

TEACHING READING IN PRIMARY SCHOOL: PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS

STANISLAV MUGAKO, MARGARITA SIROTKINA
Polotsk State University, Belarus

The article focuses on reading skills development. The process of reading is analyzed. The difficulties learners may face and possible solutions are described.

Reading is the process of looking at a series of written symbols and getting meaning from them [1]. When we read, we use our eyes to receive written symbols (letters, punctuation marks and spaces) and we use our brain to convert them into words, sentences and paragraphs that communicate something to us.

Reading is a receptive skill – through it we receive information. But the complex process of reading also requires the skill of speaking, so that we can pronounce the words that we read. In this sense, reading is also a productive skill in that we are both receiving information and transmitting it (even if only to ourselves).

Reading is specific to the human species, like speech, but reading does not follow, or at least not directly, from innate capabilities which are activated simply by spending time with written material. With rare exceptions, children learn to speak by being exposed to a linguistic environment and being encouraged into linguistic exchanges. They learn to talk according to a developmental scheme, which is both genetically programmed and geared to the properties of each particular mother tongue. Reading, as opposed to speaking, has to be learnt 'formally'. It has to be 'taught' and assimilated, either in childhood or later. Without pedagogy children remain illiterate. It is a tragedy that there are some 774 million, roughly 20% of the global adult population, illiterate people in the world [1].

Sometimes, children and adults encounter reading difficulties. These difficulties are not limited to age or to the fact whether a person is a native English speaker, or a student learning English as a second or foreign language. Reading difficulties may appear in many different forms and range from an inadequate vocabulary building to medical conditions, such as dyslexia and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Learning how to assess a reader's ability, and to identify reading difficulties, requires attention to detail and sometimes tests to gauge a reader's comprehension levels and skills.

Reading difficulties are not always easy to identify. Many people do not know what to look for because everyone learns at different speeds, making it difficult to determine if there is a problem at all. After all, if you would rather be outside enjoying the beautiful weather, you are not going to be reading as quickly or thoroughly as someone stuck inside a classroom or workplace during a snowstorm.

One of the most common signs of reading difficulties is a difficulty in manipulating sounds and words.

However, the inability of someone to remember or memorize basic letters of the alphabet, their sounds, and one-syllable words, despite repeated practice, may indicate some sort of a reading difficulty that may not be caused by the mere fact that the language is different. For example, a person who is only able to remember a handful of letters of the alphabet after repeated practice and study might have issues with vision, attention difficulties, or cognitive processing.

Some of the most common issues that are involved with those experiencing reading difficulties are due to medical factors. One of the most common is dyslexia. Dyslexia, broadly defined, is an inability or difficulty in learning to read and write by otherwise intelligent children and adults who are engaged in, or have had, adequate education [2]. There is no known direct cause or causes of dyslexia, but it is generally understood that one of the most recognizable symptoms of dyslexia seems to involve the reversal of letters or numbers. In addition, dyslexia also causes the inability of the individual to break words into individual sounds, or the inability of the individual to remember what words sound like.

Unfortunately, many teachers and parents believe that any student who is a slow reader, or one who does not seem to advance as quickly as his or her peers, is dyslexic, which is certainly not true. As with any reading difficulty, experimenting with different reading methods may help to improve both speed and fluency.

The good thing is that although dyslexia is a lifelong issue, it can be treated and alleviated once it has been diagnosed. While the primary symptom is delay or difficulty in the ability to read, there are in fact a number of ways to recognize dyslexia in pre-school children, school-aged children, and adults.

Dyslexia is characterized by problems decoding and processing language, so symptoms will appear in areas other than just reading. One or two symptoms is not necessarily indicative of dyslexia, but if your child has many of these symptoms, it would be useful to.

Delayed speech is the first most common symptom of dyslexia (though this can have many other causes). Children with dyslexia are usually have difficulties pronouncing words, especially those with letter switching – i.e. "mawn lower" instead of "lawn mower". Another evident symptom is difficulty in breaking down words into sounds as well as the reverse, the ability to blend sounds to make words when speaking. Rhyming words together is also almost impossible task for dyslexics.

