

A Case Study of a Turkish Dyslexic Student Learning English as a Foreign Language

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ABSTRACT

The present case study first describes the difficulties a Turkish dyslexic learner faces in learning English as a foreign language. It then explores the effects of positive teacher support and some motivational strategies on this specific student's learning process. Data were collected through observation, interviews and analysis of documents including student work, assignment sheets and exam papers over a period of six weeks. The results indicate that the participant benefited greatly from positive teacher support and special teaching techniques and methods employed. Implications are included for practices of inclusive education and pre-service and in-service teacher education programs in the country.

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Introduction

In any educational setting, many smart and intellectually capable children face specific learning difficulties in the presence of other symptoms such as incoordination, left-right confusions or poor sequencing. In reality, these children suffer from dyslexia, which is known as the most frequent learning disability in children and persists throughout life. This neurological syndrome is accepted to affect 5-10 % percent of children, particularly boys (Krzyzak, 2006; Stein, 2001).

The International Dyslexia Association defines dyslexia as follows:

Dyslexia is a specific learning disability that is neurological 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.

In Turkey, individuals with special needs compose almost 12.29% of the total population and 4.63% of the population aged 0-19 is reported to have special needs. Children with mild or moderate learning disabilities can attend regular schools within the context of inclusive education practices which started in 1983. During the academic year of 2009-2010, 71.142 special-needs students at primary education level and 5.062 special-needs students at secondary education level got inclusive education (ERG & TOHUM, 2011).

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Dyslexia in the Language Classroom

It seems that learners with dyslexia who lack solid foundation in their native language are generally confronted with foreign language learning difficulties. Findings from several studies on dyslexic students learning a foreign language indicate that this group of students often face serious problems in the language classroom (see Crombie, 2000; Ganschow & Sparks, 2000; Joanisse et al., 2000; Kormos & Kontra, 2007; Kormos, Sarkadi & Csizer, 2009; Kryzak, 2007; Nijakowska, 2010):

- Problems related to orthographic/phonological processing such as repeating utterances, recitation and fluent speech,
- Poor phonemic awareness characterized as an inability to segment words into phonemes affects phonological processing and consequently leads to problems with graphic-phoneme correspondence and manipulation,
- Confusion over syntax and difficulties understanding and using the rule system of the language,
- Difficulties in reading, including reading aloud and reading for comprehension,
- Problems related to writing and copying, also including spelling difficulties,
- Difficulties in learning vocabulary because of poor working memory and faulty auditory sequencing,
- Slow speed of information processing and the consequent need for more time for performing tasks,
- Lack of metacognitive skills such as ability to reflect on language and to use self-correction strategies without explicit instruction,
- Poor self-esteem resulting from the false assumption that dyslexia is a sign of low intelligence,
- Limited attention span.

These problems get even more serious in contexts where dyslexic children are required to learn a foreign language at the primary school level. For dyslexic primary school children who have not reached a fair level of competency in their mother tongue, having to learn another language can be more problematic (Crombie, 2000). Hence, teacher behavior plays an essential role in shaping the attitude of dyslexic learners to learning a foreign language. Ganschow, Sparks and Javorsky (1998) propose that foreign language teachers should try to meet the needs of dyslexic students who experience difficulties in their classrooms. They believe that affective differences are the “result” rather than the “cause” of foreign language learning difficulties.

Therefore, it is of great importance that learners with dyslexia are provided with extra assistance and support in the language classroom. Previous research suggests positive teacher behavior and various motivational instructional strategies in teaching foreign languages to students with dyslexia (Crombie, 2000; Ganschow, Sparks & Javorsky, 1998; Kormos, Sarkadi & Csizer, 2009; Kryzak, 2006; Sparks et al., 1998):

- The use of multi-sensory techniques based on a combination of aural, visual, tactile and kinesthetic aspects to facilitate learning,
- The use of in-class accommodations such as offering frequent revision opportunities, adjusting the pace of verbal instruction to student’s needs and placing him/her in an appropriate place in the class,
- Talking to the child about what poses the most difficulty for him/her in the classroom,
- The use of large-font coursebooks not overloaded with lexical items and grammatical structures,
- The use of information technology to reinforce the teaching of a foreign language,
- Getting information about a dyslexic, his family, friends and environment,
- Changing dyslexic student’s negative attitude to himself/herself and helping the child build confidence in him/her,
- Getting help and support from a specialist while deciding on appropriate classroom accommodations,
- Offering compensatory classes or forming special groups where specific methods to foster the development of foreign language competence of dyslexic students are applied,
- The use of tutorial support with clear and well-structured explanations.

