

## Experience of ESL Teachers in Teaching Dyslexics in the Mainstream Classroom of UAE and India: A Comparative Case Study

Shini Unni

*Department of Linguistics, Gujarat University*

**Corresponding Author:** Shini Unni E-mail: [shinyp29@gmail.com](mailto:shinyp29@gmail.com)

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### ABSTRACT

This paper explores the experiences of English as a second Language (henceforth ESL) teachers in teaching dyslexics within the mainstream classroom. Looking at the severity of Specific Learning Disorder, it is even more challenging for dyslexics to acquire the language within the mainstream classroom. The researcher aims to highlight how ESL primary school teachers in UAE and India respectively identify the needs of the students, implement a strategy and ways to accommodate them within the mainstream. In-depth interviews were conducted with the teachers for the data collection. The main findings are that ESL teachers play an active role in early identification of dyslexic problem; however, ESL teachers in India require appropriate training and an improved 'preventive' model of intervention to identify and restore the reading accuracy and fluency of dyslexics.

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### 1. Introduction

Have you ever thought that reading a billboard or browsing a menu without visually fumbling is a big deal? Reading is an essential habit which has been included in our curriculum. We have been encouraged to value reading at schools and home too. Reading skills do not evolve spontaneously in human beings (cf. McGuinness, 1998), rather, reading is something that we must *learn* to do. But, on the other hand, there would be still some faces within the classroom struggling to decipher the letters. In India, for the past decades, there has been much light on the inclusion of a Specific Learning Disorder<sup>1</sup> or Dyslexic within the mainstream class. Dyslexia<sup>1</sup> is an alternative term used to refer to a pattern of learning difficulties characterized by problems with accurate or fluent word recognition, poor decoding and poor spelling abilities. Dyslexics find it difficult to understand and grasp letters quickly and also find it difficult to identify the sound- word correspondence.

The most sought question is "What causes dyslexia?" Doctors claim that dyslexia is not a disease with a cure. Researchers have been carried out that there is no consensus on the definition of dyslexia and its underlying cause (Smythe and Everatt, 2002). However, the primary method is to identify the signs of dyslexia at an early age and teachers could play a pivotal role in discovering the most important clue to a potential reading problem (Shaywitz, 2003).

### 2. Literature Review

"Dyslexia is a specific learning disability that is neurobiological 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." (International Dyslexia Association, 2002).

The idea for the research came during the pilot study in UAE. UAE welcomes more than 200 different nationalities with students from different background getting enrolled. UAE education system offers a great help to Specific Learning-Disabled

students, focusing on the learner's need. The education system of UAE categorizes Dyslexia as a type of learning disability and students with dyslexia are categorized in three types of placing: full inclusion, partial inclusion and integration setting (Special Education Integration Program-SEIP).

This research has taken place in schools in Dubai and India. The primary objective is to apply a similar teaching strategy on students of Gujarat board schools. Phase one, conducted in UAE for a year. All the English subject teachers were given training on identifying the students with learning disabilities and how to cope their learning along with the mainstream students. In-depth interviews on teaching challenges and strategies were conducted in UAE and India. In India particularly parts of Gujarat, ESL teachers find challenging to teach students with dyslexia because of lack of hands on expertise and lack of effective teaching methods to apply in the classroom.

In order to understand teaching as well as learning behaviour within the organizational systems, the researcher has chosen Phonological Deficit Hypothesis (PDH) and Cooperative learning Structure as a theoretical framework for the data collection and analysis. PDH has been the dominant framework for Dyslexia during the late twentieth century. Owing to that, the data from longitudinal study has focused on the variability of dyslexic problems of constructing, maintaining and retrieving phonological representation with lack of sensitivity to the sounds of words. The researcher uses the broad framework of Kagan's Cooperative Learning which is a collective task for teachers, dyslexic students and their parents.

