



**PEDAGOGICAL STRATEGIES TO CATER FOR DYSLEXIC LEARNERS  
IN THE EFL CLASSROOM**

ESTUDIANTE

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## Pedagogical Strategies to Cater for Dyslexic Learners in the EFL Classroom

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### Abstract

This essay seeks to help teachers reflect on the importance of catering for dyslexic individuals in the EFL classroom. For this purpose, a general review of the causes and manifestations of dyslexia will be presented, so that teachers can identify students that might have different learning needs. The discussion centers on the necessity of enforcing pedagogical tools that might serve dyslexic students. Hence, aspects such as using modern technology as an ally, providing individualized learning experiences, adapting material, and praising and motivating students will be analyzed. Besides the need to create an inclusive learning environment where students, teachers, relatives, and stockholders become aware of the needs of dyslexic individuals will be addressed. A final consideration of how teachers can offer additional support to dyslexic learners will be discussed.

**Keywords:** Dyslexia, bilingualism, inclusion, EFL classroom

### Resumen

Este ensayo pretende ayudar a los profesores a reflexionar sobre la importancia de atender a las personas disléxicas en el aula de ILE. Para ello, se presentará una revisión general de las causas y manifestaciones de la dislexia, para que los profesores puedan identificar a los alumnos que puedan tener necesidades de aprendizaje diferentes. La discusión se centra

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en la necesidad de aplicar herramientas pedagógicas que puedan servir a los alumnos disléxicos. Por lo tanto, se analizarán aspectos como el uso de la tecnología moderna como aliada, la provisión de experiencias de aprendizaje individualizadas, la adaptación del material, el elogio y la motivación de los alumnos. También se abordará la necesidad de crear un entorno de aprendizaje inclusivo en el que alumnos, profesores, familiares y tomadores de decisiones hagan conciencia de las necesidades de los disléxicos. Por último, se analizará cómo los profesores pueden ofrecer apoyo adicional a los alumnos disléxicos.

**Palabras clave:** Dislexia, bilingüismo, inclusión, clase ILE

### **Introduction**

One of the most important challenges that English as a Foreign Language (henceforth, EFL) teachers face in the classroom is catering for students with special learning needs. This challenge is multifactorial as several aspects combine to create a complex situation that teachers must navigate constantly. From my perspective, three main factors influence the way in which EFL teachers deal with students with learning difficulties. The first factor is lack of preparedness. Ahmad et al. (2018) have asserted that EFL teachers rarely have a solid formal training to teach students with special needs. From my experience, teacher training programs scarcely ever include specific courses or modules that prepare student teachers on how to deal with students with special learning needs.

Teachers usually have to resort to self-training, the advice of other colleagues, or taking additional training of their own device to fill this gap in the teacher training programs. As a result, in general terms teachers do not have the tools and the confidence to teach students with special needs. Unfortunately, teaching students with special needs is a common situation that educators will face in their professional career, and the lack of preparedness will make it an extremely difficult problem to tackle.

The second factor is the lack of resources. As Nijakowska (2019) has explained, students with special learning needs require special material, special resources, and the use of special technological tools. Again, it is my opinion that teachers do not receive the training

to adapt or prepare that material. Besides, teachers usually do not have the time and the resources to adapt or create special materials. The majority of the institutions use textbooks or resources that are intended for learners with standard abilities neglecting students with special needs. In this sense, teachers confront an additional challenge, as they have to adapt traditional materials and teaching technologies, or create new materials, to be able to meet the needs of those students. This could result in a frustrating process of material creation that adds up to the heavy workload that teachers usually have.

A third aspect to consider is the lack of support of the institutions and stockholders. Coughlan et al. (2019) have argued that programs and course syllabi usually follow a standardized format that does not contemplate the needs of students with learning disabilities. Once again, I strongly believe that the burden falls on the shoulders of the teachers who have to propitiate the adequate changes so that students with special needs have the same opportunities to access the learning process as the other learners do.

Therefore, teachers have to adapt programs and syllabi to meet the needs of all students, which is something that institutions and stockholders should have considered beforehand. Hence, teachers see themselves immersed in this intricate web of problems in which they have to keep their focus on the ultimate goal, which is to help the learners. To do so, teachers need to reflect on their teaching practices, their students' needs, and the resources they may implement.

