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TEACHING LEARNERS WITH DYSLEXIA IN JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL OF POLAND

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НАВЧАННЯ УЧНІВ З ДИСЛЕКСІЄЮ У СЕРЕДНІЙ ШКОЛІ ПОЛЬЩІ

Стаття присвячена проблемі навчання учнів з дислексією в інтегрованих класах середньої школи при вивченні англійської мови. Навчання учнів з дислексією вимагає децю інших дидактичних методів. Запропоновано програму підтримки учнів з дислексією на обов'язкових уроках англійської мови. При підготовці до занять з учнями з різним рівнем знань використано літературу, присвячену проблемам навчання дітей з дислексією. Представлено результати педагогічної роботи в експериментальній групі і методичні рекомендації для вчителів англійської мови.

Ключові слова: інтегровані класи, дислексія, симптоми, учні, дислексик, Польща.

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ОБУЧЕНИЕ УЧАЩИХСЯ С ДИСЛЕКСИЕЙ В СРЕДНЕЙ ШКОЛЕ ПОЛЬШЕ

Статья посвящена проблеме обучения учащихся с дислексией в интегрированных классах средней школы при изучении английского языка. Обучение учащихся с дислексией требует несколько других дидактических методов. Предложено программу поддержки учащихся с дислексией на обязательных уроках английского языка. При подготовке к занятиям с учениками с разным уровнем знаний использовано литературу, посвященную проблемам обучения детей с дислексией. Представлены результаты педагогической работы в экспериментальной группе и методические рекомендации для учителей английского языка.

Ключевые слова: интеграционные классы, дислексия, симптомы, ученики, дислексик, Польша.

Introduction

Some dyslexics claim that dyslexia is the total inability to read and write and profess that they are notable to trigger the memory of symbols and their connections in various configurations. For dyslexics already known words might seem to be obscure. As far as reading is concerned, even if they read aloud or fluently speak the words, they see no sense in the text. They must repeat the sentence several times to find its meaning.

Researchers point out that dyslexia is defined as a disorder manifesting as difficulties in learning how to read, even though the child is taught in accordance with accepted principles and methods of teaching.

In an article by Leiguarda it is stated that teenagers learn differently from children and adults. They can be moody, sleepy, rebellious and usually hard to motivate [2]. According to motivation, teenagers are hard to motivate, not just because they are going through adolescence, but because the way in which their brain works influences the way that they learn. In their teenage years students undergo much more than the obvious physical and emotional changes. Children are often self-centered (egocentric) in their thinking. Children of this age are quite simply convinced their beliefs are correct. They do not understand beliefs are the result of a thinking process and can be arrived at differently. They assume that their beliefs are correct and that these are the only beliefs held and shared by all people. If they learn new information that contradicts their beliefs, they will find a way to integrate that information into their beliefs rather than alter them. An example is a child who believes in Santa will interpret a forbidden glimpse of mother wrapping Christmas presents as mother's attempt to help out overworked Santa.

Leiguarda has drawn attention to the fact that teenagers find it difficult to engage in activities that will be profitable in the long run if they do not appeal to them in the short term. When trying to learn a language, for instance, adults will participate in activities and exercises even when they do not enjoy them. In contrast, teenagers may not participate at all. For that reason, if teachers want to draw their teenage students' attention to what they want to teach, they have to make it emotionally relevant for them by presenting and practicing topics in new ways. A boring environment has a thinning effect on the brain's cortex. Furthermore, if the environment is not challenging and interactive, the brain's cortex does not only fail to develop properly but also shrinks. Thus, teachers should try to motivate learners, for instance fight with sleepy students, empower students, help students to find answers to the questions which they may have [2].

In an article by Moreno it is reported that most teenagers claim that teachers tend to take too much upon themselves during the teaching process [3, p. 52]. To change this, they could share the responsibility and involve the learners more in discipline and motivation by negotiating with them. For

discipline, a classroom contract could be drawn up, with ideas from the learners and agreed penalties, and signed by learners and teacher alike. In order, to improve motivation, learners could be involved in choosing activities. In both cases, learners would be investing something of themselves in the class and would therefore be taking some responsibility. Learners could be asked to give feedback on their own learning and on the teacher's teaching, which demands that the teacher be a good listener, flexible and understanding «If we want to draw our teenage students' attention to what we want to teach, we have to make it emotionally relevant for them» [2, p. 9].

