

Developmental Dyslexia between Reality and Misconception: Investigating Algerian EFL Teachers' Awareness of Dyslexia Case of EFL Teachers in Batna Middle Schools

عسر القراءة النمائي بين الواقع وسوء الفهم: التحقيق في وعي مدرسي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة
أجنبية بعسر القراءة -حالة أساتذة اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في متوسطات ولاية باتنة

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Abstract: The teacher plays a major role in establishing a successful inclusive learning environment which facilitates and promotes learning for dyslexic pupils, Since the created inclusive environment enormously relies on the presence of his/her knowledge skills, and attitudes, the present study attempts to investigate Algerian EFL middle school teachers' awareness of and familiarity with developmental dyslexia, A purposive sample of 81 EFL middle school teachers from Batna and its suburbs was surveyed through an online questionnaire; Findings revealed that the overwhelming majority of the surveyed respondents are not aware of developmental dyslexia and its effects on foreign language learning. Inevitably, because of their unawareness, they misconceive dyslexic pupils and consider them sluggish learners and below average performers; Thus, it is recommended that teachers undergo compulsory training on dyslexia which enables them cope with the needs of such impaired learners.

Keywords: Developmental dyslexia; awareness; familiarity; Algerian EFL middle school teachers; training.

ملخص: يلعب المعلم دورًا رئيسيًا في تهيئة بيئة تعليمية شاملة وناجحة تسهل وتشجع التعلم للتلاميذ الذين يعانون من عُسْر القراءة النمائي، ونظرًا لأن هذه البيئة الشاملة تعتمد اعتمادًا كبيرًا على وجود معارفه ومهاراته ومواقفه، تحاول هذه الدراسة التحقيق في وعي مدرسي الطور المتوسط الجزائريين للغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية. تم جمع البيانات من عينة قصدية تضم 81 مدرسًا من إكماليات باتنة وضواحيها من خلال استبيان على شبكة الإنترنت؛ كشفت النتائج أن الغالبية العظمى من الأساتذة الذين شملهم الاستطلاع لا يدركون عسر القراءة النمائي وتأثيره على تعلم اللغة الأجنبية حتما بسبب عدم إدراكهم، فهم يسيئون فهم التلاميذ الذين يعانون من عسر القراءة ويعتبرونهم متعلمين بطيئين وأقل من متوسطي الأداء؛ وبالتالي يوصى بأن يخضع الأساتذة للتدريب الإلزامي على عُسْر القراءة، مما يتيح لهم التعامل مع احتياجات هؤلاء المتعلمين.

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1. Introduction

When teaching and evaluating learning, teachers have to deal with different kinds of learners who encounter learning difficulties as a result of special needs, Taking into

consideration that all children ought to have the same chance of receiving the same education without making any differentiation between them in terms of ability, the meaning of inclusive education has changed from teaching learners with particular needs together with their classmates to teaching through the use of suitable pedagogy to meet the needs of those with learning difficulties (Chong, Forlin, & Au, 2007). In fact, the teacher plays a major role in establishing successful inclusive learning environments, which facilitate and promote learning for the learners with reading difficulties since the created inclusive environments enormously rely on the presence of his/her knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, cooperation, and expertise. As such, teachers' perceptions of inclusion and awareness of the hindrances are crucial in order to create the inclusive learning environments (Hoenig, Sim, Bochev, Herrnberger, & Kiefer, 2008). Hence, their awareness should be raised around the realization, acquaintance and or the comprehension of the disability/difficulty so the teacher can be knowledgeable in accommodating the learners' special needs.

1.1. Literature Review

1. Dyslexia: Definition and characteristics

Dyslexia is a type of specific learning difficulty that affects reading and related language-based processing skills. It primarily affects the skills involved in accurate and fluent word reading and spelling. Dyslexia is characterized by a combination of different symptoms that vary from person to another. The British Dyslexia Association described dyslexia as:

a lifelong, usually genetic, inherited condition [...] affects around 10% of the population, [...] occurs in people of all races, backgrounds and abilities, [...] is really about information processing: dyslexic people may have difficulty processing and remembering information they see and hear. This can affect learning and the acquisition of literacy skills, [...] It often co-occurs with related conditions, such as dyspraxia, dyscalculia and attention deficit disorder. On the plus side, dyslexic people often have strong visual, creative and problem-solving skills (9).