Despite international evidence that such strategies work well with dyslexic foreign language learners (see Kormos, Sarkadi & Csizer 2009; Pearson Casanave, 2009), there appears to be insufficient research in Turkey concerning the use of such strategies. The aim of the present case study was to see how some of these techniques worked with a dyslexic foreign language learner, and to explore what impact each technique had on the student’s language learning process.

Method

The study adopted a descriptive case study design in order to deeply understand the participant's experiences without aiming to generalize to other populations. Case studies are valuable in that they help build an in-depth understanding of a case that is unusual, unique or not yet understood. We believed that a case study design would result in a rich and holistic account of the phenomenon, offering invaluable insights (Merriam, 2009; Pearson Casanave, 2009; Punch, 2009).

In order to ensure that findings are triangulated, data were collected through multiple sources including observation, interviews and documents such as student work, assignment sheets and exam papers over a period of six weeks. Each member of the research team observed the participant in the research context and compared notes together before completing the analysis (Cowie, 2009).

The participant was as fully informed as possible about the study's purpose and audience. A consent form was signed by the participant's mother, who approved of his participation in this project. Verbal informed consent was obtained from the school administration and the participant's teachers (Rallis & Rossman, 2009). Obviously, the name used in this study is a pseudonym.

Research Context and Participant

English as a foreign language is highly valued in Turkey, as in many other countries around the world. It is a primary prerequisite for finding a good job or pursuing an academic career. Children in state schools start to learn English as a foreign language in the primary education. The two languages, Turkish and English, differ greatly in their orthographic features. Turkish falls into the category of shallow, transparent orthographies which have one-to-one correspondence in both spelling and reading. In contrast, English lacks consistency in both direction and falls into the category of deep, opaque orthographies, which makes the grapheme-phoneme relations difficult to learn (Nijakowska, 2010).

The research participant Deniz is an 8th grade primary school student aged 14. He has been diagnosed with dyslexia and prescribed medication to reduce his distractibility and hyperactivity. Dyslexia is often accompanied by additional dysfunctions such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), which puts Deniz in a situation that requires complex and multidimensional help in many different areas. He has difficulty reading and writing in his native language, Turkish. Besides, he has severe problems in learning English as a foreign language. He attends a regular school together with non-dyslexic children and does not receive tutoring at home. Due to his disability, he has poor working memory and cannot remember English words. He cannot read or write in English. Besides, he confuses m/n and b/p sounds. He expresses that he dislikes reading and writing in English to the point of hatred.

Procedure

The research team consisted of one senior English language student teacher, one English language instructor and one Associate Professor of special education, all of whom are from a large state university in western Turkey. Deniz was a student in a public primary school where the student teacher was doing her teaching practice. We decided to work with Deniz to see what we could do to help him become more literate in English during a 6 week-period from November 2011 to mid-December 2011. At the end of this period, we expected Deniz to be able to introduce himself in English, both in spoken and written forms as a result of the strategies we planned to use. We also hoped to break his prejudices against learning a foreign language.

First week. In the first week, two members of the research team simply observed Deniz during his English course for two hours, letting his actions speak for themselves. The severity of his disability became vividly apparent. He was very shy and inactive in class. He had difficulty pronouncing English words and was reluctant to talk. We decided that one member of the research team –called as 'teacher/researcher' throughout the study- worked with Deniz and provided him with regular support, believing that he had a chance of success. The teacher/researcher gave Deniz one-hour private lessons twice a week at his home during the course of the study.

In the first private session with Deniz, the teacher/researcher administered some reading, writing and spelling assessments to see his language proficiency level better. She was being pleasant and encouraging to Deniz as he completed each task. He did the tests to his best ability. In order to help him break down his

prejudice against learning a foreign language, she used auditory and visual means such as listening to funny songs and watching different videos together. During this very first meeting, she just aimed to make him realize that he could like this “strange” language. At the end of the session, she decided not to give a homework assignment, which made Deniz extremely happy. Deniz later explained that having to do his homework in written form had been agonizing for him because of his disability.

