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## GERMAN LANGUAGE TEACHERS AND DYSLEXIC STUDENTS

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**Abstract.** Dyslexia is a common disorder experienced by many students in Europe and worldwide. It is a specific learning disability, which also generates difficulties in foreign language acquisition. Publications presenting the etiology, pathomechanism, symptoms and types of dyslexia can be found in literature. There are also guidelines for parents and teachers of dyslexic children. This paper attempts to fill a gap in literature addressing teachers of specific school subjects, more specifically German language teachers, who have dyslexic children in their classes. The article points out the difficulties faced by both the teacher and the students. We present a synthetic review of the literature on dyslexia and the current research on the subject, followed by the key laws and regulations in the Polish legal system that relate to the situation of a dyslexic child at school, with particular emphasis on modern language (German) classes. The Polish legal system and the knowledge contained in the most recent literature set the framework for the conduct of educational institutions and indicate the principles of action of professionals, including Germanists, involved in the education of dyslexic students. Symptoms of specific foreign language learning difficulties include, for example, poor development of linguistic functions, difficulties in differentiating sounds and finding sounds in words, problems with dividing words into syllables or distinguishing similar-sounding words, difficulties in assimilating grammatical and spelling rules. Compilation of practical tips with guidelines for the assessment of dyslexic pupils, e.g., the use of descriptive assessment for written work, possible use a computer for written work, providing oral answers to questions from the bench rather than the middle of the classroom, asking simply formulated questions, is most essential for German language teachers. These teachers, as well as teachers of any modern language, should bear in mind the need to use pedagogical, legal and practical knowledge in their work with dyslexic students.

**Keywords:** developmental dyslexia, specific reading and writing difficulties, German language teachers, symptoms of dyslexia, learning German, legal regulations for dyslexic students.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Dyslexia is a disorder experienced by a large group of children, with about 10-15% of affected students in Europe. There is a large body of pedagogical, psychological and speech therapy literature on the subject. Most of these publications present the disorder in terms of its pathomechanism, symptoms and the forms it can have in specific individuals. Guidelines for teachers and parents of dyslexic children are also offered (Bogdanowicz, & Adryjanek, 2005; Bogdanowicz, Adryjanek, & Rożyńska, 2007; Bogdanowicz, Krasowicz-Kupis, Kwiatkowska, Wiejak, & Weremiuk, 2014). However, papers addressing teachers of specific subjects who have dyslexic students in their classes are missing. Indeed, most scientific papers are limited to the general guidelines for all teachers (Półtorak, 2007).

This paper attempts to point out the difficulties faced by German language teachers in their work

with dyslexic students. This review paper is structured as follows: an introduction, a review of the literature on dyslexia, presentation of the current research, a discussion of the concept and types of dyslexia and its pathomechanism. This is followed by an analysis of normative and legal documents with regard to the organization of the learning process for a dyslexic child. The key information with regard to the subject under discussion is provided in the section devoted to the symptoms of specific foreign language (mainly German) learning difficulties and the compilation of practical guidelines for German language teachers, along with guidelines for the assessment of dyslexic students. The article closes with general conclusions on the need for German language teachers to use and combine theoretical, legal and practical knowledge when working with dyslexic children.

## 2. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

### 2.1 Dyslexia - a review of literature and research

Different definitions describe dyslexia as a linguistic, neurological, psychological, social and pedagogical disorder (Bogdanowicz, 2006; Borkowska, 2006; Cieszyńska, 2010; Czajkowska, & Herda, 1996; Fawcett, Nicolson, 2004; Makarewicz, 2006; Mirecka, 2010; Sochacka, 2004). This is due to the diverse nature of worldwide research conducted by representatives of many disciplines. The definition of 'dyslexia' formulated by the oldest association dealing with this issue, i.e., the Research Committee of The Orton Dyslexia Society, is as follows: *"Dyslexia is one of several distinct learning disabilities. It is a specific language-based disorder of constitutional origin characterized by difficulties in single word decoding, usually reflecting insufficient phonological processing abilities. These difficulties in single word decoding are often unexpected in relation to age and other cognitive and academic abilities; they are not the result of generalized developmental disability or sensory impairment. Dyslexia is manifest by variable difficulty with different forms of language, often including, in addition to problems reading, a conspicuous problem with acquiring proficiency in writing and spelling"*. (Bogdanowicz, 1996, p. 35).

