

Dyslexia and foreign language learning: Do teachers need theory or practical advice?

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Nijakowska, Joanna. (2010). *Dyslexia in the foreign language classroom*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters. 236 pages, ISBN 978-1-84769-279-5

Overview and purpose of the book

Joanna Nijakowska's 2010 book *Dyslexia in the foreign language classroom* deals with dyslexia in the context of foreign language (FL) learning. The book is a highly comprehensive, up-to-date overview of the most salient theoretical and practical issues pertaining to dyslexia in general and in the context of FL learning. While dyslexia is a prominent and widely researched area both in general and also in case of FL learning, comprehensive works in the dyslexia and FL learning field are very rare, and virtually nonexistent in the past 5-10 years. Most of the recently amassed knowledge in connection with dyslexia and FL learning is available only in separate studies published in various journals, which makes the field seem fragmented and chaotic, and it is difficult to tell what the true state-of-the-art is. Furthermore, due to the fragmented nature of the field, it is not always clear how the findings pertaining to dyslexia in general relate to the findings in connection with FL learning and dyslexia. Therefore, Nijakowska's book is a much needed, all-encompassing overview bridging the gap between studies that deal with dyslexia in general and dyslexia and FL learning specifically.

The book is meant to be a reference book written for professionals involved in FL teaching, most notably novice teachers, in-service teachers, teacher trainees and trainers. The aim of the book is to help them address the challenges posed by having dyslexic students in their FL classrooms by designing effective intervention procedures to help their students. While the book is an excellent theoretical review of research issues, I would argue that the practical aspects of dealing with dyslexic language learners are considerably less emphasised.

Content and analysis

The first two chapters of the book deal with dyslexia in general. Chapter 1 explains the terminology related to dyslexia and describes the process of learning to read and write to show how and where dyslexia may cause difficulties in these processes. A cross-linguistic perspective on dyslexia is also introduced here, explaining how dyslexic symptoms may manifest themselves differently in different languages due to the differences and similarities between the linguistic features of dyslexic learners' native language and the FL they are learning. Introducing this issue is one of the main merits of the book since this aspect of dyslexia and FL learning is often neglected even though it is important to be aware of how dyslexic language learning difficulties may depend on the characteristics of the students' mother tongue and on the features of the FL. This perspective is especially relevant in a

European context where the mother tongue of FL learners varies from country to country. In contrast, in the American and British context, where most of the research on dyslexia traditionally originates from, English is automatically supposed to be the native language of dyslexic FL learners; therefore, some of the problems they encounter when learning a FL might not be universal, but specific to native speakers of English.

In Chapter 2 the most widely researched causes of dyslexia are listed and described, presenting theories from several academic fields including genetics, neurology, cognitive psychology, and psycholinguistics. Another merit of the book is that despite the multitude of theories and explanations of dyslexia, it manages to present them in an organised manner and to highlight the complex relationship between these theories while still acknowledging that creating a truly all-encompassing model of dyslexia has not been entirely successful up to now. By the end of the chapter it becomes clear to the reader that it is impossible to pinpoint a direct cause of dyslexia at the genetic/biological level, the cognitive or the behavioural level, but that difficulties on all these levels surmount to the complex condition that is dyslexia. Consequently, the interdisciplinary approach of this chapter is absolutely necessary.

Chapter 3 is devoted to the theoretical background of dyslexia and foreign language learning. While it mainly endorses Sparks and Ganschow's (Sparks et al., 1989) Linguistic Coding Hypothesis (LCDH), which basically states that the main cause of FL learning problems is native language coding problems, the chapter also describes the potential problems with the LCDH studies and introduces some alternative theories as well. Furthermore, this chapter convincingly refutes the notion of a FL learning disability, the idea that there is a distinct type of learning disability for foreign languages, a notion which is often used to argue that dyslexics should not learn foreign languages because they cannot. The refutation of this line of thinking is done plausibly, based on sound research evidence, while it is also acknowledged that there is no clear cut answer to the question whether dyslexia always occurs together with FL learning difficulties and whether FL learning difficulties always signify the presence of a learning difficulty.

