

# Raising awareness of dyslexia

*Světlana Hanušová and Naděžda Vojtková present the DysTEFL project.*



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Foreign language learning is undoubtedly more challenging for learners with dyslexia than for most other learners. Although the exemption of the learners with specific learning difficulties from foreign language instruction was common in the past, it is no longer an option. Educational policy makers in many countries insist on the right of learners with dyslexia to have opportunities to achieve their full potential, including foreign language learning.

## DysTEFL project

In our workshop at the IATEFL conference in Harrogate we presented the outcomes of the DysTEFL project funded by Comenius LLP. The main aim of the project was to improve the quality of inclusive education of pupils with dyslexia. Together with the consortium of project partners from Poland, Great Britain, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Germany and

Austria we developed a special training course and materials for teachers of English as a foreign language in order to equip them with the appropriate knowledge, attitudes and skills that will enhance the quality of their teaching.

Prior to working on the course materials, we asked English teachers and teacher trainees in Europe (and elsewhere) about their needs, expectations and priorities related to their work with dyslexic learners. We received answers from almost 400 respondents, the majority of whom showed low levels of confidence, knowledge and experience when identifying, teaching and assessing dyslexic individuals. They stated that their pre-service and in-service teacher training did not equip them with the necessary information on dyslexia and did not teach them what a suitable approach to dyslexic students should look like.

We also decided to examine and analyse legal documents in the partner countries, in which we identified a trend to accommodate dyslexic learners in the classroom, both in terms of instruction

and assessment. Quite interestingly, the accommodation measures were specified in the area of assessment whereas the description of accommodation in the methods of instruction often remained on a rather general level.

We believe that if teachers are made legally responsible for accommodating the needs of learners with dyslexia in instruction and assessment, there should be opportunities for them to develop the necessary knowledge and skills. Therefore, we also researched the range of courses dealing with dyslexia in foreign language teaching both in pre-service and in-service teacher training in the partner countries. The courses offered were rather scarce, especially in pre-service teacher training. Without appropriate training opportunities we find it is very difficult for teachers to comply with the policies formulated in national educational documents. The declaration of an inclusive policy cannot automatically guarantee its implementation in the classroom.

## DysTEFL course: a task-based approach enhancing reflection and learning

When designing the course for teachers we wanted to offer more than just tips and recipes. We adopted a task-based approach, which employs tasks to enhance reflection and learning. We aimed at raising the course participants' understanding of cognitive, emotional and social issues associated with dyslexia and their influence on foreign language learning and teaching, as we believe it is crucial for teachers who have to make informed pedagogical decisions in their own teaching contexts. The first four units of the course are so-called foundation units, and the rest (six units) deal with classroom management, teaching and assessment techniques.

What we wanted to avoid was writing another book serving as a depository of relevant information about dyslexia and language teaching, as such resources already exist, some of them authored by DysTEFL project partners (Kormos and Smith 2012; Nijakowska 2010).

Each course unit follows a reflective cycle. The initial awareness-raising tasks that take the form of pair and group discussions, surveys or diary entries focus on the trainees' own experience, reflection on their current practices, attitudes and preconceptions. The following input phase brings new ideas and relevant background information. The input, in particular course units, is presented in various ways: as brief online lectures, narrated PowerPoint presentations, recorded interviews with experts in the field, book chapters or articles. After the input phase the trainees are asked to apply the new knowledge while performing tasks that include writing summaries of the information presented, finding key points, filling in worksheets, preparing lesson plans or instructional materials relevant for their contexts.

Cooperation among trainees is encouraged through collaborative tasks throughout the course so that the trainees can gain input not only through materials and from the trainer but also from each other. Finally the trainees reflect on what they learnt in the course of the unit.

## The effect of dyslexia on foreign language learning

In this part of the article we would like to share some tasks and activities that our course participants found useful and inspiring.

In Unit 4 of the course the main focus is on the effects of dyslexia on foreign language learning. After the initial discussion regarding whether it is possible for dyslexic learners to learn foreign languages, the trainees learn about the Linguistic Coding Difference Hypothesis and then they engage in an activity in which they match the areas of difficulty with the signs a teacher can observe in lessons. A short extract from the material is presented below:

### Unit 4: Task 2 Step 1

*Characteristics of dyslexic learners which may affect learning*

- Phonological processing: Poor grasp of sound/symbol correspondence
- Lack of awareness of individual sounds within words
- Auditory discrimination/perception
- Unsure of the sound which has been heard
- Difficulty in perceiving the difference between similar sounds
- Difficulty in knowing where a spoken word ends and a new word begins

*The effect on foreign language learning—dyslexic learners may have difficulties with*

- Pronunciation, even of frequently encountered words.
- Recognizing familiar words & phrases and confusion of similar sounding words.
- Reading, especially if asked to read aloud.
- Knowing whether a sound is being pronounced correctly (e.g. repeating after the teacher)
- Ability to recognise the difference between two words containing similar sounds in either language
- Listening tasks
- Answering oral questions

In this activity the trainees are exposed to a vast number of different signs and the variety of the combinations that each dyslexic learner can possess. They learn that no two dyslexic learners are identical. After this conclusion the trainees are asked to prepare a scenario of an interview with a dyslexic learner to find out what specific problems the learner has to cope with. They can check their ideas with a sample interview and refer back to the matching activity descriptions. Finally, they carry out their interview with a dyslexic learner in their schools and create a profile of the learner.

## Teaching reading and writing to dyslexic learners

In the opening section of the unit dealing with reading and writing skills the trainees brainstorm possible problems that dyslexic learners can face while reading and writing in English. They use a Venn diagram to categorise the problems into three areas: reading, writing and both. In the area of reading they usually mention 'visually challenging' texts and problems with texts that are far beyond the learners' level of English in terms of vocabulary, syntax and morphology. They come to the conclusion that the majority of texts, especially authentic ones, should be adjusted to their students' needs. Then, the trainees are guided step by step via a narrated PowerPoint presentation to adjust an authentic text in all the necessary areas (i.e. content, length, language quality, layout, fonts and colours). They also learn how to help learners with dyslexia with vocabulary they don't know (for example, by preparing a glossary of content words or by paraphrasing difficult parts of the text) and experiment with various electronic devices that can convert a text into an audio file. Having adjusted the text, the trainees begin planning a reading activity. In the final reflection they look at the problematic areas on their Venn diagram again and find out how many of them they have addressed in their activity plans.

## Course availability

In order to reach teachers in a variety of countries, we designed the course in three different formats. We published booklets for teacher trainers and trainees for use in face-to-face courses (these courses are offered by the project partners but can also be offered by other teacher trainers). A slightly modified version of the course is available online and is suitable for self-study. The last format, a moderated course in LMS Moodle, is offered exclusively by the project partners.

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<http://www.dystepl.eu>

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