When we scored the assessments, we learned that Deniz could not read and write in English. His handwriting was very poor and most of his words were either spelt wrongly or crossed out. It was obvious that he could not understand the instructions in the test. Besides, it was too difficult for him to pronounce an English word and keep it in mind. The results showed that he had learned almost nothing related to English during his eight year school life. Although he was in the 8th grade, he was an absolute beginner in English.

After the first session, we conducted interviews with his teachers and his mother in order to learn more about Deniz. His teachers said that Deniz attended classes regularly, was respectful and tried to do whatever he was asked. His English teacher stressed that he suffered from lack of concentration and that his attempts to participate in the lesson generally ended in failure. He also added that he sometimes followed the words by his finger while trying to read. His mother said that he had hyperactivity and attention problems. Also, she described Deniz as a difficult and stubborn child who refuses to do anything that he does not want to.

Second week. In the second week, the teacher/researcher sat next to Deniz during his English course. She observed his behaviors and provided him with support many times during the course. Consequently, he attempted to participate in the lesson several times, hesitatingly. Towards the end of the course, when he became sure that she would help him, Deniz felt much more comfortable and seemed more interested in what was being taught by his English teacher.

In the private session, the teacher/researcher focused on English grammar sentence structure and introduced several examples. She tried using multi-sensory techniques such as a visually interactive PowerPoint presentation she herself prepared. Deniz seemed very interested and actively participated in the lesson. In addition to the PowerPoint presentation, flash-cards, pictures and videos, she also used other approaches such as forming letters in sand or using the fingers for writing the letters in the air, which he really enjoyed doing.

Third week. This week during the English course, the teacher/researcher did not sit close to Deniz. She sat at a table in front of him and did not interrupt frequently. She just encouraged him several times to participate more. She observed that Deniz raised his hand and formed a sentence correctly on his own. In the private session, the teacher/researcher wanted Deniz to read a short paragraph silently and highlight the sentences he understood. She helped him use his dictionary for the unknown words and write the words in the air using his finger. At the end of the lesson, she asked several comprehension questions that Deniz could answer successfully.

Fourth week. This week the teacher/researcher wanted to teach the English course herself and got permission from Deniz’s teacher. Her aim was to see how Deniz would react in the absence of her support. At the beginning, she could observe that it was a bit difficult for him. He was silent and timid. Whenever she asked him a question, he answered, but he rarely participated on his own wish.

In the private session, she focused on teaching questions and answers related to introducing oneself:

- What is your name? My name is Deniz.
- How old are you? I am fourteen years old.
- Where are you from? I am from Turkey.

While teaching, she used an interactive PowerPoint presentation which included repetition, matching, gap filling and restoration activities. She observed that using the computer enabled him to work at his own pace and increased his self-esteem. She also used flash-cards and pictures, which helped Deniz remember the related questions. Then, she asked him to write similar questions and answers, using the pictures. In addition, watching videos and trying to catch up some words in them was useful as well as entertaining. At the end of the session, the teacher/researcher and Deniz prepared a role play activity in which they both took part. We could see that Deniz enjoyed using various multi-sensory approaches.

Fifth week. During the English course, she sat away from him and did not talk to him. Deniz tried to participate in the lesson, ignoring the mistakes he made. It was a great pleasure to see him trying to speak English. He even helped one of his friends form a sentence correctly.

This week's private session focused on similar sentence patterns formed with different subject pronouns. This session aimed to help Deniz introduce his family using the suitable subject pronouns and auxiliary verbs. She used flash- cards and pictures again. A family tree was used to introduce family members. Some information – Jane/14/England- was given in small boxes. Deniz was asked to write questions and answers using the information in the boxes. He was then asked to read aloud what he had written at his own pace. Although he had some difficulty remembering words, he was able to complete the task successfully with the teacher/researcher's continual support. On the whole, his performance was excellent.