One of the most common disabilities that teachers will have to deal with in the EFL classroom is dyslexia. The International Dyslexia Association (2002) has stated that this learning disability impacts reading and writing directly:

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. (Para. 1)

Oftentimes, dyslexia is considered as an occult learning disability as learners, teachers, relatives, and other people involved in the learning process fail to recognize its existence, which has serious implications for the students as they are labeled as slow learners and do not receive the appropriate help they need.

In the context of the EFL classroom, dyslexic learners face a daunting task. Cimermanova (2015) explained that scholars have divided opinions about the participation of dyslexic learners in the EFL classroom. While some scholars think that they should not study a foreign language, others think that studying a second language could be of great benefit for them if they are provided with an appropriate learning environment. I strongly agree with the second opinion, and I believe that dyslexic students should be catered for in the EFL classroom. As Cimermanova (2015) argued, inclusion in a foreign language class is much more than being exposed to the foreign language. It also has to do with feeling accepted and involved in a meaningful learning environment regardless of the level that can be achieved.

Therefore, dyslexic learners deserve attention, and they deserve to participate in inclusive learning environments because they can have additional benefits out of the participative activities such as enhanced social development, no matter the level of language proficiency that they would eventually achieve. Learning a second language can be extremely difficult for dyslexic learners. Specific areas such as reading and writing can be challenging for them and as Cimermanova (2015) suggested; associated problems such as short working memory and problems with automaticity in language will impact directly their learning process.

However, with the appropriate help and support of teachers, relatives, and stockholders, dyslexic learners can successfully participate in the EFL classroom. Consequently, EFL teachers should address the problem of dyslexia in the classroom, and they should be prepared to recognize and help students with special needs. Besides, students with dyslexia need to feel part of the classroom. Therefore, the teacher should

adapt and develop tools, materials, and activities that help these learners. Moreover, teachers should empower these students to make them become active participants in their learning process in spite of their learning disability.

### **Recognizing and Dealing with Dyslexic Learners**

The first step to develop effective pedagogical tools to cater for dyslexic learners in the EFL classroom is to recognize dyslexia. As stated earlier, many times dyslexia is an occult disability, and the EFL teacher needs to develop a trained eye to recognize it. Evidently, teachers should avoid the pitfall of diagnosing dyslexia, as they lack the training and the expertise to do so. However, they should work close to students, relatives and stockholders to detect the signs that may indicate dyslexia and that may help teachers to better understand the pedagogical path to follow. In a similar manner, teachers should ignore common myths about dyslexia.

Cimermanova (2015) has argued that people believe that dyslexic learners cannot read, that they have a vision or auditory problem, that dyslexia is a rare condition, and that dyslexic learners see things backwards. Fighting those myths will enable teachers to have an educated and informed approach to the problem and make important decisions to improve the student's situation in the EFL classroom. Additionally, it is important to consider that dyslexia is a chronic, lifelong condition that cannot be cured, and therefore, should be addressed accordingly.

Nijakowska (2019) has presented a wide range of signs that dyslexic learners may show, among which the most relevant are difficulties in learning, remembering, and distinguishing the sounds of L2, mainly those which do not exist in L1. Besides that, dyslexic individuals have difficulty in acquiring sound-letter relations, problems in comprehending and processing spoken language, especially when it is presented in rapid speech, issues in speed and accuracy of processing information presented in oral form, challenges in acquiring different aspects of L2 (applying grammar rules, for example). These learners may also present smaller vocabulary ranges, struggle with reading and spelling, as well as

reduced attention span, working memory capacity, internalization of new knowledge, and poor organization and time management skills.

Teachers should be alert to these signs of dyslexia, as students will show some or most of them to a higher or lesser degree, according to the level of their learning disability. What really matters is that teachers, parents, stockholders and the students themselves should be aware that these warning signs are indicators of a learning disability. Moreover, everyone involved should avoid labeling and categorizing dyslexic learners, which will make matters worse adding to the already challenging nature of the learning disability. Being pigeonholed may have a negative effect on the self-perception of the learners and affect not only their academic performance but also their social life. Teachers should be aware that the main point of recognizing dyslexia is to develop and implement adequate pedagogical strategies and tools to cater for those students.