The symptoms of dyslexia

Spionek presents the causes and mechanism of perceiving of specific difficulties in reading and writing. She distinguishes 5 concepts about dyslexia: *organic concept* which sees the causes of dyslexia in micro-damages to the central nervous system which appear in childhood. It is claimed that dyslexia might be caused by preservatives, alcohol, prolonged labor or asphyxia. Furthermore, *genetic concept* sees that dyslexia is genetically determined; *emotional concept* is focused on the influence of a child's emotional life which might be responsible for dyslexia [5]. Furthermore, Spionek distinguishes *hormonal concept*, which is defined as overproduction of testosterone in the prenatal period that disrupts the body's immune system and leads to a block to the development of the left hemisphere of the brain, which is responsible for reading. Additionally, Spionek presents *linguistic concept* which is responsible for poorly developed language skills [5].

The difference in learning between dyslexic and non-dyslexic

The Polish Ministry of Education gives specific clues on how to work with dyslexics, especially for teachers who will teach mixed-ability groups. Dyslexics should sit near the teacher; it helps the teacher to observe them; teachers should not ask them to read aloud; there should be opportunities for reading books with parents at home where parents would supervise them. As for reading, teachers should encourage dyslexic to read comics, if necessary teachers should put new words on the blackboard with their spelling, dyslexics should rewrite new word more than once, every dyslexic should have guarantee to use a dictionary, they should have them on their desks. A teacher should explain their mistakes if they made such. Lessons should be based on practical communication in everyday life, during the test dyslexics should have more time than others from the same class and teachers should involve their emotion during the lesson.

Nijakowska claims that the process of learning a foreign language is analogous to the acquisition of the mother tongue. Therefore, if students exhibit any problems with their first language, they will have difficulty in learning the second. Such a situation occurs in the case of dyslexics. Frequently, these problems are manifested at the phonological level. She argues that the key to

success is to teach directly, rather than intuitively, the relationship between sound and letter [4].

Memorization of vocabulary and dyslexia

Bremner suggests stimulating a teenager's brain by: using authentic materials, asking questions to keep attentive, reading loudly, non-competitive games, using computers, using pictures and multi-media material, sticking spelling of words anywhere in view, looking at pictures in a book before reading, playing games e.g. work in pairs to improve memory, drawing mind maps, using good visual software, crosswords, matching definition with words. Bremner suggests some exercises for dyslexics, for instance: writing stories, developing of stories on the base of introduction, writing stories on the base of given topics, working on synonyms and antonyms, working on adjectives, verbs, nouns, adverbs, making rhymes, working on some pictures, gradation of adjectives, creating dialogues, rebuses and creating a family of words [1].

Many teachers complain that they have problems dealing with mixed-ability classes. This section attempts to provide suggestions for dealing with mixed-ability classes.

Bremner claims that it is important to make a clear distinction between mixed-ability teaching and mixed-ability classes. Most teachers have to teach mixed-ability groups but they may not be aware of using mixed-ability teaching strategies. He appeals to some researchers who suggest that teachers need to recognize that a class is by default a mixed-ability group because children have different strengths and weaknesses and develop at different rates and teachers cannot treat them the same as learners who are mentally healthy. Dyslexics have different preferences for learning and organizing work in the classroom. A mixed-ability class displays a range of abilities, learning styles and preferences. All learners' strengths will be demonstrated at different times, which depends on the topic studied and the learning style used. When learners are working out with their preferred learning style, they will perform better. All classes, even those that have been set, are mixed ability to a certain degree. Therefore, the following strategies are valid for all classes [1].

Nijkowska promotes effective methods of teaching foreign languages to mixed-ability groups, especially in the light of the recent decrees of the Minister of Education, which regulate the position of students with developmental dyslexia in the Polish education. Whether students with developmental dyslexia will have the opportunity to acquire skills so desirable in a multi-lingual society of the united Europe as foreign languages, largely depends on the sensitivity and awareness of their teachers. Learners with developmental dyslexia language learners can stand in the face of demands which are unable to cope with. Frustration and disappointment due to failure can be avoided by using appropriate methods, techniques and materials, which learning can transform learning into a source of joy and satisfaction [4]. Nijkowska claims

that teachers who are able to individualize the approach to the student and are aware of the causes of the difficulties experienced by people with developmental dyslexia can become contributors to their success in learning foreign languages [4].