A term 'developmental dyslexion', which indicates the innate nature of the difficulty as opposed to dyslexia acquired later in life, may be found in literature. Depending on the perspective from which dyslexia is viewed, it may be associated with a different type of difficulty. For example, from the perspective of speech therapy, developmental dyslexia is seen as a disorder of linguistic communication, i.e. *"a disorder of written communication, which is often very closely related to a disorder or delay in the child's speech development - a disrupted acquisition of linguistic competences and skills (in particular phonological and phonetic, but also morphological, lexical, syntactic and text structure-related)"*. (Domagała, Mirecka, 2015, p. 439). In addition to the term "developmental dyslexia", extended terms such as "specific reading and writing disorders" or "specific difficulties in reading and writing", are used in the literature (Domagała, Mirecka, & Muzyka-Furtak, 2016, p. 182).

Given the quality and extent of problems associated with dyslexia, it is reasonable to use the term dyslexia constellation, i.e., the concept of learning disorders associated with a variety of abnormalities with a common developmental nature and specific cortical dysfunctions. Dyslexia involves difficulties with learning, processing, understanding and remembering new information. Additionally, problems with implementing the newly acquired knowledge occur. It is important to note that these difficulties are unrelated to the level of intelligence. Instead, biological, environmental and educational factors are involved (Habib, 2004, p. 185).

The main goal of research on dyslexia has been to understand its etiology. It has contributed to several leading etiological concepts: organic (structural changes in brain tissue are the cause of learning disabilities in reading and writing), genetic (inherited changes in the central nervous system), and hormonal factors (prenatal overproduction of testosterone inhibits the development of the left cerebral hemisphere), delayed maturation of the central nervous system (slower maturation of brain areas associated with reading and writing), psychodyslexia (emotional disorders as a result of e.g. stress, conflicts, psychological trauma, cause learning difficulties in reading and writing) and polyetiology

(many factors determine the occurrence of dyslexia) (Czajkowska, & Herda, 1996; Skałbania, 2011).

A literature analysis has shown that there are many classification systems for dyslexic disorders. Among them, the typology based on the type of dysfunction underlying the disorder: visual dyslexia (impaired visual perception and memory), auditory dyslexia (impaired auditory perception and memory of speech sounds), mixed dyslexia (dysfunctions in several areas), and integrative dyslexia (difficulty coordinating perceptual-motor functions), may be distinguished (Bogdanowicz, & Adryjanek, 2005, p. 71; Szkolak-Stępień, 2018, p. 222). Other classifications of dyslexia were based on qualitative differences in reading and writing (Boder's typology), or the dominance of the right or left-brain hemisphere (neuropsychological classification proposed by D.J. Bakker) (Bielen, 2004; Jarosz, Wysocka, 2006).

## 2.2. A dyslexic child in normative and legal documents

The support for a child with specific learning difficulties is very well regulated in the Polish educational system, in particular through the Act of Educational Law of 14 December 2016 (Journal of Laws 2017, item 59) and executive acts to this Act, i.e. Regulations of the Minister of National Education addressing the functioning of state kindergartens and state schools, as well as the principles of operation of state psychological and pedagogical counselling centers, including specialist counselling centers. Normative principles for the above issues are also posted on the website of the Ministry of Education and Science and on the website of the Education Superintendency of a given voivodeship. Interpretation of legal regulations was also addressed by the Education Development Center in educational material entitled "*Akty prawne na rzecz ucznia z symptomami ryzyka dysleksji oraz zadania nauczycieli edukacji wczesnoszkolnej w organizowaniu pomocy psychologiczno-pedagogicznej* [Legal acts for the benefit of students with symptoms of the risk of dyslexia and the tasks of early childhood education teachers in organizing psychological and pedagogical support]" by Jolanta Rafał-Łuniewska, where the author collected and discussed the legal provisions on the above issue (Rafał-Łuniewska, pdf). The earlier Regulation of the Minister of National Education of 17 November 2010 on the principles of providing and organizing psychological and pedagogical assistance in state kindergartens, schools and institutions (Journal of Laws No. 228, item 1487), based on the Act of 7 September 1991 on the Educational System (Journal of Laws 1991, No. 95, item 425), already indicated the principles for dealing and working with a dyslexic child. For the aforementioned regulation, the Education Development Center, in the person of Jolanta Rafał-Łuniewska, developed the "*Strategy of actions towards a dyslexic student at risk*" (Rafał-Łuniewska, 2013).