Chapter 4 deals with the identification and diagnosis of dyslexia. Based on the previous chapters it is easy for the reader to understand why the diagnosis of dyslexia is a complex issue and why a single reading test is not enough to identify it, uncover its underlying causes and design effective intervention (see Chapter 2). This chapter, again, features the very welcome bilingual/multilingual perspective introduced in chapter 1.

Chapters 5 and 6 can be considered as the 'practical chapters' since they deal with the general principles of teaching dyslexic FL learners illustrating these principles with sample language learning tasks. Chapter 5 describes the treatment and teaching of dyslexics with emphasis on methodological issues, especially the Multisensory Structured Learning Approach. It also discusses other accommodations for dyslexics such as ignoring spelling mistakes, using technological gadgets, and enhancing the students' motivation. Chapter 6 has sample activities for raising the phonological, orthographic, morphological, and grammatical awareness of dyslexic learners complete with instructions and illustrations. The weak point of this chapter is that the activities presented are mainly suitable for children who are beginner students of English. Although it can be argued that the ideas used in these tasks can be employed to design tasks for other language learning contexts, teachers might be unsure how to extend certain task design principles to their context, especially since the tasks are presented separately, not in the framework of lesson plans, syllabuses, or large-scale intervention programs.

Overall

Overall, we can say that Nijakowska's book is easily the most comprehensive overview of FL learning and dyslexia in the market right now. Its complex, multidisciplinary, multi-layered approach gives the reader a thorough understanding of dyslexia. The integration of the cross-linguistic perspective to counter Anglo-Saxon research approaches is especially timely and welcome. Finally, the author is not afraid to delve in to the murkier waters of dyslexia research, topics like bilingualism or multilingualism in dyslexia or the relationship of native language and FL skills. Although the author presents several aspects of these issues, at the end of each chapter she summarizes them clearly, giving the reader a clear indication of what is agreed on by most researchers and what is still a matter of debate.

Having praised the book on its comprehensiveness, it can also be argued that while it gives a very detailed picture of dyslexia as a learning difficulty, it views the condition in a vacuum rather than in terms of the educational context or the learner as a whole. While issues such as motivation, anxiety and segregation versus inclusion are discussed briefly, issues such as the parents' perspective, the behavioural and emotional disorders arising from dyslexia, conditions that can co-occur often with dyslexia such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and the strengths of dyslexics are not dealt with or are only very briefly mentioned. It has to be noted that the book still gives a perfectly coherent picture of dyslexia; the lack of these issues is only noticeable because of the expressed aim of the book.

Even though the main purpose of the book as professed in the Introduction is to help those engaged in FL teaching, listing novice and in-service teachers specifically, I would argue that the book is more research than practice oriented. This is reflected by the proportion of the theoretical and practical chapters; the theoretical chapters (chapters 1–4) significantly outweigh the practical ones (chapters 5 and 6), and even the 5th chapter includes a 12-page research study discussing the results of a small scale intervention study on dyslexia and foreign language learning. While it is definitely important for practicing teachers to be familiar with the theoretical background of dyslexia, it is questionable whether even the more dedicated teachers would be willing to read through 4 highly theoretical chapters tackling complex issues for the methodological payoff of chapters 5 and 6. I agree with the author that it is necessary to delve into the not so clear cut, more theoretical aspects of dyslexia to understand its nature; therefore, it is not enough to make a long list of methods, tips, and tricks, hoping that teachers will be able to employ them. Understanding why those methods work is of crucial importance. However, the research issues in the book are discussed in separate chapters from the practical ones. The research aspects are not immediately connected to classroom practice which makes it different from books such as Schneider and Crombie's (2003) handbook that place more emphasis on the methods and give the theoretical background to why those methods work. Maybe Nijakowska's book would be a more accessible handbook for practicing teachers if the theoretical and practical chapters were more integrated. Naturally, this does not diminish the value of this book; however, its focus is on theory rather than practice.

References:

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