So, dyslexic people have specific difficulties in three areas: phonological processing, working memory and processing speed. From the definition above, it becomes clear that conventional language teaching methods usually do not work for learners with dyslexia, but with the teacher's awareness and support, they might overcome their difficulties. Teacher awareness of dyslexia is very important to the success of affected children because, according to Karande Mahajan, and Kulkarni (2009), many learners with reading difficulties report high levels of anxiety and fear for the reason that, their teachers have a poor understanding and insufficient awareness of this impairment.

2. Teachers' unawareness and misunderstanding of dyslexia

Previous undertaken research has shown that teachers often have mistaken beliefs about reading difficulties. Moreover, some teachers hold negative attitudes toward dyslexic learners because of unawareness and poor knowledge of the condition (Wadlington & Wadlington, 2005). Teachers still believe that the learner's underachievement is either because of a lack of cleverness and/or sluggishness (Wormald, 2015). Other teachers and even parents think that the learner's lack of accomplishment is because of his/her lack of motivation and laziness (Smart, 2011). As a result of teachers' lack of understanding and belated intervention, the affected learners can develop further problems and the situation can become even worse (Wadlington & Wadlington, 2005).

Researchers found that misunderstanding of dyslexic individuals might lead teachers to think negatively about learners who struggle with reading difficulties. Kenny, McNeeba Shevlin, and Daly (2000), for example, claim that most learners with reading impairment might be seen as sluggish or unintelligent. Furthermore, they may not receive sufficient support and help from their teachers in the classroom. In addition to that, as a result of

teachers' miscomprehension of learning disabilities in general, dyslexic learners might suffer from low self-esteem (Gibson & Kendall, 2010); be alienated, marginalized, and humiliated; they might feel as if they are an outsider in their own classroom and unable to cope with their colleagues (Townend & Turner, 2002), Negative attitudes do not stop at the level of seeing them as unmotivated, some peers view them as "class clowns" and embarrass them because of their underachievement (Smart, 2011, 290).

Teachers' knowledge and awareness of dyslexia are of crucial significance in understanding the learners' needs, having positive attitudes toward affected learners and helping them overcoming their difficulties as well as improving their achievement levels (Elias, 2014), A survey carried out by the Japanese Ministry of Education revealed that teachers are not even aware if their learners struggle with particular learning difficulties or not (Kataoka, Van Kraayenoord, & Elkins, 2004), Likewise, in a study conducted by Sónia (2012) in Portugal, it was found that teachers are not aware of dyslexia, They said that in case they were, they cannot provide help because they are not pedagogically trained to meet the need of dyslexic learners, The situation is not different in New Zealand where Elias (2014) reports that secondary school teachers are not aware of reading impairments and do have enough pedagogical knowledge of how to meet the needs of students with dyslexia, These studies conclude that teachers need urgent training on dyslexia.

As already shown, the issue of weighing up teachers' awareness of dyslexia has been investigated in different countries, The importance of conducting this study is that no similar studies pertain to the Algerian context, Therefore, the present study sheds light on dyslexia in the Algerian EFL classes of middle schools by attempting to answer the following questions:

1. Are Algerian middle school EFL teachers' familiar with dyslexia? i.e. Can they discern certain weaknesses and behaviors that may indicate dyslexic pupils?
2. Which are the challenges faced by these teachers when teaching dyslexic pupils?
3. What are their needs for training in relation to dyslexia?

2. Method and Tools

2.1 Participants

Surveying the whole population of Algerian middle-school EFL teachers is impossible, therefore, sampling is necessary. The sample of this study consists of 85 teachers employed in 23 middle schools in Banta and its suburbs, The middle-school level was chosen in particular because the present study is concerned with dyslexia in foreign language learning and English is not taught to pupils in primary schools in Algeria, Moreover, this learning difficulty is more common in the early school years (Marshall, 2013); consequently, secondary school and university teachers were not chosen as a target population. The present study's participants were contacted through a Facebook group of Algerian middle-school teachers of English, An online questionnaire was administered to all of them but since four participants left the majority of the items unanswered, they were excluded from the sample. Of the 81 participants left, 25.92% are female while 74.08% are male. For their position, 89% are full-time teachers whereas 11% are part-time teachers, Concerning their teaching experience, it varies: 48.15% of them had 1-5 years of service; 20.99%, 6-15 years; 25.92%, 16-24 years; and 4.94%, more than 25 years. As far as the educational degree is concerned, a significant percentage of the EFL teachers are highly qualified; 59.26% of them hold a Master Degree and the rest a Licence degree.