Another publication edited by Sister Maria Bogumiła Pecyna (2011) entitled "*Dysleksja rozwojowa, fakty i tajemnica w diagnostyce psychologiczno-pedagogicznej* [Developmental dyslexia, facts and mystery in psychological and pedagogical diagnosis]" shows the complexity of the problems in functioning of a dyslexic child. The Regulation of the Minister of National Education of 9 August 2017 on the rules for the organization and provision of psychological and educational support in public nursery schools, schools and other educational institutions, where § 2, paragraph 2 states that the need to provide a student with psychological and pedagogical assistance in a kindergarten, school and institution results in particular from item 6 of this § 2, i.e. "from specific learning difficulties", is an important document normalizing the support for children at risk of dyslexia. The aforementioned Regulation of 9 August 2017 indicates in § 9 that speech therapy classes are organized for pupils with competence deficits and language disorders. The number of participants in the classes shall not exceed four. The legislator in the aforementioned regulation referred to the role of a speech therapist in alleviating speech disorders: "[...] § 25. The tasks of a speech therapist in a kindergarten, school or other institution include in particular: 1) speech therapy diagnosis, including screening tests to assess speech and the level of linguistic development of pupils; 2) conducting speech therapy classes for pupils, as well as counselling and consultations for parents and teachers on the stimulation of pupils' speech development and elimination of speech disorders; 3) taking preventive measures to prevent disorders of linguistic communication in cooperation with parents; 4) supporting teachers, educators of

*educational groups and other specialists in: a) recognizing individual developmental and educational needs and psycho-physical capabilities of students in order to identify their strengths, predispositions, interests and aptitudes or talents, as well as reasons behind academic failures or difficulties in pupils' functioning, including barriers and constraints which make it difficult for them to function and participate in the life of their (nursery) school or educational institution; b) providing psychological and pedagogical assistance [...]"* (Journal of Laws 2017, item 1591).

Another Regulation of the Minister of National Education of 22 February 2019 on the assessment of pupils and learners, eligibility for assessment and promotion in public schools, where § 6, paragraph 2 indicates that in the case of a pupil with profound developmental dyslexia, the headmaster is obliged to take specific actions: *"In the case of a pupil pursuant to paragraph 1 who has an special educational or individual educational needs statement, which indicates the need to exempt the pupil from learning a second foreign language, exemption from the learning of this foreign language may take place on the basis of this statement" and in paragraph 3 "in the case of an exemption of a pupil from learning a second foreign language, in the documentation of the course of teaching, instead of the classification grade, 'exempted' shall be written"* (Journal of Laws 2019, item 373).