Owen (2016) also pointed out other important pitfalls to avoid. For example, overreacting when correcting works of dyslexic learners is counterproductive as it may be greatly discouraging for them to receive a paper all marked in red. Instead, teachers should focus on specific mistakes and correct those errors. Teachers should avoid giving long instructions for activities. As an option, they can number the instructions on the board.

Additionally, teachers should refrain from considering dyslexic learners as lazy students because in reality, they are trying very hard to overcome their learning disabilities and that takes a lot of effort. Learning disabilities are usually misunderstood. Besides, there is a social stigma around them. People with learning disabilities generally are ashamed of their condition and need a helping hand when facing the challenges of learning a foreign language. It is part of the teacher's roles to provide help and support for dyslexic learners and make sure that they have a safe learning environment that accommodates their needs.

### **Enforcing Pedagogical Tools to Cater for Learners with Dyslexia**

The next challenge that EFL teachers face is implementing pedagogical tools to cater for learners with dyslexia. First, it is important to define the concept of pedagogical tools.

McGrath (2013) has explained that a pedagogical tool is basically anything that a person uses to learn or teach. The most traditional tool that learners rely on is the textbook, but pedagogical tools involve other types of materials like newspapers articles, songs, videos, worksheets and quizzes, realia, among many others. The way teachers and learners approach pedagogical tools varies depending on their interests, age, educational level, learning goals, among other factors. For example, building blocks can be a very useful tool for kids or young learners but it may be inappropriate for adult learners. Depending on the subject to be taught, the context of the class, and the goals of the instruction, building blocks can be a useful tool for adult learners as well.

Traditional pedagogical tools include textbooks, handouts, worksheets, and many others. However, the incorporation of technology in the classroom has impacted the use of pedagogical tools enormously. More and more, teachers and students use technological resources to teach and learn. Thus, new pedagogical tools such as eBooks, podcasts, websites, mobile apps, among many others have become a constant in the learning process. Yet, it is important to highlight that no matter the pedagogical tool being used; it has to make a connection with what is being taught. Using pedagogical tools at random may actually have a contrary effect, as students may lose focus of what they are supposed to learn. Besides, the ultimate goal of a pedagogical tool is to meet learners' needs also considering the different learning styles.

Importantly, teachers need to accommodate the classroom to meet the needs of dyslexic learners. This could be achieved by individualizing the learning experience of students with learning differences. Kormos (2012) explained different ways in which teachers can help dyslexic learners. To begin, teachers can modify and adapt material for dyslexic learners by using shorter reading texts, or dividing them into shorter sections, by using illustrations and glossaries of unknown words, by preparing quick and easy comprehension questions, and by assigning easier reading tasks.

Also, by recognizing and targeting the difficulties of learners, teachers can help students to learn to overcome those obstacles, which will make the class environment



friendlier. In addition, teachers should praise the learners often for their achievements, even if they seem small. Teachers should encourage learners with different needs all along the way. Most importantly, teachers have to motivate dyslexic learners by setting up clear and achievable goals.

Moreover, teachers, relatives, stockholders, and other people involved in the learning process should be aware of other implications of dyslexia. Martínez and Belmonte (2020) explained that the needs of dyslexic students could have serious consequences if not addressed properly. They argued that dyslexic students could be trapped in a vicious cycle that involves lack of motivation, low self-esteem, which in turn affect the family and social life of the students, and could even provoke bullying or school alienation. For this reason, they proposed that it is absolutely necessary to visibilize dyslexic students and cater for their needs when planning the teaching and learning processes, having in mind the necessary adaptations, as they are entitled to the right of an education that is suitable for them.

Thus, teachers should be made aware of the implications for dyslexic learners in the ESL classroom in terms of programs, assessments, and materials. Catering for dyslexic students is a very important issue. By implementing the correct tools, materials, spaces, people and time adaptations, they can achieve the objectives and competences of the stage without this resulting in a negative experience that could have repercussions on later learning practices; thus avoiding both school failure and the difficulties that continue to grow and limit the opportunities of many students. Since dyslexia is a learning disability that has multifactorial components and implications, the response to it should be consequent and it should target not only the merely pedagogical goals but also the inclusion of the student in a friendly learning environment. Educators should strive to empower dyslexic students so that they can gain autonomy and control over their learning process.

