Identifying the training needs of EFL teachers in teaching children with dyslexia

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Abstract

The study aims to provide a descriptive account of the training needs of EFL teachers who face the challenge of teaching dyslexic students within the mainstream classroom in primary education. A total of ninety-four EFL teachers employed in Northern Greece participated in the pilot study. A questionnaire, constructed on the basis of a review of the relevant literature was used. The findings indicated that the teachers had only limited awareness in dealing with dyslexic student in the EFL classroom. However, they stated their interest for INSET courses in order to become equipped with further knowledge and skills and be able to teach dyslexic students more effectively in an inclusive way.

Keywords: Dyslexia and EFL; teachers’ training needs; primary education;

1. Introduction

An analysis of the word ‘dyslexia’, which comes from Ancient Greek, into its constituent parts, ‘dys’ which means ‘difficulty with’ and ‘lexis’ meaning ‘words’, refers to difficulty with words and has come to describe children and adults who have some deficits in reading and writing (Schneider & Crombie, 2003, ix). However, dyslexia is no longer viewed merely as a deficiency but rather as a learning difference which also involves strengths (Ranaldi, 2003). According to Peer (1999), dyslexia can be described “as a combination of abilities and difficulties which affect the learning process in one or more of reading, spelling, and writing” (p.61).

Dyslexia is a problem commonly identified at all educational levels, and is faced by a significant percentage of the student population. Learning modern foreign languages is indicated as probably the most challenging task for dyslexic students justified on the basis of the discrepancy of the ability of dyslexics to cope with the tasks demanded in their effort to learn the target language (Crombie, 1995). It was pointed out that the difficulty of learning a foreign language such as English can be rooted in the nature of the skills involved such as the sequencing, short and long-term memory and phonological skill which determine retention of vocabulary and mastering of grammar. A further important aspect put forward is also the ability of the dyslexic to effectively segment words in the foreign language into phonemic sounds and then reproduce them (Robertson, 2000 p.203).
In addition, English is a non-inflective language (Jaffré, 1997) which implies that it is differentiated in terms of phoneme-grapheme de-/en-coding, word sequencing, sentence structure, and pronunciation from the learners’ mother tongue, Greek, which poses a major difficulty for the learners in the EFL classroom. Given the fact that English orthography is not a straightforward phonemic transcription of speech (Ehri, 1989) but rather contains many inconsistencies as it is considered as deep as the grapheme/phoneme relationships during the reading and spelling process (Griva & Anastasiou, 2009 p.201), it is particularly hard for dyslexic students to cope with and relate their writing and reading to spelling.

However, it is not always the case that the EFL teachers are well informed about dyslexia and its influence on the effort undertaken by dyslexic students’ to achieve mastery of the English language. Therefore, EFL teachers have to be adequately trained in relation to the complex nature of the concept so as to effectively address the needs of EFL learners in the mainstream classroom (Clark & Uhry, 2004; Levine, 1994). Therefore, EFL teachers need to be provided with focused INSET courses which will inform them about various aspects of teaching EFL to dyslexic students and introduce them to the teaching approaches, methods and techniques to be adopted and implemented in the EFL classroom so as to ensure that dyslexics are rightly integrated into the mainstream classroom rather than segregated into special schools (Mitra, 2008). It is the teacher’s role to support dyslexic students and make educational adjustments in order to create successful classroom environment so as to facilitate them in becoming successful learners (Secemski, Deutsch, & Adoram, 2000) and provide them with all help and attention they may need to compensate for their deficits in EFL and make most efficient use of their strengths (Ranaldi, 2003).

2. The Study

2.1. The aim and objectives of the study

The purpose of this survey was to provide a descriptive account of the training needs of EFL teachers who teach dyslexic students within the mainstream classroom in primary education. The data were collected with the aim to be used for the design of an experimental in-service teacher training program with a focus on issues of dyslexia in the near future. In particular, the present study was conducted with the aim to:

- identify the EFL teachers’ familiarity with dyslexia, i.e. whether they can discern certain weaknesses, and behaviors that may indicate a dyslexic student;
- indicate the EFL teachers’ needs for training in relation to dyslexia;
- record their expectations from an INSET course with a focus on issues of dyslexia;
- specify their preferences for place, time, and length concerning the development of an INSET course.