Since German is an inflected language, it poses many difficulties for dyslexic students. It is worth referring here to the research conducted at the University of Sheffield, which has shown that dyslexic learners have a disrupted automatised, which is crucial when learning to write and read (Fawcett, & Nicolson, 2004, pp. 43-75). Methodological recommendations for teaching a dyslexic student a modern language can also be found in the journal *"Języki Obce w Szkole [Foreign Languages at School]"*, where, among others, Anna Jurek, in the series of publications *"Języki obce w nauczaniu uczniów z dysleksją rozwojową [Foreign Languages in the Teaching of Students with Developmental Dyslexia]"* (Jurek, 2004, part 1, pp. 57-72; Jurek, 2004, part 2, pp. 46-54; Jurek, 2004, part 3, p. 37-45) points out ways of overcoming difficulties in learning to read and write by dyslexic children. A paper by Katarzyna Maria Bogdanowicz (2011) entitled *"Dysleksja a nauczanie języków obcych [Dyslexia and foreign language teaching]"* is a valuable methodological resource on teaching dyslexic students a foreign language. As far the most recent literature on the subject, it is worth referring to the publication entitled *"Praca z uczniem dyslektycznym na lekcjach języka obcego [Working with a dyslexic student in foreign language classes]"* by Iwona Gryz (2015, pp. 67-75) and *"Indywidualne style uczenia się uczniów z dysleksją a nauczanie języka obcego w szkole ogólnodostępnej- zarys problematyki [Individual learning styles of dyslexic students and foreign language teaching in a mainstream school- an overview]"* by Mariola Jaworska (2015, p. 55-70). The most up-to-date literature on the subject also includes author's monographs and books edited by: Grażyna Krasiewicz-Kupis (2019) entitled *"Nowa psychologia dysleksji [The new psychology of dyslexia]"*, Gavin Reid (2018) *"Dyslexia: A Practitioner's Handbook"* and a publication by Teresa Wejner-Jaworska (2019) entitled *"Dysleksja z perspektywy dorosłości [Dyslexia from an adult perspective]"*.

As can be seen, the Polish legal system and the recent literature set the framework for the role of educational institutions towards a dyslexic child and indicate the rules for the management of dyslexic students by various educational institutions and professionals, including German language teachers.

### **2.3 Symptoms of specific difficulties in learning a foreign language**

Research (Nijakowska, 2004) shows that there is a relationship between linguistic competence in the mother tongue and the ease of acquiring a foreign language. The higher the metasyntactic competence, i.e., linguistic processing, comprehension and expression, the level of sentence construction competence, and the higher the meta semantic competence, i.e., adequate vocabulary development, correct construction of utterances and understanding the meaning of individual words, the higher the above-mentioned competence in the process of learning foreign languages. Dyslexia is a specific learning difficulty, which also affects language acquisition. The poor development of language functions in a foreign language refers to (as in the case of the mother tongue) difficulties in distinguishing individual sounds, finding sounds in words, dividing words into syllables, remembering the meaning of new

words in a foreign language, distinguishing similar-sounding words and homophones. Dyslexic individuals have impaired automaticity, which is responsible for remembering what we learn from writing and reading (Fawcett, & Nicolson, 2004, pp. 43-75). Furthermore, dyslexic children show difficulties in remembering word sequences, such as the names of days of the week or the names of months. Dyslexic pupils also find it challenging to learn grammar and spelling rules, although it is easier for them to acquire theoretical knowledge and more difficult to apply the rules in practice. They are much more fluent in spoken foreign language but have difficulties in reading and writing essays. Dyslexia in foreign language learning also manifests itself in the use of spelling rules, as students have difficulty distinguishing between sounds and letters in words. Furthermore, foreign languages have a large number of exceptions, words that are irregularly conjugated, which poses a great difficulty for dyslexic students (Bogdanowicz, 2005, 2011; Jaworska, 2013; Jurek, 2004).

#### **2.4 Practical tips for German language teachers**

German is an inflected language and therefore poses particular difficulties for dyslexic students. Success in teaching these students depends to a large extent on the way classes are run. Lessons should be conducted in a flexible manner with an appropriate choice of materials and methods adapted to the students' competences. A German language teacher should be aware at all times that dyslexic children process information in a different way than most students. The teacher needs to show empathy and openness towards dyslexic pupils. Adequately selected exercises, which will help alleviate stress and reinforce the learner's confidence, should be used to help overcome language barriers. Supported learning process will allow students for acquiring basic knowledge of the German language. In order to facilitate students' acquisition of German, the teacher should, among other things, clearly explain grammatical rules and spelling in the native language during lessons. The knowledge of vocabulary should be checked orally. Additionally, a fill-in text is recommended instead of a dictation. Pupils should have frequent exposure to the German language through music and German-language films, visuals, etc. Phonetic transcription should not be introduced. In general, a large number of practical exercises is advisable. In order to enhance language skills, frequent revision of the material covered is important, but without overburdening the student. Even small improvements should be noticed and appreciated by the teacher. The material covered during a lesson needs to be presented in a clear and comprehensible way. It is important to provide an overview of the lesson at the beginning of each class. In addition, a deductive approach is recommended, as dyslexics show difficulties in inductive identification of rules based on just a few sentences.