This research focuses mainly on teacher's strategies and intervention on understanding dyslexics. Knowing teachers' perceptions on dyslexia is important. Firstly, how teachers perceive dyslexia directly affects dyslexic students' self-image (Humphrey,2003). Wadlington and Wadlington (2005) states it is necessary that there should not be any discrepancies exist between teachers' view on dyslexics' disabilities, as it would cause them to have social and emotional problems.

The purpose of this study is to identify the teaching strategies and learning improvement of dyslexics with parameters such as

- a. To recognize on how to train teachers in facilitating dyslexics within the mainstream
- b. To develop strategies and recognize the challenges faced by the ESL teachers and utilize new parameters in assisting teachers
- c. To find the gaps and accommodating the dyslexics and get to the root of it with first course of action.

### **3. Methodology**

This study is qualitative in nature with semi-structured interview which involved 10 ESL teachers from UAE and 10 from Gujarat, India who were selected through purposive sampling technique. With a smaller number of participants, it was observed that the teachers were able to share their personal experience on the effective teaching practice. Research suggests that strong and effective teaching of literacy, embodying the principles set out in the work of such authors as Torgesen (2002), can minimise the barriers to participation and learning for pupils with dyslexia.

"Intensive preventive instruction can bring the average word-reading skills of children at risk for reading disabilities solidly into the average range."

Torgesen,2002

Most of the Schools in UAE enlisted under SEIP Dyslexia Program. In UAE school, 10 dyslexic learners were purposefully selected and diagnosed formally by Occupational therapist with accurate psycho-educational report. However, it was difficult in Gujarat Board schools to get a medical report for students. Although the students were not formally diagnosed, but after assessing each student's six months' performance ESL Teachers were able to focus on the learning needs. As part of the research, prior training was given to the teachers. The ESL teachers identified 10 learners who showed signs of Specific Learning Disorder in mainstream classrooms. The selected students were given AS-ESL (After School-English as a Second Language) class in a special setting where the teacher focuses on teaching a small group of students with one-to-one instruction. The focus of this study is on the experiences of ESL teachers and the need of improvement with expected ESL learners within the mainstream classrooms. The ESL teachers are given a training with two months' intervention period to fulfil the remediation class with the diagnosed and expected learners.

The questionnaire used in this study was developed based on the basis of the relevant literature concerning the experiences, the challenges, and the strategies of language teachers who teach pupils with dyslexia (Subramaniam & Che Mat, 2013). It consists of ten guided questions. The interviews were conducted in English language according to the interest of the participants. Each teacher was given pseudonyms as Teacher A, Teacher B and Teacher C to ensure anonymity and secure

their identities. Each interview lasted for approximately 30- 45 minutes. The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim by the author. The responses elicited from the participants were analyzed thematically in order to find the answers to the research questions of this study.

### 3.1 EARLY TASK

Dyslexia is a language processing disability, to be precise dyslexics have a weakness in one or more area of language such as decoding, encoding, phonological awareness, word retrieval and syntax. To be proficient within a SL it, “need[s] the use of specifically those language skills in which [dyslexics] are weak in [their first language]” (Arries, 1999, p. 1).

Dr. Kenneth Dinklage, researcher within the field of learning disabilities and second language learning, believes that dyslexics, due to their disability can only, “make tentative attempts at gaining proficiency with a second language” (Ott 1997, pg.187).

#### 3.1.1 Early clues to Reading Difficulties

No one will doubt that the first step is to know the letters and how they sound. That is technically named as correspondence between graphemes and phonemes (J.P. Das.,2009). Keeping this mind, the researcher conducted a longitudinal study over the span of a year categorized it as Early task, Core Task and Post task. The early task is the stage where activities of basic concepts of grapheme to phoneme will be included. The ESL teachers in UAE and India understand that students with dyslexia really struggle with any language learning and to learn English as a second language is a bigger task.

Firstly, the teachers were given a month training on the expectations of teaching and the strategies to be applied to dyslexics within the mainstream classroom.