2.2. The participants

The sample of this pilot study consisted of ninety-four EFL teachers employed in primary school in Northern Greece. The questionnaires were administered to ninety-eight EFL teachers; however, as four of them stated to be completely unaware of dyslexia and left many of the items unanswered, they were excluded from the research project. Of the participants in the research, 96% were female while 4% male. Concerning their position of service, 89% of them were permanent teachers whereas 11% substitute teachers. Their teaching experience varied: 47% of them had 1-5 years of service; 15%, 6-15 years; 32%, 16-24 years; and 6%, more than 25 years. Also, a significant percentage of the EFL teachers are highly qualified; 38% of them hold a Master Degree and 2% a Ph.D.
2.3. Research methods and tools

The development of the questionnaire has taken place on the basis of: a) literature on dyslexia (Kormos & Kontra, 2008; August & Shanahan, 2006; Berninger, 2006; Clark & Uhry, 2004; Foorman, 2003; Shaywitz, 2003); b) literature on constructing a questionnaire (Dörnyei, 2003; Munn & Dewer, 1990; Robson, 1993); c) literature in teacher training education (Richards, 2008; Wallace, 1991).

The questions included were checklist items, multiple-choice, and rank-order items on a three point Likert scale. The last question was ‘open-ended’ aiming to provide ‘qualitative information’ (Dörnyei, 2003).

2.4. Data analysis

The data derived from the questionnaires were analyzed by using descriptive statistical methods. Frequencies and percentages for all items were obtained. The data from the open-ended question, which was analyzed qualitatively, underwent the procedures of data reduction, first and second level coding and resulted in groups of categories/sub-categories (Miles & Huberman, 1994) as shown in Table 1.

3. The Findings of the Questionnaire

3.1. The INSET Needs of EFL Teachers’

3.1.1. EFL Teachers’ awareness about the issue of dyslexia

The data from the questionnaire revealed that half of the EFL teachers surveyed (51%) reported that they were ‘aware about the issue of dyslexia and its resulting difficulties in the process of learning English as a foreign language (EFL) on the part of the learners’. An equally high percentage (45%) of them declared to have ‘little knowledge about the concept and how it affects students in language learning’, a fact which cannot be ignored as the latter comprise a significant percentage of the target population. A 4% of them stated to be ‘moderately familiar with dyslexia’. Also, the greatest majority of participants (53.1%) reported that their awareness about dyslexia came about as the result of knowledge acquired by ‘attending seminars’ which however, had not been offered as part of in-service training; an equally high percentage (29.7%) suggested personal initiatives in the process to become informed by ‘reading relevant materials’. ‘Talking with experienced colleagues’ about the issue was reportedly helpful for a smaller part of the teachers (14.8%). It should be noted that only a mere 2.1% indicated having become knowledgeable about dyslexia as a result of ‘attending in-school training sessions’.

3.1.2. EFL Teachers’ personal experience with dyslexic students

It should be considered that in their vast majority (89%) the EFL teachers indicated ‘to have met diagnosed dyslexic learners in their classes’ while only 11% of them stated that they ‘had not encountered diagnosed dyslexic students’. In addition, it is striking that more than half of them (57%) admitted having ‘negative experience’ from teaching dyslexic students.

3.1.3. The present situation

In the attempt to account for present course design specifications, it should be strongly emphasized that only a limited part of the teachers surveyed (10%), supported the view that ‘the EFL Cross Thematic Curriculum Framework acknowledges the needs of dyslexic students in the mainstream classroom’; On the same line, it is striking that only 5% of the teachers considered that ‘the currently adopted English language course books facilitate
students with dyslexia in learning English as a FL’ while almost unanimously (95%), they argued that this is not at all the case as ‘the course books do not focus on the needs of these learners’. Moreover, about two thirds of the teachers (67%) underlined the fact that ‘the proposed teaching methodology does not help dyslexic students to master the target language’ although the views of a third (33%) of them were contradictory as they regarded ‘the teaching methodology’ helpful for the dyslexic students.