Clarity of teaching materials is also very important: larger, easy-to-read letters clearly separating tasks facilitate concentration and perception. In addition, many dyslexics find it difficult to identify rules based on what they hear or read; in other words, implicit learning is more difficult for them. Therefore, it is helpful to discuss the rules and details explicitly, as this draws their attention to important details. Talking about details helps dyslexic children to build up representations in long-term memory that they can later recall. It is very important to work step by step, as pupils experience problems with partial cognitive performance, i.e., attention, perception and working memory capacity. Tasks to be completed should be formulated in short, simple sentences and very precisely. Language learners should be given, for example, not five, but three tasks to practice. It is also important to always check that they have understood the tasks and to monitor their work. In conclusion, learners should carry out the tasks to the end so that they can reproduce what they have learned, even in stressful situations.

Even when introducing a new grammatical phenomenon, it is important to discuss it gradually. Example situations (e.g., with simple pictures, drawings) that can be processed without detailed analysis should be presented first. A picture, a short dialogue can also help to put oneself in the situation. Dyslexic pupils can then try to create sentences with ready-made expressions without taking the time to recall the relevant vocabulary. It is only after the introductory phase that the pupils' attention should be focused on details in order to thoroughly practice the structures discussed. This requires patience from

teachers as this phase can take a relatively long time (Kohlmann, (2017).

## 2.5. Guidelines for assessing dyslexic students in German classes

Assessing pupils for their achievements is an important part of the school learning process. This also applies to children with dyslexia. In any case, it should be remembered that such assessment is intended to support and motivate pupils rather than indicate the level of their value, designated by a number (from a failing grade to an excellent grade). *"The starting point of this complex intellectual activity, which consists of an analysis of the teaching and learning process, should be not only knowledge and skills, but also - which is particularly important in the case of students with specific learning difficulties - the individuality of the learner and his/her developmental capabilities"* (Jaworska 2013, pp. 84-85). At the beginning of the school year, a German language teacher presents the rules for grading students. Here are some of the specific guidelines relevant when assessing dyslexic students:

- assessment should take into account the student's effort rather than the outcome itself, which is usually much lower than that of peers;
- amount of material to be mastered over a given period of time should be limited or divided into smaller portions;
- pupils should answer questions from where they are sitting rather than from the middle of the classroom, which increases stress and makes thinking even more difficult;
- it is recommended that the teacher focus on assessing students' knowledge based on their oral statements, making sure beforehand that the question has been properly understood; if necessary, the question should be rephrased or repeated;
- we should remember to ask simple questions; complex instructions may be incomprehensible to a dyslexic pupil; words in German should be pronounced slowly and clearly;
- it should be borne in mind that a dyslexic student needs more time to respond; the teacher should be ready to provide supporting questions if necessary; the focus must shift from assessing pronunciation to the student's fulfilment of the communicative purpose of the utterance; fluency of speech and pronunciation should be assessed liberally;
- during written tests, a dyslexic pupil should be allowed to use a pencil to repeatedly correct mistakes; the graphic aspect of the work should not be assessed; left-handed pupils must be given freedom of movement when writing and the sheet of paper must be properly arranged;
- language errors which do not interfere with communication, i.e. articles, punctuation, missing or misplaced letters, should not be assessed in written assignments; instead, the teacher should place emphasis on the richness of content and vocabulary;
- teacher should absolutely refrain from urging a dyslexic pupil or making comments; it is the responsibility of the teacher to protect the pupil from being ridiculed by his/her peers;
- it is advisable to introduce the possibility of using a computer for written work, particularly for pupils in the older grades;
- it is essential to use a descriptive way of assessing written work, which will both motivate the student and provide feedback on the mistakes made;
- dictations written in German should not be assessed; they should only play a role of a spelling exercise;
- it is necessary to stay in close cooperation with the child's parents/guardians, encourage them to help with homework; inform them in advance about the proposed final grades (Bogdanowicz, Adryjanek, & Rożyńska, 2007; Gryz, 2015; Pawłowska, 2011).