*“We were much clear on the expected outcomes of each child. We set an achievable targets and work on their strengths and weaknesses...” (Teacher A)*

ESL Teachers applied the "Sea of Strengths" model (Shaywitz, 2003) by identifying:

- a weakness in getting to the sounds of words

SAMPLE- Table 1: Akia, aged 12		
<b>Gathering Information</b>		Pupil's name: Akia Age: 12
	Source	Your findings
The Pupil's strengths, interests, needs:	The student has told...	Akia is an extrovert person. She loves to dance and participate in co-curricular activities. She creates her own poems and writes on her choice of themes. She feels anxious when she has been asked to read out aloud and time taken tests.

After a month hands on experience, teachers apply the learning into practice. Teachers create a portfolio of each student reflecting on their strengths, weaknesses, approaches and etc.

- a weakness in getting to the sounds of words
- the strengths in thinking and reasoning
- providing early help for the weakness
- accommodations to help access the strengths

Similarly, other students were also analysed by each ESL teacher.

*(Teacher B) “Her spelling errors was overlooked because she has a creative way in thinking the plot of the story ...”.*

Apart from reading, writing ability is another area that is affected by dyslexia and teachers need to focus on other motor development such as holding pencil, putting the objects on the table flexibly (Reid,2000).

### **3.1.2. Specific Learning and other Associated disorder**

Under the big umbrella of Specific Learning Disorder, ESL teacher observed other possible symptoms other than SLD. Though dyslexics face difficulty in reading but they equally struggle to express in writing. A Specific Learning Disorder in Written Expression (Dysgraphia) is a neurobiologically-based writing disability in which a person finds it hard to express themselves on paper. According to DSM 5, a Specific Learning Disorder in Written Expression (Dysgraphia) includes impairment in:

Spelling Accuracy  
Grammar and Punctuation Accuracy  
Clarity or/and Organization of Written Expression

### **3.2 CORE TASK**

#### **3.2.1. General Strategies to train Dyslexics to be an independent reader**

Traditionally, it is observed that dyslexics with difficulty in reading struggle with spelling because they have to encode each phoneme to its corresponding letter. Keeping this in mind, ESL teachers create a pattern according to the learning needs of dyslexics. The pattern should follow:

- a. Reading single syllable words
- b. Focusing on phonemic awareness and tracing the difficulty in decoding unfamiliar words
- c. Reading comprehension focusing on the cognition and reasoning part
- d. Allocated time for Oral Reading of Passages
- e. Spelling Enrichment Programme

Case 1:

Akia (anonymous) shows a superior range in verbal reasoning and high average range in IQ. The evaluations showed a below average scores in Reading. It was clearly evident that a person who scores higher in IQ could under perform in Reading and these discrepancies lose her self-esteem and becomes hesitant in the class too. A comprehensive approach was taken by ESL teachers with a stipulated time frame of achievable goal and result.

She has been gradually showing an interest in higher learning and become more inquisitive. ESL teachers corroborated her accounts by relating their observations and Vocabulary Tests and showed a massive change in her performance. Certainly, the teacher has to introduce change in the strategy of teaching but not the context. The teacher has to bear in mind that a gradual progress is the key to successful teaching (Parmadhayalan, 2009).

#### **3.2.2. Specific Strategies using Kagan's Cooperative Learning Strategies (1994)**

Certainly, the teacher has to introduce change in the strategy of teaching but not the context. The teacher has to bear in mind that a gradual progress in the key to successful teaching. Certainly, the teacher has to introduce change in the strategy of teaching but not the context. The teacher has to bear in mind that a gradual progress in the key to successful teaching. Certainly, the teacher has to introduce change in the strategy of teaching but not the context. The teacher has to bear in mind that a gradual progress in the key to successful teaching.

Cooperative learning involves students working together to accomplish shared goals, and it is this sense of interdependence that motivates group members to help and support each other. When students work cooperatively, they learn to listen to what others have to say, give and receive help, reconcile differences, and resolve problems democratically.