3.1.4. EFL Teachers’ INSET needs to cope with the dyslexic students’ deficits

When asked to identify some of the areas in which the EFL teachers considered themselves in need to be trained in order to cope with the major problems faced by dyslexic students, the following areas were recorded in relation to the students’ deficiencies: As far as the reading process is concerned, a very high percentage of the target population (85.7%) indicated that they have to find out how to assist the dyslexic students who tend to ‘read too slowly, uttering words syllable by syllable’. Also, a significant percentage of the teachers (71.4%) put forward that it would be helpful if they were guided as to how they could effectively deal with the students’ ‘difficulties in understanding text content’. A considerable part of the EFL teachers, highlighted the necessity to acquire further skills in order to deal effectively with common problems of dyslexic students such as ‘difficulty in discriminating words that look similar’ (66.6%) and ‘omitting and/or adding phonemes while reading’ (76.1%).

Concerning writing, the EFL teachers in their statements valued training in terms of spelling problems; in particular, addressing ‘the omission and/or addition of letters/syllables’ (88.1%) and ‘the inversion of letters’ (76.1%), which are often presented by dyslexic students were reported. In addition, a very high percentage of the teachers (83.3%) acknowledged the students’ difficulty in ‘accurately copying from the board’ and sought for help in making this task easier for them; Also, 59.5% of the participants referred to the students’ tendency to ‘confuse phonemes’ known as ‘mirror writing’ and called for guidance in dealing with it.

Moreover, as far as classroom behaviors of dyslexic students are concerned, the teachers opted for training in terms of typical issues of dyslexics in relation to how they respond to the learning process in the classroom. Most EFL teachers (71.4%) believed that they have to be able to help dyslexic students who tend to be ‘usually distracted during the lesson’. Also, half of the respondents (50%) regarded that they have to be prepared to employ efficient ways in order to enhance ‘the self esteem’ of these students while about a third of them (30.9%) reported on their need to receive training to ease ‘the anxiety dyslexic students usually experience’. In addition, it was recorded that the EFL teachers could benefit from training in relation to the problem of ‘dyslexic students being usually teased by their classmates’ (47.6%).

3.1.5. EFL teachers’ interest for INSET on dyslexia

Concerning their training needs, 87% of the sample indicated their ‘strong interest’ for attending INSET courses; another 9% were only ‘moderately interested’. It is noteworthy that only 4% declared no interest at all in attending seminars on dyslexia.

3.1.6. EFL Teachers’ preferences concerning INSET courses

The following methods were identified by the participants as useful to be employed in the training session under construction: ‘microteaching’ was opted for by 46.8% of the EFL teachers whereas 31.3% preferred ‘group work activities’. Equal percentages were casted on ‘presentation of papers’ and ‘the lecture method’ (10.6%).

Also, the majority of the respondents (55.3%) requested for the invited speaker to be ‘a trained specialist in dyslexia’ while a significant percentage (40.4%) stated their preference for ‘university professors’ and another 4.2% called for the expertise of special education teachers.

Concerning the expected results of attending a training seminar with a focus on how the complex nature of dyslexia can affect the teaching and learning process in the mainstream classroom, ‘application of principles to practice’ was ‘very much’ opted by considerable percentages of the EFL teachers (41.3%). In addition, 34.0% of the
respondents were ‘very much’ interested in ‘being informed about modern, up-to-date teaching methodologies concerning dyslexia’; ‘Understanding complex issues in teaching dyslexic students’ was a ‘very’ interesting option for 16% of them. Another 8.5% of the EFL teachers considered the need for ‘professional development in terms of improved teaching practices on dyslexia’.

In terms of the aims set for a successful training programme, the majority of the teachers (51%) strongly agreed that ‘a critical presentation of various teaching methodologies and an evaluation of the appropriateness of their application in individual cases’ should be prioritized. An additional 40.4% of the participants indicated the importance of ‘addressing the trainees’ professional needs’. About a third of them, 27.6%, signified ‘the blending of theory and practice’ and 23.4% required for a training course ‘offering relevant solutions to the issues raised’.

As for the duration of a training session, more than half of the EFL teachers (56%), considered ‘4-5 hours’ ideal, and another 27% requested ‘an 8 hour seminar’ while 17% wished for ‘seminars of longer duration’. Concerning the frequency of holding these seminars the majority (55%) of the teachers considered ‘scheduling of INSET courses twice-yearly’ as optimal. ‘Once per year’ was thought sufficient for 26% while striking though it may be 15% sought for the organization of ‘monthly seminars’.

