelligences which will result in their creative and effective learning of a foreign language. What is more, their level of motivation will increase due to their active engagement and devotion (Botwina 2010, p. 18).

The importance of the teacher and the classroom environment

While dyslexia seems to be one of the serious obstacles encountered in the process of learning, many teachers minimize the problem blaming it on children's careless-

ness and laziness. Understanding the nature of dyslexia is essential both for teachers and learners, for once the teacher knows how to approach a student with dyslexia, the dyslexic learner will become a successful learner. The role of teachers working with dyslexic learners is to recognize the problems faced by dyslexic students and introduce an appropriate syllabus and create successful class environment. It is necessary to highlight here that acquiring a great amount of knowledge about a dyslexic learner is the factor that will lead towards the child's later success. Consequently, teachers should collect as much information about a dyslexic child, his family, friends and environment as possible (Reid 2005, p. 63). Whenever a dyslexic child is confident that the teacher is aware of the nature of the learner's difficulties, s/he is eager to actively participate in the foreign language lesson and face new challenges.

Moreover, teachers should remember that dyslexic students tend to have a low self-esteem. Teachers should remember that a word of praise may do miracles in motivating dyslexics to try harder despite their handicaps. What is more, building strong relationships between classmates will result in strong ties between students in class where the success of a dyslexic student will become the success of the rest of the class. Above all, discussing the nature of dyslexia with students affected by it and showing its negative and positive sides will enhance students' performance. Ronald D. Davis (1997, p. 4) notices: "to change our perspective of dyslexia from disability to gift we must start with a clear, accurate understanding of what dyslexia really is, and what causes it. Doing this will bring out positive as well as the negative aspects of the situation and allow us to

see how dyslexia develops. [...] Going a step beyond correcting the problem, we can recognise and explore this condition as the gift it truly is." Hopefully, dyslexic students will learn to accept their disabilities and handle them successfully in their learning process.

Conclusions

In conclusion, it is necessary to highlight that the actual state of research done into the nature of dyslexia allows making the process of teaching dyslexic children effective and enjoyable both for teachers and learners. Dyslexia should no longer be seen as a constraint but rather as a challenge

emphasising the importance of a collective work done by teachers, parents and dyslexic learners. A constant widening of teachers' knowledge about the nature of dyslexia will certainly help to domesticate the problem. Additionally, maximizing the chances of students' multi-sensory perception and building a safe classroom environment will allow dyslexic students to accept their constraints and learn how to cope with dyslexia successfully in the process of foreign language learning. Undoubtedly, the benefits will be numerous and result in enthusiastic foreign language learners and creative foreign language teachers.

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TOWARDS EFFECTIVE FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING: FOCUS ON DYSLEXIA**Summary**

Contemporary foreign language teaching methodology is on a constant lookout for innovative methods to be implemented in foreign language classrooms. Being based on the individualized approach, such methods cater for different learning profiles and appeal to students with different learning disabilities. For a long time, students suffering from dyslexia were perceived as the ones “who will amount to nothing”. As a result, much too often dyslexics struggled throughout their school years being considered as lazy, slow, and hopeless students. Nowadays, the situation has changed dramatically due to intense research in the field of learning disabilities as well as their types and nature. The nature of dyslexia and the handicaps it results in have been thoroughly studied and discussed. As a result, dyslexics as well as their teachers and parents are equipped with the sound knowledge of how to deal with it successfully. What is more, they are challenged to discover a hidden potential of dyslexia, which brings a new dimension to the process of teaching dyslexics.

This paper aims at an overview of the problems faced by dyslexic students in learning a foreign language in the theoretical framework of foreign language teaching methodology (Berninger and Wolf 2009, Crombie 2010, Stasiak 2004, etc.) and psychology (Gardner 1983, 1999, Bogdanowicz 2002, 2004, Davis 1997, etc) The author of the paper intends to prove that dyslexic students benefit from the use of multisensory techniques (VAK) which stimulate their learning process by engaging students at multiple levels of perception. Special attention is given to the nature of dyslexia, its types and handicaps it results in. Numerous solutions to the problem are presented and analysed within the framework of Gardner's theory of Multiple Intelligences (MIT), which seeks to explore each student's strong intelligences to deal with those weaker ones. Accordingly, dyslexic students and their teachers should be challenged to recognise the hidden potential of dyslexia and see it as a gift to be explored. Moreover, the importance of a safe classroom environment has been stressed, for once a dyslexic student feels comfortable in the classroom, the teacher can equip him with a range of techniques and strategies to deal with dyslexia successfully. What is more, a significant role of the teacher and parents in the process of teaching dyslexics is discussed. Finally, the author of the paper gives a number of practical tips how to deal with dyslexia and proves that FLT can be both effective and enjoyable for those who encounter this handicap.

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