Techniques in teaching vocabulary to dyslexics and non-dyslexics

In order to learn words learners use a range of strategies. Some of these can be called *cognitive*: they are direct mental operations which are concerned with working on new words in order to understand, categorize, and store them in the mental lexicon; for instance, making associations, learning words in groups, exploring range of meaning, using keywords, encountering an unfamiliar word and engaging in lexical inference in order to try to establish its meaning, deducing from syntactic structure that the word is an adjective, dividing the word into its parts and looking for a similar word in his/her first language.

Some other strategies are called *metacognitive*. They are not direct mental operations but indirect strategies which facilitate learning by actively involving the learner in conscious efforts to remember new words; for instance, consciously collecting words from authentic contexts, making word cards, categorizing words into list, reactivating vocabulary in internal dialogue.

Another item which needs to be taught is the collocations typical of particular items which make a particular combination sound right or wrong in a given context. Learners should be taught aspects of meaning such as denotation, connotation, appropriateness or meaning relationship.

For teachers it is easier to teach a group of learners who are healthy rather than teaching a mixed-ability group. In Section 1 there are some examples of how to deal with teaching in such a class.

Bremner points out that teachers should use or draw colourful flashcards or make up differentiated worksheets. As an alternative approach, he suggests focusing on helping learners to become more effective learners. In some schools teachers use a variety of teaching methods and share the purposes of lessons and activities with learners in order to give them some clues. Furthermore, pupils may be given interesting and challenging tasks to complete co-operatively in groups. A mixed-ability class can only be effectively taught if the teacher accepts that every lesson cannot be treated as whole class teaching, with lessons controlled from the front [1].

Bremner suggests that teaching a mixed-ability class will work if all learners are allowed to experience success and to learn as individuals and to work as individuals. It will help teacher to have a clear view of the class. This is less likely to happen if teachers insist on whole class teaching. It is unrealistic to expect that any group of learners whatever the ability, will work through a body of work at exactly the same pace. Two-thirds of pupils will be working out of their learning style unless the type of task is varied: some learners do not achieve their potential because they are confused.

Claims that learners cannot overcome blocks to learning if they have not learnt how to learn. It is essential that teachers should act as role models for learning and teach learners how to become independent and effective learners. Learners need to be taught learning techniques in order to be resourceful, they will be more motivated if they understand the aim of a lesson and have some input. It is teachers' responsibility to guide them [1].

Bremner suggests that teachers should get to know the pupils' names and if possible one fact about them e.g. their hobby, make learners aware about the different learning styles, teach them techniques for learning new work that cover the visual, auditory and kinaesthetic modes of learning which are likely for them, make sure that the whole group is aware of the aim of the lesson and what learners are expected to achieve by the end of the lesson. Claims that every teacher should teach how to be resourceful so that they know where to find help if they get stuck, learners could be involve in the learning process and choose the order of the topics, perhaps such learners could have an opportunity to work individually, in pairs and in groups. Learners with some difficulties manifest their understanding in different ways i.e. a visual representation, an oral presentation or physical demonstration, thus they need to be given problem-solving tasks and have the opportunity to transfer their knowledge to a new context [1].

Furthermore, teachers are responsible for encouraging stronger students to create their own dictionary of new vocabulary and to add to it by including synonyms and/or antonyms for each word.

Other techniques in teaching mixed-ability learners is using students' definitions for new vocabulary and/or use a monolingual dictionary to find definitions. Weaker students might want to add illustrations. Students with dyslexia find reading very difficult so they need help with correcting written sentences. Thus they teacher need to allow them to read the sentences aloud and then ask the class to correct each one. In this way students can focus on correcting the mistakes by ear. It is also helpful to do pair work in which a student without dyslexia reads out the sentences and a student with dyslexia corrects them. Less confident students can look for and underline the ending of nouns in questions as this will remind them that they need to use *a* or *any* before these words. Fast finishers can create more questions from other nouns in the activity.