3.1.7. Suggestions

The verbal data derived from the open-ended question ‘what are your proposals and comments concerning the provision of effective teaching to dyslexic students in EFL?’ resulted, after processing, into the following categories and sub-categories which are presented in Table 1:

| Table 1. Suggestions for the provision of effective EFL teaching to dyslexic students |
|---------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Categories-Subcategories        |                                                                                                 |
| 1. In the EFL classroom         |                                                                                                 |
| 1.1 Sustain the dyslexics as members of equal rights and competence in the EFL classroom |
| 1.2 Stream dyslexic students in classes according to level of competence           |
| 1.3 Adapt tuition to address the specific needs of dyslexic students            |
| 1.4 Adapt tasks to match the specific needs of dyslexic students (individualized learning) |
| 1.5 Reduce the number of students per class to attend to the individual needs of dyslexic students |
| 1.6 Introduce alternative ways of evaluating the dyslexic students               |
| 1.7 Offer further tuition to dyslexics to help them cope with the pace of the other students |
| 2. Beyond the EFL classroom      |                                                                                                 |
| 2.1 Sustain cooperation between the EFL teacher and other teacher(s) of the dyslexic students |
| 2.2 Establish consultation of the EFL teacher with specialists to deal with emerging problems |
| 2.3 Encourage collaboration of the EFL teacher with the dyslexic students’ parents |
| 2.4 Revise the present EFL curricula in order for them to account for the needs of dyslexic students |
| 2.5 Equip schools with computers, TVs, DVDs, CDs, etc. to facilitate effective teaching |

4. Conclusion

The data from the research revealed that the EFL teachers in their vast majority were adequately aware of dyslexia issues and the challenges of dyslexic students in relation to learning EFL since most of them have had the experience of teaching dyslexic students in the mainstream classroom. However, they contended that although they did recognize the distinct needs of these learners in EFL they were unable to appropriately cater for them as they lacked the knowledge of how to devise an appropriate teaching approach in order to ease the load of dyslexic learners and enable them to learn the target language. Inevitably, the perceived lack of the specific skills required to cope effectively with the demands of the teaching context on the part of the teachers resulted into frustration and negative feelings on the part of many of them. In effect, the necessity for the development of focused INSET courses concerning dyslexia is strongly reinforced in acknowledgement of the teachers’ role which entails the ability
to provide and support the required educational adjustments in order to help the dyslexic students to cope with their problems effectively and facilitate their learning in the mainstream classroom (Beaton, 2004, p.71).

Moreover, in consideration of the fact that the existing curricular framework, the course books provided, and the suggested instructional methodology do not seem to be aligned with the needs of dyslexic students in the mainstream classroom, it inevitably becomes the EFL teachers’ responsibility to adjust and present the curriculum in a dyslexia friendly manner (Schneider & Crombie, 2003; Reid, 2005). This necessitates the development of distinct skills to be acquired through principled training. On the same line, several deficiencies commonly identified with dyslexic students in relation to the reading comprehension and pronunciation process and the writing-spelling process require the provision of direct, specific instruction in the areas of weakness (Stowe, 2000, p.51) and are suggested as high priority issues to be included in training courses on dyslexia.

The necessity for an INSET course specifically aimed at providing a realistic approach to the subject matter, which allows for an understanding of dyslexia on the part of the teachers and offers practical guidelines to be used for teaching is paramount in sustaining the effectiveness of the learning process of dyslexic students. It is considered that in this way the EFL teachers will enable dyslexic students to overcome any learning problems they experience and develop a conscious awareness of the processes involved in reading and writing in the target language (Lundberg, 2002), to build-up their self esteem (Schneider & Crombie, 2003), raise their motivation, and become fully integrated in the EFL classroom instead of being streamed into special schools (Mitra, 2008, p.84). It is acknowledged that any issues associated with dyslexia and language learning can be effectively tackled provided there is adequacy in terms of resources, examination support, teaching approaches, assessment needs, curriculum differentiation and management, and parental involvement (Peer & Reid, 2003, p.9).

As for the implications of the study, it is suggested that the EFL teachers should attend systematic and well organized INSET courses in order to receive information and become more knowledgeable about the symptoms of dyslexia and the problems faced by dyslexic learners in EFL, as well as to become aware and deal with problems of undiagnosed learners. In addition, the teachers need to be trained in updated methods and approaches, so that they could implement them in the language classroom. Such training would make them realize why certain adjustments and accommodations in the language classroom are essential to secure the success of dyslexic students in learning English as a FL in the mainstream classroom of public primary education.

References