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

A German language teacher, like any foreign language teacher, should show great empathy and patience when working with a dyslexic child. The aim of this paper was to show the quality and extent of the problems faced by a dyslexic student. It attempted to confront the views on dyslexia with the legislation and the situation of a dyslexic child in the German language classroom. A German language teacher should bear in mind the need to use and combine pedagogical, psychological, legal and practical knowledge when working with dyslexic children. Each field of knowledge in this area has specific consequences and influences the organization of the learning process for dyslexic children. Specific guidelines for German language classes provide the basic factual knowledge to make this work effective and devoid of unnecessary stress on the part of dyslexic pupils as well as the teacher. When working with a dyslexic child, it is important to remember that problems with the mother tongue become also evident in foreign language learning. Therefore, we should first try to make up for mother tongue deficiencies in these pupils, which will certainly make learning a foreign language easier: *"Kinder mit LRS haben bereits in ihrer Muttersprache mit deutlichen Schwierigkeiten beim Erwerb der Schriftsprache zu kämpfen. Wenn sprachliche Grundfertigkeiten fehlen, zeigen sich die Auswirkungen in der Fremdsprache. Betroffene Kinder verfügen demnach nicht über ein grundlegendes sprachliches Verständnis, das auf fremde Sprachstrukturen angewendet werden könnte. Ein neues sprachliches Regelwerk kann für Verwirrung sorgen und so Probleme in der Muttersprache sichtbar machen, die Ihr Kind zuvor noch durch bestimmte Kompensationsstrategien ausgleichen konnte. Um die optimalen Rahmenbedingungen für den Erwerb einer Fremdsprache zu bieten, sollten die Defizite daher zunächst in der Muttersprache ausgeglichen werden. Gezielte Förderung festigt die Lese- und Rechtschreibfähigkeiten in der Muttersprache und nimmt einen positiven Einfluss auf das Erlernen einer Fremdsprache."*

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Дислексія - це розлад, з яким стикається значна кількість учнів у Європі та світі. Це специфічні труднощі у навчанні, в тому числі у вивченні мови. У літературі можна знайти публікації, що описують передумови, патомеханізм, симптоми та види дислексії. Існують також посібники, орієнтовані на батьків і вчителів дітей з дислексією. Ця стаття намагається заповнити прогалину у відсутності публікацій, адресованих вчителям конкретних шкільних предметів, зокрема, вчителям німецької мови, які мають у своїх класах дітей з дислексією. У статті вказується на труднощі, з якими стикаються вчитель та учні. Після синтетичного огляду літератури про дислексію та презентації стану досліджень на цю тему наводяться основні закони та положення польської правової системи, які стосуються становища дитини з дислексією в школі і, зокрема, на уроках сучасної мови (німецької). Польська правова система та знання, що містяться в найновішій

літературі, встановлюють рамки поведінки навчальних закладів та вказують на принципи впливу професіоналів, у тому числі германістів, при навчанні учня з дислексією. Симптомами специфічних труднощів у навчанні іноземної мови є, наприклад: недостатній розвиток лінгвістичних функцій, труднощі з диференціацією звуків і знаходженням звуків у словах, проблеми з поділом слів на склади або розрізненням схожих за звучанням слів, труднощі із засвоєнням граматичних і орфографічних правил. Найбільш важливим для вчителів німецької мови є збірник практичних порад з рекомендаціями щодо оцінювання групи учнів з дислексією, наприклад, використання описового оцінювання письмових робіт, запровадження можливості написання письмових робіт на комп'ютері, усне опитування з лави, не виходячи на середину класу, ставлячи просто сформульовані запитання. Вчителі німецької мови, як і вчителі будь-якої сучасної мови, повинні пам'ятати про необхідність використання педагогічних, юридичних та практичних знань у роботі з учнями з дислексією.

**Ключові слова:** дислексія, специфічні труднощі читання та письма, вчителі німецької мови, симптоми дислексії, вивчення німецької мови, правові норми щодо учнів з дислексією.