In the context of dyslexic learners, pedagogical tools acquire a whole new dimension. Teachers need to adapt, change, modify, or implement the pedagogical tools to cater for their needs. In the EFL classroom, teachers usually rely on traditional materials such as handouts, worksheets, and textbooks. They may also complement the class material with

some additional technological resources that come with the textbook, or that they research or create themselves.

However, some or many of the materials in these resources may not be apt for students with special needs. Along with adapted materials, teachers need to adopt other techniques that will help students with different learning needs. For instance, Owen (2016) explained that overlearning may be a useful technique to help students with dyslexia. It consists of practicing newly acquired skills over and over again until they become automatic. Overlearning can be helpful with repeating concepts, grammatical explanations, vocabulary, and anything else that will help students acquire the knowledge of the language.

Educators can use several techniques in the EFL classroom to cater for students with dyslexia. For example, teachers can use mnemonics to help students learn tricky words by making them funny or memorable. They can use words within words to help students memorize spelling. Also, teachers may resort to fun and gamification to make learning memorable, as most dyslexic students have short-term memory issues. It is easier to remember things if you are having fun. Besides, teachers should use a multi-sensory approach by including music, games, or videos in the classroom and kinetics, making students stand up and move around, not simply sit still and listen to the teacher.

Additionally, the use of mind-maps can be helpful for students with dyslexia to recall vocabulary, especially for written tasks like an essay. In addition, teachers should allow students in general (and students with dyslexia in particular) some thinking time. Teachers should let students formulate their ideas before they answer. Moreover, the author pointed out the importance of pair and group work. Small groups and pair work may be the ideal interaction for dyslexic learners who may feel shy to participate in whole class activities. Another helpful resource to cater for dyslexic learners suggested is storyboards. Storyboards are especially helpful for written assignments because they help the student organize the text before they actually write it as some dyslexic learners may have problems following chronological order.

Along with these techniques, which may prove very useful for every EFL classroom indeed, teachers need to think of other pedagogical strategies and accommodations to implement. Nikajowska (2019) has explained that special accommodations for dyslexic learners involve enabling solutions and arrangements to respond to their special educational needs, so that they can show their potential, develop and demonstrate attainment. Eight different areas have been identified as important to provide a suitable class environment. First, assessment and special conditions during exams; as students may require help with instructions and what is required in the different exercises, or even oral instructions to perform a task, which may imply that they will take longer solving a test or completing an assessment.

Second, aspects of classroom management such as grouping, routines, and pace must be closely monitored. Teachers may need to slow down the pace of the class and use different grouping strategies as dyslexic learners perform better in smaller groups. Third, feedback becomes an important part of catering for dyslexic learners. Teachers should be aware to use different ways to deliver feedback. For instance, written feedback may not be the most suitable option for a dyslexic learner. Instead of that, the teacher may provide oral feedback, which may result as a more appropriate way to reach the learner.

In addition, instruction becomes an important aspect to keep in mind. Giving instructions is particularly important, as dyslexic learners may have trouble remembering instructions, or following the order of instructions. Teachers should apply different methods to provide instructions like, repeating instructions, writing them on the board, or asking the students to repeat the instructions to verify they have understood. Besides, the use of materials has also an important role in accommodating dyslexic learners in the EFL classroom. As stated before, pedagogical tools and materials need to be apt for learners with special needs. It is necessary to implement materials that target different types of learning, that are visually engaging, and that have a manageable amount of text.

Teachers need to pay attention to the curriculum as well, in terms of how they organize the subject matter and task types. For example, it is convenient to organize items in

an exercise, tasks, and activities in a gradual way where easier tasks come first and they evolve to more difficult and complex ones. Classroom environment is important, too. Aspects such as light, furniture, equipment, among others may have a direct impact on the learning experience of students with special needs. For instance, a dyslexic learner may perform better in a well-lit room, sitting on a comfortable chair close to the whiteboard, as this seat arrangement will reduce the stress of not being able to see the written material clearly.