2.2 Instruments and data analysis

A questionnaire was opted for as "it affords a good deal of precision and clarity because the knowledge needed is controlled by the questions" (McDonough & McDonough 1997, 171), Moreover, it enables the researcher to collect standardized answers since all the participants respond to the same questions and saves him/her time and effort either in data collection or handling (Dornyei, 2003), For its design, it was divided into three sections: Section 1 concentrated on socio-demographic information, Section 2 focused on the teachers

attitudes towards dyslexic pupils while Section 3 was concerned with the challenges they face and their training needs, Although the questionnaire consists of yes-no questions, multiple-choice, and Likert items, we heavily depended on open-response questions for we wanted the participants to express their opinions in their own words freely.

The development of the questionnaire was based on literature on dyslexia (Foorman 2003; Shaywitz, 2003; Clark & Uhry, 2004; Berninger, 2006; August & Shanahan, 2006; Kormos & Kontra, 2008, Shaywitz, & Shaywitz, 2013), Because piloting tests the validity and reliability of the items (Hazzi & Maldaon, 2015), the present study's questionnaire was piloted with four teachers from the English department of Batna 2 University, Taking into consideration their feedback, some items were reworded and others omitted to avoid ambiguity and repetition. Quantitative data derived from the questionnaire were analyzed by using descriptive statistical methods, With the help of SPSS, frequencies and percentages for all items were obtained, However, qualitative data collected through open-ended questions were analyzed using content analysis, The analysis process began with the open coding of the data followed by inducing categories from these codes, which were then gathered under general themes for each set of data relating to specific questions. The categories and themes were subject to intra-coder reliability checking.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Teachers' awareness of dyslexia

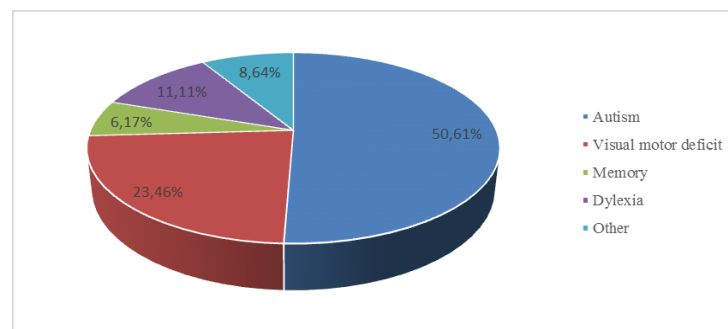


Figure (1): Teachers' familiarity with disabilities

Looking at Figure 1, we can see that the participants' awareness of dyslexia is poor. Only 11.11% of the participants (count = 9) are aware of this reading impairment, Out of these 9 participants, 0% reported that they are not fully familiar with the issue of dyslexia and its resulting difficulties in the process of learning English as a foreign language on the part of the learners, The vast majority of the respondents (77.78%) said that they are slightly familiar with this disability while 22.22% reported that they are moderately familiar with it, Most respondents stated that their familiarity resulted from personal initiatives that are not part of service training such as reading books, surfing the Internet, or discussions with experienced colleagues, The other respondents stated that their awareness comes from attending seminars with inspectors.

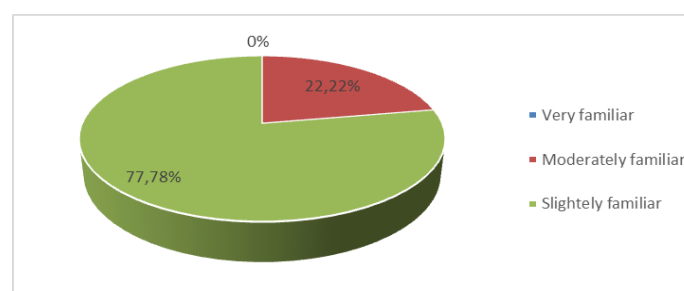


Figure (2): Teachers' familiarity with dyslexia

Minimal familiarity with signs and causes of dyslexia disclosed in this study concurs with Cons tantopoul, ou (2002) which concludes that EFL teachers in Greece do not have good knowledge on signs of dyslexia and its possible causes and they are not competent to teach dyslexic students as there is a lack of teachers' training on this issue, This is not peculiar to Algeria and Greece. According to the Dyslexia Foundation of New Zealand (2007) classroom teachers often have minimal knowledge or understanding of dyslexia.

Results of the present study showed that the participants are not only unfamiliar with dyslexia but the majority of them hold a negative attitude towards dyslexics. This is most probably due to the lack of unawareness, A 97.53% teachers believe that dyslexics are slow sluggish learners and 86.42% think that they are below average performers. These results are in line with Kenny et al (2000).