Conception of the quasi-experiment

According to what has been presented in the theoretical consideration by the author of the project the teaching of vocabulary to mixed-ability learners could be effective in junior high school. A quasi-experiment was conducted in a mixed-ability group of lower secondary school which comprised dyslexics [6].

The subjects were children, aged fourteen, most of whom had been learning English at school for nine years. The lessons were conducted in a group of fifteen pupils. The main aim of the quasi-experiment was to teach

vocabulary to a mixed-ability group, so that both dyslexic and non-dyslexic would have an opportunity to learn and increase their knowledge. The dependent variables of the observation was the amount of vocabulary learnt, as well as the learners' opinions (both of the dyslexic and the non-dyslexic) about the activities implemented in the quasi-experimental lessons and the work mode used by the teacher. The independent variables were the techniques in teaching/learning vocabulary used by dyslexics and non-dyslexics which the present author implemented. The researcher resort to such techniques as: physical demonstration, verbal explanation, synonyms, translation, pointing to objects, using visual aids such as mounted magazines pictures or blackboard drawings, using antonyms, or asking learners to use dictionaries. Furthermore, pupils were given interesting and challenging tasks to complete co-operatively in groups. The present author use techniques for learning new vocabulary that cover the visual, auditory and kinesthetic models of learning which is likely for dyslexics.

Three lessons were conducted, during the first and the last one the learners completed questionnaires: the pre-questionnaire was supposed to provide data about the students and their experience in learning English while the post-questionnaire was administered in order to verify the students' attitude to learning in a mixed-ability group. Afterwards, the researcher presented a presentation based on dyslexia in order to specify the disability. The presentation covered such terms as: developmental dyslexia, dysorthography and dysgraphia. The diagram distinguished types of dyslexia, factors affecting its development and types of learning difficulties which it brings about. From the presentation the learners had an opportunity to learn about famous dyslexics.

Subjects

The sample group consisted of six boys and nine girls, 8 declared to attend private classes in English, whereas 7 learners declared they did not, 5 learners claimed to spend roughly 4 – 5 hours a week learning English, the same number declared to work on English about 1 – 3 hours, 4 pupils spent 6 – 7 hours, whereas only one of the learners devoted more than 7 hours a week to English. The number of the learners who declared that they liked learning English was 8 in comparison to 7 learners who were not in favor of English, 7 pupils claimed that they learnt English because it is a compulsory subject, 5 learners indicated that they derived pleasure from learning English. What is more, at least 3 of the learners associated their future with English, they considered English useful for them in the future. The following question dealt with the subject's motivation, the results reflected that the motivation was at a high level. In the following question the learners answered that they pair work was their favorite learning technique, and only 6 pupils declared to favour individual work individually or group work. As for the marks, 9 learners declared that they scored 3 or 4 at the end of the second term, whereas 6 claimed to have scored a 5 or a 6.

Afterwards, the subjects were asked questions pertaining to vocabulary learning. For instance, 3 learners declared that they did not enjoy studying new vocabulary, 8 considered vocabulary easy to learn, and 4 pupils did not specify their decision. More than half (7 learners) learnt vocabulary regularly, whereas 8 of the subjects claimed to learn new vocabulary only before tests. The learners answered that their English lessons were focused mostly on vocabulary. In the last question they declared to have difficulty in spelling rather than pronunciation [6].

Procedure

The present researcher conducted three lessons in the mixed-ability group, before the lessons the author ran the fifteen-minute pre-observation questionnaire and the lessons were followed by the final test and the post-observation questionnaire (for both dyslexics and non-dyslexics) relating to the students' attitude towards the lessons conducted. What is more, during the third meeting the subjects watched a presentation about dyslexia in order to expand their knowledge about it.

Both lessons were conducted in the learners' mother tongue and in a foreign language. The author came to the conclusion that the learners' mother tongue was necessary, especially for the dyslexics, it helped them to understand what they were required to do during the lessons. The present researcher used Polish to translate some words or sentences or while giving instructions, which was also supposed to increase the effectiveness of learning.

During the quasi-experiment all of the learners in the group were present. The whole group was active, polite, they preferred the teacher's tasks, which affected the pace of work. Wherever they had any doubts, they politely asked for clarification and assistance.