Finally, teachers need to adapt the areas of students' performance such as timing, setting assignments, and homework. Timing is especially important since dyslexic learners need to process information in a slower way. Teachers should be careful because this fact contributes to the myth of perceiving dyslexic learners as slow learners. Teachers should provide accommodations not to make them feel they are dragging behind the rest of the class.

Perhaps implementing more conscientious timing in the activities, or providing extra time if required will be helpful. The same applies to homework and setting assignments, as teachers need to foresee any difficulties students with special needs may face. Nijakowska (2019) explained that adjusting, altering, and differentiating teaching practices promotes the participation and involvement of dyslexic learners in classroom activities allowing them to demonstrate their potential. Overall, it sounds like a daunting task; however, training and practice will make it easier for teachers to cater for dyslexic learners as most of the accommodations are not difficult to implement, are free of cost, and may benefit all learners in general.

### **Implementing Pedagogical Practices to Cater for Dyslexic Learners**

Ahmad et al. (2018), Akbasli (2017), Nijakowska (2019), Owen (2018), and Owen (2016) have established diverse pedagogical approaches and practices to cater for dyslexic learners and help them overcome common challenges they may encounter during the learning process. One of the first steps to implement is adapting material. Teachers should avoid text cluttered pages and difficult to read fonts like the serif types. Instead, they should

use easy-to-read text type material with easy-to-follow instructions; avoid copying from the whiteboard exercises, and assign exercises according to students' abilities. Nowadays, technology serves as a powerful ally for dyslexic learners. Whenever possible, teachers should implement and allow the use of technology in class. Tools like laptops, spell checkers, specialized computer software, reading aids to read text back, listening devices equipped with headset and microphone, among many others, can make a big difference in the learning experience of the students and they make the teacher's job easier.

Another important aspect to have into account is the implementation of different teaching methods. Nijakowska (2019) has proposed several approaches that may help in a day-to-day teaching basis. For instance, foster repetition and revision of material using creative and innovative means. Also, it is important to set achievable goals according to the students' needs and performance. Setting too high goals may result in frustration on the part of both the teacher and the learner. Provide clear, step-by-step instructions. Summarize contents using a variety of visual aids like charts, mind maps, tables, graphics, or illustrations. Elicit students to create their own summarizing and studying strategies, which will help them engage in the learning process and become autonomous and independent learners.

Teachers should favor oral performance over written tasks, as the former may be more suitable for dyslexic learners. Ahmad (2018) also proposed a buddy system in which strong learners collaborate with dyslexic students to guide them and support them through the activities. I consider this is an especially useful technique, as it will result in less work for the teacher, mainly considering large groups.

The way the teacher manages the classroom has to adapt to the particular needs of dyslexic learners. Again, small changes can go a long way. For example, teachers should establish routines and maintain them, and in that way learners will know what to expect. Moreover, teachers will need to allow more time for students to complete the tasks and assignments in class. Providing constant feedback may prove especially helpful, as dyslexic learners will have input of their performance. Teachers must praise achievement frequently

and when it is deserved, which will result in a positive self-image and may impact both their academic performance and also their social life. Besides that, teachers may need to adapt and vary the test conditions providing a special distraction-free environment, giving more time to complete the tests, and using alternative task types, like take-home tests. All these useful techniques will help dyslexic students in their learning process, as they will be able to participate in a friendlier learning environment.

It is my thesis that teaching methodology must be oriented to meet the needs of all students, including dyslexic learners. Nijakowska (2019) has argued that the most effective way to teach dyslexic EFL learners is the Multisensory Structured Language Learning (henceforth MSL) approach. I consider that this approach is highly valuable in that it involves diverse elements of the learning process and may be used to teach grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, reading, speaking, and listening. I also think that a complex condition like dyslexia requires a multifactorial solution like MSL. Teachers may implement some of the MSL components according to their learners' needs. Importantly, MSL is easy to adapt and implement and can add pedagogical value to any class, even if dyslexic learners are not present. In that way, teachers do not need to have different plans in case they are teaching in other learning environments where accommodation for learners with special needs is not necessary.