Questions moved from surveying the EFL teachers about general issues such as familiarity with learning disabilities in general and dyslexia in particular, and attitudes towards dyslexics to personal experiences of teaching dyslexic pupils, A 33.33% of teachers reported to have met dyslexic learners in their classes while 66.67% of them stated that they had not encountered diagnosed dyslexics, Unfortunately, all the surveyed teachers admitted having very negative personal experiences with dyslexic pupils or hearing about some, This negativity, as teachers explained, is due to the lack of knowledge of the difficulties disabled learners face and the challenges of teaching them in inclusive classes, A teacher said that teaching such type of learners is time consuming as she often finds herself spending too much time with a dyslexic who reads very slowly, She even confessed that she occasionally gets angry when this pupil faces difficulties in following what she is saying, It is known that when it comes to phonological processing, dyslexics have difficulties with identifying different sounds, Besides, they tend to have a shorter working memory, which affects their ability to hold information temporarily, As for processing speed, they tend to be slower when engaged in tasks that require fast response.

3.2 Barriers and challenges of teaching dyslexic pupils

Thematic analysis yielded the following codes presented in Table 1.

Table (1): Perceived barriers and challenges when teaching dyslexics

Code	Example
Lack of adequate skills to deal with dyslexics	<i>These pupils fail to read effectively or do any exercises properly. So, they become demotivated, loose interest in study and they generally have poor self-esteem. In this case, it becomes difficult for the teacher to deal with him.</i>
Lack of training	<i>Teachers' lack of knowledge and traning on how to teach dyslexic pupils also hinders the provision of support for dyslexic pupils.</i>
Large classes	<i>Some classes have 45 to 50 pupils. The teacher can hardly have some time for dyslexic pupils.</i>

Busy schedule	<i>The headmaster and the parents expect you to finish the syllabus. In addition to this, you have to prepare and correct papers, and report marks...too many demands on the teacher. So, we cannot have time for exceptional pupils. We do not do miracles.</i>
Lack of teaching materials for dyslexics	<i>The textbook is designed for normal learners. There are no materials and resources for dyslexic pupils.</i>

The surveyed EFL teachers agreed that the difficulty of diagnosing dyslexics and the lack of knowledge on this disability and its effects on foreign language learning hinders their provision of support for dyslexic pupils. Lack of training on how to deal with dyslexics is another challenge. Psychologically speaking, the present study's participants revealed that dyslexics' poor self-esteem is one of the barriers to providing support for them. A pupil who grows detached due to the lack of engagement or support is likely to exhibit depression. For teachers who are not well trained to deal with such kind of learners, it is very difficult to keep on supporting them. This evidence concurs with the findings of Carreker, Joshi and Gooden's study (2010).

Large classes are another barrier to providing support for middle school dyslexic pupils as they hinder the provision of their special needs. This is in line with Kerr's (2001) study which finds that large pupils' numbers negatively impact the teachers' ability to better support dyslexics. Another perceived barrier is teachers' busy schedule. As the example shown in the previous table tells, teachers struggle with finishing the syllabi, lesson preparation, exams' and homeworks' correction, and preparing for the 9th grade national final exam. This makes them unable to provide care and support for dyslexics who take more time to accomplish the different tasks. These results were evidenced in Kerr's (2001) which reveals that most pupils with dyslexia require additional educational support when demands on the teacher might be too high. Another challenge mentioned by teachers pertains to the lack of adapted or specialist resources and materials for learners with dyslexia. Availability of appropriate materials is one of the criteria of dyslexia-friendly practice according to Mackay (2004). The use of special resources and especially ICT ones was also reported by the Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCOs) to have been effective for dyslexia support (Hunter & Carsch, 2001).

3.3 EFL teachers' training needs to cope with dyslexic pupils' deficits

When asked whether or not they are interested in attending seminars and workshops on dyslexia, the majority of the EFL teachers (95.06%) stated that they are strongly interested the rest (4.94%) reported that they are moderately interested while no respondent stated that s/he is not interested at all. Most of the respondents requested the invitation of dyslexia experts and university researchers to these training events. When asked to identify some areas in which these teachers considered themselves in need to be trained in order to cope with the major problems encountered by dyslexic pupils, the following areas were mentioned. For classroom behaviors, more than two thirds of the teachers expressed their wish of being able to respond to the dyslexics' learning process in the classroom. All those teachers believed that they have to be able to help dyslexic pupils who usually tend to be distracted during the lesson. Moreover, they valued psychological training which helps them enhance the self-esteem of these pupils, relieve their anxiety, and enable them to overcome the bullying of their classmates. For the reading skill, a very high percentage of the respondents (93.83%) indicated that they should benefit from training that enables them assist the dyslexic pupils who tend to read very slowly, utter words syllable by syllable, and comprehend texts poorly. It is worth mentioning here that proposals that could enhance the writing skill were not put forward by teachers. This might be due to their unawareness of such type of difficulties that dyslexic pupils face.