Dyslexics also have difficulty with phonological processing (the manipulation of sounds) and rapid visual-verbal responding, they may exhibit some difficulties in basic learning. One of them is slowness to build their vocabulary. Usually dyslexic pre-school children only say a small number of words. Slow recall of sounds, letters, colors, and numbers is another obstacle such pupils usually have. Dyslexic children may also be slow to name objects they have already dealt with. Even recognizing their own names is sometimes difficult for them. Writing errors are not necessarily indicative of dyslexia in pre-schoolers. Many kindergarteners and first-graders reverse their letters and numbers as they are just learning to write. However, this can be a sign of dyslexia in older children and if the reversal of letters and numbers in writing persists, this child should be tested for dyslexia.

Dyslexia includes problems with spatial organization that is why dyslexic children may also struggle with their motor skills. Common signs of problems with motor skills, first of all, include trouble with writing or copying. Their handwriting may also be illegible. Frequent confusion of left and right, over and under is another sign any instructor should pay attention to in order to indicate dyslexia.

If a child is dyslexic it does not mean he has to give up on learning a foreign language. There are many ways how teachers can help. And one of the most important rules any teacher should remember is what is good for the dyslexic is good for all. Series of practical teaching tips focusing on different language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) may be used.

The problem of dyslexia is closely connected with listening. A dyslexic child may struggle to process incoming auditory information efficiently in his/her first language. A teacher should explain important things in the child's first language. The use of a small tape recorder to record new vocabulary, stories, homework instruction is highly effective so the child can listen to it as many times as necessary. Using visuals and pictures along with the listening task will aid the child's understanding. The following exercises might be useful if they have difficulties differentiating between certain sounds, for example e-i, a-e...etc.

The first exercise is sorting. An instructor will need a range of cards showing pictures of objects with the problem sounds, and two boxes. First, the teacher names the object, the student picks the correct card. Second, the student repeats the word, and places in the right box that is labeled for the sound.

The other one is odd one out. This can be played with the same cards. First, the teacher shows four pictures. For example, *hat, pen, cat, map*. Next, the pictures are named and the student has to point out the odd one out.

Speaking is another important component any teacher should focus on in order to overcome difficulties. In foreign/second language acquisition understanding, reading and writing usually precedes speaking, therefore instructors have to be very patient with their students. A dyslexic child should be never forced to speak, a teacher should always wait until they volunteer. A good way to make such children take part in a lesson is to ask them to speak when the question is easy and a teacher sure they know the answer. Encouraging them with lots of positive feedback is also very important.

Lots of difficulties can be managed through writing. Dyslexic children may have the most difficulties with learning to spell English words. Pointing out the difference between the letter-sound correspondence of their first language, and English can often be a very helpful start. For example, in Hungarian each letter has its corresponding sound, whereas in English there are 26 letters referring to 44 sounds [2]. A teacher should build a structured, systematic, spelling program focusing on one rule at a time. Repeating and reinforce stimulating the use of all the pathways (eyes, ears, hands, and lips) to the brain simultaneously. For example, have them vocalize the words as they write them. Younger children enjoy building words using plastic, wooden, or rubber letters. An instructor should always remember to teach the irregular words on a whole word basis. These words are frequently used and the dyslexic child needs a great deal of exposure to them. Teaching the words in context is also very useful. When writing to communicate, dyslexic children should be taught different planning techniques, such as mind mapping. It would be also effective to break up the process into small, manageable steps.

Reading is a complex process, which is closely connected with other language skills of listening, speaking and writing. That is why it causes so many difficulties especially in children. Sometimes the whole situation can be even worse if these problems are caused by medical conditions, such as dyslexia, which is characterized by issues with vision, attention or cognitive processing. However, if a child is dyslexic it does not mean he has to give up on learning English. There are many ways how teachers can help. Experimenting with different reading methods may help to manage with most of these obstacles. It is always extremely important to set a realistic goal to the dyslexic and commend their effort and improvement no matter how small it is.

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