In first meeting the learners were asked to fill in the pre-observation questionnaire. The class teacher ran the traditional lesson and the last fifteen minutes was devoted to the questionnaire, yet the learners spent about twenty minutes on that activity.

Conclusions

The results of the test and the final questionnaire indicated that in a mixed-ability group both dyslexics and non-dyslexics may have an opportunity to achieve knowledge. After the quasi-experiment, the present author analysed the data gathered. The data led the present researcher to the conclusion that in a mixed-ability group, if the learners are involved, fewer difficulties may be encountered by dyslexics. The aim of the quasi-experimental lessons was fulfilled as the results of the final test indicated that both the dyslexics and non-dyslexics were successful and managed to memorize the vocabulary items taught. Moreover, the results of the post-observation questionnaire presented that most of the learners were aware that games and pictures had accelerated their memorization.

Furthermore, one of the learners behaved appropriately, he disturbed during the lesson, laughed, talked, and he was reprimanded by the present teacher. The researcher observed that the problems encountered during the lesson did not only relate to the types of learning but also to class discipline.

The results gained in the singular quasi-experiment may not be sufficiently reliable because of the time restriction and the limited number of the participants, which leads to the conclusion that the present quasi-experiment could be treated as a pilot study and the issue requires further investigation.

Finally, the present teacher would like to concentrate on selected weak points of the quasi-experiment which might have had an impact on the results of the final test. Subsequently, implications for EFL teachers that were inferred from the quasi-experiment will be demonstrated.

Weak points

There were number of factors that might have had an influence on the validity observation conducted and the conclusions drawn on its basis.

The first factor that might have affected the results of the quasi-experiment was the time limit to the quasi-research were the reasons, as a result of which the present author could not afford to estimate the subjects' levels of proficiency. The present writer depended only on an interview with the subjects' regular English teacher, who estimated their command of English.

A second disadvantage was that individual learners' levels of proficiency varied in the group, which was probably caused by the fact that some of the students attended private lessons, that is why it was hard to conduct the lesson to the same rhythm for each learners. Particular students needed more time than the others to do the activity. The present author assumes that not every student had the opportunity to practice the strategies presented sufficiently.

Another weak points of the quasi-experiment was the number of the lessons conducted. The present teacher carried out only three lessons. It was not sufficient amount, since the present author was not able to observe the subjects' behavior during the regular lessons. Therefore, it was impossible to check whether the problems perceived during the quasi-experiment had appeared previously.

All the students appreciated the selected activities and they did concede them as interesting. The present writer would like to draw attention to the fact that all of the activities utilized were self-made and they did not come from any book. The quality of the material might have affected the students' involvement in the lessons.

Implications for the ELT classroom

The quasi-experiment produced evidence that the use of techniques in teaching a mixed-ability group during a vocabulary-based lesson could be of real aid in teaching vocabulary to young learners. Nevertheless, numerous problems could appear while using them in the classroom and teachers should know how to deal with difficulties as well as how to avoid possible problems.

First of all, it is necessary for a teacher to plan carefully which techniques to choose for a mixed-ability group. While making a decision whether or not to use a particular activity he/she should be aware of its applicability. Thus, the teacher is responsible for determining its appropriateness as well as obliged to consider carefully the time necessary for the completion of the activity. Furthermore, the teacher is responsible for taking under consideration students' problems, for instance in reading and writing.

It is also advisable that the teacher creates a friendly atmosphere during the lesson. The teacher has to remember that dyslexia is a disorder which is responsible for students' problems in learning.

Furthermore, some students need more time than others to finish the task, which may cause discipline problems and affect the lesson. This may be resolved by adjusting the level of difficulty of a particular activity. In that way, teachers would avoid boredom as well as disruptive behavior at lessons. Another solution to the problem may be the preparation of more exercises so as to distribute them to the students who finish their tasks earlier. It might be a good solution to establish general rules of behaving, which can be written on a poster and kept on the classroom wall. These rules should be clearly explained to the learners and the students ought to.

Teachers should take advantage of the learners' natural eagerness to speak and encourage children to speak in English rather than trying to prevent them from communicating normally with each other.

Additionally, the present researcher came to the conclusion that if the level of the noise increases, it might be appropriate to apply a short activity that would calm down the class, for instance the class might play a short game.

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