4. Conclusion

The present study revealed that the Algerian EFL middle school teachers in their vast majority are poorly aware of dyslexia and its negative effects on foreign language learning. Moreover, they confessed that even though they recognized the various needs of these learners, they would be unable to appropriately cater for them as they lacked the sufficient knowledge and adequate training of how to devise an appropriate teaching approach for impaired learners. Furthermore, unawareness and lack of specific skills required on the part of the teachers resulted into negative attitudes towards dyslexics. However, they showed a great interest in knowing more about dyslexia and the appropriate techniques in order to help their pupils overcome difficulties. The following practical points are put forth to help dyslexics learn English as a foreign language better.

- EFL teachers and syllabus designers should adjust and present the curriculum in a dyslexia friendly manner. On the same line, they should provide direct and specific instruction on the several deficiencies commonly identified with dyslexic students such as reading comprehension, pronunciation process, and writing-spelling process by adopting individualized learning.
- The Algerian Ministry of higher education should organize educational seminars and workshops that shed light on dyslexia, its features as well as indicators and equip teachers with appropriate guidance, techniques, and strategies to teach affected learners.
- The Algerian Ministry of higher education should reduce the number of students per class to attend to the individual needs of dyslexic pupils.
- EFL practitioners should collaborate with dyslexic pupils' parents.
- The Algerian Ministry of higher education should equip schools with technological aids to facilitate effective teaching for dyslexic pupils.

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Appendix: Questionnaire

Dear teachers,

This questionnaire is part of a research study that attempts to pinpoint the Algerian EFL middle school teachers' awareness of dyslexia. As there is no right or wrong answer

please answer all the questions as honestly as you can. The data you provide in this questionnaire will be handled in an anonymous basis and will be used for research purposes only. Your cooperation in this regard is highly valued and appreciated. Please tick the answer you think the most appropriate, or provide relevant information in the provided space.

Section I: Teachers' General Information

1. Gender: ☐ Male ☐ Female
2. Age: Is your age:
 - ☐ Between [22-26] years old ☐ Between [26-30] years old
 - ☐ Between [30-34] years old ☐ More than 34 years old
3. Including this year, how many years have you been teaching English:
 - ☐ 1-5 years ☐ 6-15 years ☐ 16-24 years ☐ more than 25 years
4. What is your highest academic completed degree?
 - ☐ Licence ☐ Master ☐ Magistère ☐ PhD
5. Are you...?
 - ☐ A full-time teacher ☐ part-time teacher

Section II: Teachers' familiarity of dyslexia and attitudes towards dyslexic pupils

6. Which disabilities are you familiar with? You can tick more than one disability.
 - ☐ Autism
 - ☐ Visual motor deficit
 - ☐ Memory
 - ☐ Dyslexia
 - ☐ Other (Please specify:)
7. In case you are familiar with dyslexia, how much are you familiar with it?
 - ☐ Very familiar
 - ☐ Moderately familiar
 - ☐ Slightly Familiar
8. How did you become familiar with dyslexia?
 - ☐ Through educational seminars and workshops that are part of service training
 - ☐ Through personal initiatives
 - ☐ Other (Please specify:)
9. Have you ever taught dyslexic pupils?
 - ☐ Yes ☐ No
10. Do you think that dyslexic pupils are unintelligent and slow learners?
 - ☐ yes ☐ No
11. Please describe your experience of teaching dyslexic pupils. If you have never taught one, please tell about some experiences you heard of.

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Section III: The challenges that teachers face and their training needs to cope with dyslexic pupils' deficits

12. According to you, what are the challenges that EFL teachers face when teaching dyslexics?

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13. Are you interested in joining a training that helps EFL teachers cope with needs of dyslexic pupils?
 - ☐ Yes ☐ No
14. If you answer to the last question is *yes*, how much are you interested?
 - ☐ Strongly interested
 - ☐ Moderately interested
 - ☐ Not interested at all

15. What are you comments and suggestions concerning training EFL teachers on dyslexia?

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Thank you so much for your cooperation.

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