#### **Buddy System/Peer Coaching**

Dyslexics often perform well when they are placed with a buddy or a peer coach. At times, when they are unable to follow teacher's instruction or see from the white board, buddy system often proves beneficial. A buddy steadily monitors the reading status.

#### **Positive reinforcement and feedback**

Dyslexics are constantly striving hard to concentrate and logically sequence instructions. It is a cruel irony if a teacher wouldn't acknowledge their hard work in reaching the set goal of the day.

#### **Think- Pair- Share**

The students are at freedom to perform on their own. ESL teachers would observe the behaviour of dyslexics. The teacher would pose a question and buddy would share with a dyslexic and work in a pair. This strategy will help the dyslexics to think and communicate more

## **Brainstorming**

In general, brainstorming is a very effective strategy in group discussion. Students in the group have roles:

Speed Captain - prompts more ideas

Super Supporter - encourages/recognizes all ideas

Synergy Guru - encourages members to build upon one another's ideas

Secretary - writes ideas

### **3.3 Post Task**

#### **3.3.1. Challenges Faced by ESL Teachers in teaching Dyslexics**

There were certain limitations to ESL teachers in teaching pupils with dyslexia in mainstream classrooms in India. However, in UAE, these challenges were ruled out.

#### **3.3.2 Over populated**

Due to higher number of students within a class, teaching becomes a great challenge for subject teachers. The ESL teachers fill in the gap by facilitating them through one-to-one instruction or in small groups of four or less pupils. Shaywitz (2003) states that the best way to engage SLD learners is through Wilson Reading System by using manipulatives to teach phonics and word analysis skills systematically while stressing fluency, incorporating spelling, and providing engaging materials to read (p.283)

#### **3.3.3 Limited Special Training Related to Dyslexia**

In India, majority of the students are left unidentified at the beginning of their age. No matter how bright and motivated the student must be but there are students who face reading difficulties. Early intervention programs should be encouraged with proper diagnosis. To a greater extent, a teacher can understand how to reach out to the students in need and to look at other functions such as the ability to spell words, to retrieve words, to articulate words and to recall sequences.

Unfortunately, limited training is given to teachers to identify the root cause of the dyslexics. There is an immediate need for training teachers to know the teaching method including the perception and cognition of dyslexia.

## **4. Results and Discussion**

With a span of a year study in India and UAE, there were many positive and negative aspects. The current paper supports the idea that with consistent practice and effort a dyslexic can manage to take further education but still they will have difficulties in cognitive, literacy and daily activities. More specifically, our research shows some similarities with Riddick et al.'s (1999) study who found that the dyslexic group reported themselves as feeling more anxious and less competent in their written work at school than the controls, and rated themselves at university as less competent in their written skills. In addition, self-report questionnaires (such as the Dyslexia Adult Checklist) clearly differentiate the dyslexic group from the group. These screening questionnaires include not only questions about literacy but also items which cover problems such as attention, visual process and organization (Cooper & Miles 2011). They also provide a time-saving way of estimating risk factors for dyslexia.

## **5. Conclusion**

It is difficult to come to a conclusion when there are many other doorways of possibilities opening up. In this paper, we came across ESL teachers' experiences in dealing pupils with dyslexia in mainstream settings. The key findings are that the dyslexics think differently and require more hard work and perseverance on the other hand teachers find it challenging to cater to the ESL learning needs of pupils with dyslexia because of lack of remedial training.

Over a year span, 10 students were given continuous training with regular practice. The question is, 'Did they still show the symptoms of being a dyslexic?' and the answer is "Yes, but identifying the problem at an early age would ensure their strength more rather than weakness.

For further studies, there are possibilities to explore the perspectives of other ESL educators by interviewing secondary school teachers as well as lecturers who are teaching students with dyslexia in different parts of India This should be done in order to accommodate their language learning needs specific to their level of education.

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