Sixth week. In this final week, classroom observations indicated that Deniz had more self-confidence. When she asked him whether he enjoyed the lesson or not, his answer was: "Yes, I enjoyed it, a little bit". The interview conducted with his English teacher also confirmed the positive changes we observed in Deniz. He stated that there had been some remarkable increase in his motivation and self- confidence for the last few weeks.

In the private session of the 6th week, the teacher/researcher administered some reading, writing and spelling assessments. The test results indicated that he was able to read and understand simple sentences in English. He was able to form sentences and match them. He even managed to write a short paragraph which introduced his family. His handwriting was still poor, but he did not make so many spelling mistakes. Finally, he wrote a dialogue on his own and read it aloud quite successfully.

Findings

On the whole, the six weeks spent with Deniz indicated that he needed some serious support to believe that he could become literate in English as a foreign language. Our observations suggested that what Deniz really needed was appreciation by his teachers. The positive attitude of the teacher/researcher and her giving him encouragement was so vital to the entire success of Deniz, as supported by Macnamara (2004).

Working with a private tutor, as recommended by Kormos, Sarkadi and Cziser (2009), proved very beneficial because Deniz received special attention and the rate of progress was adjusted to his needs. Also, in private sessions, the teacher/researcher put his feelings first and wanted to help him gain self-confidence. She began each session with some cheery chatter and complemented him on every success. Towards the end of the second week, Deniz began to trust his teacher/researcher and did his best to perform well both in his English courses and private sessions. Throughout the project, rebuilding his self-esteem was considered as important as improving his literacy skills in English. In other words, we tried not only to make Deniz able to learn, but also to make him want to do so, as expressed by Nijakowska (2010).

Our experiences with Deniz also suggested that he benefited greatly from a multi-sensory approach based on the simultaneous activation of auditory, tactile, visual and kinesthetic pathways. For instance, Deniz learned how to read and spell words by tracing them on sand. This facilitated his forming associations between the visual and phonological aspects of a word as well as its meaning. Also, Deniz was provided with a lot of repetition and practice until he became ready to find answers on his own. As suggested by Nijakowska (2010, p.126), self-dependence was achieved in "a step-by-step fashion, beginning with guided practice, through supported practice to independent practice". The use of technology, particularly the use of interactive PowerPoint presentations, was very useful in motivating Deniz and boosting his-self esteem. These PowerPoint presentations prepared by the teacher/researcher and several computer games they played together supported the teaching/learning procedures, as suggested by Nijakowska (2010).

Discussion and Implications

The results of this descriptive case study indicated that positive teacher behavior and motivational teaching strategies play a significant role in teaching English to a dyslexic learner. These findings are

congruent with the findings of Kormos, Sarkadi and Csizer's (2009) study on Hungarian students with dyslexia. They also found out that students with dyslexia are highly appreciative of positive teacher behavior and motivational instructional processes. Similarly, Krzyzak (2006) identified the use of a wide variety of methods and approaches as well as the teacher's guidance and support as two significant factors that enable a dyslexic child to overcome his foreign language learning difficulties.

Concerning the results obtained, some implications can be drawn for teaching a foreign language to learners with dyslexia in Turkey. First, if these learners are to be truly included into the existing educational system of the country, it is necessary that a set of special educational arrangements be made to create dyslexia-friendly classes and schools. A wide range of supporting activities and services are essential within the school context if these learners are to be part of the mainstream education. Special, more individualized help for students with specific learning difficulties should be organized in the form of special compensation classes where they can gain enough input, knowledge, positive feedback and confidence. It is especially important that students with dyslexia should be taught foreign languages in special groups where specific teaching methods are applied in a supporting atmosphere (Kormos, Sarkadi & Csizer, 2009; Nijakowska, 2010). Second, a strong cooperation between special educators and foreign language teachers should be established within the school context. Each school should minimally include a special education teacher who can help these learners and their teachers live with dyslexia.

Finally, it is crucial that more attention be paid to acquainting pre-service and in-service teachers of foreign languages with the constitutional nature of the difficulties dyslexia causes in the foreign language learning process as well as with the effective teaching methods and techniques that could be employed while working with students with dyslexia. They should be made aware that the use of multi-sensory approaches and information technology is of great help to a foreign language teacher who confronts various facets of dyslexia every day (Kormos, Sarkadi & Csizer, 2009; Nijakowska, 2010).

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