The main elements of MSL relate to diverse aspects of the learning process and it is specifically linked to language learning. The first recommendation is to implement a highly structured teaching where contents, exercises, and activities are progressive and go from simple to complex. In that way, students have a chance to prepare for the more demanding tasks. Second, teachers should strive for direct explicit instruction and clear explanations of the different rules of the target language. Vague or difficult explanations are hard to grasp, especially for learners with special needs. A third aspect to consider is training students in different learning strategies. This training will add value to their learning process as they will reap the benefits in different learning areas, not only language learning. Besides, learning strategies are useful for all learners and not exclusively for learners with dyslexia.

Using drills, frameworks, and models may prove especially helpful, as teachers need to give structure to their lessons. I find drills very appropriate for language learning, mainly when teaching pronunciation or difficult grammar structures. Drills and over practice may appear quite obsolete but they definitely work. In addition, teachers should aim for small cumulative steps. I believe this should be a ground rule for every language class. Going slow may be key to the progress of students. Lessons that include lots of activities, different types of material, and several topics usually do not have the desired objectives. Keeping it simple and working in small cumulative steps may have better results.

It is recommended that teachers use multi-sensory activities that involve all types of learners. From my point of view, this is especially important in language learning where teachers have the opportunity to be creative and innovative in the implementation of materials and resources. Teachers can use colorful charts, visuals, and videos for visual learners. They can include music and songs for auditory learners. Logical and mathematical learners will be especially interested in grammar drills and other activities that involve logical thinking.

The teacher should be careful to adapt those activities to the needs of students with dyslexia. Teachers may also have games and activities that involve moving around or physical expression, such as playing charades, to include kinesthetic learners. In addition, pair or group activities are relevant for interpersonal learners. In language teaching/learning grouping is fundamental as it helps develop the social skills that students will need to practice the target language in a real interaction. Usually, role-plays, group work, and dialogues are an integral part of any EFL classroom. Teachers also need to cater for solitary and intrapersonal learners by providing activities, like reading exercises, adapted to meet the needs of dyslexic learners. Finally, the triad of frequent repetition, ample practice, and revision assures the effectiveness of the MSL approach in the classroom to cater not only for students with special needs but also for the achievement of the goals of the whole group.

### **Including Dyslexic Learners in the EFL Classroom**

One of the main reasons to cater for dyslexic learners in the EFL classroom is to promote inclusion. Although this may prove a big challenge for teachers, especially in large groups, educators need to be aware of the situation of students with different learning needs. Kormos (2020) stated that inclusion is a process that starts with the analysis of the barriers in the institution and the educational system and policies that can obstruct the participation of all students. In inclusive learning environments, diversity is perceived as an enriching aspect and not as an obstacle to learning.

González et al. (2005) have noted that in our country, since 1997, the Ministry of Public Education through the law 7600 established a regulation and created the document *Policies, Regulations and Procedures for the Access to Education for Students with Special Educational Needs [Normas y procedimientos para el manejo técnico y administrativo de los servicios educativos para estudiantes con problemas de aprendizaje]*, which contemplates different aspects of inclusion for students with learning disabilities, and therefore, with different learning needs. The establishment of this legislation implies that students have the right to learn in an inclusive environment and that educators must provide such conditions for all individuals.

In the specific context of dyslexic learners in the EFL classroom, Ahmad et al. (2018) have emphasized that to be competitive individuals in modern society, people need to learn at least one additional language. Being English a global language, it is only natural that more and more students choose to learn it to fulfill their personal, professional, and career goals. This situation is particularly true of Spanish speaking countries where people need to learn English to have access to a better education, better career options, and better job opportunities, among many other benefits. Hence, discouraging dyslexic people to learn English as a Foreign Language puts them in clear disadvantage with the rest of the population. In like manner, Owen (2018) argued that all students have the right to attend and participate in foreign language classes and, for this reason; foreign language educators face



the challenge to accommodate their individual needs in an environment that does not restrict them.

The main purpose should be to include students with dyslexia in a differentiated classroom, which takes into account different learner capabilities, needs, and learning styles. I agree with Owen (2018) when he stated that including dyslexic learners in a language classroom may be a daunting task. However, by implementing some basic strategies and pedagogical tools the educator can ensure that students with dyslexia reach their full potential. Moreover, Ranaldi (2003) also explained that language teachers should guarantee that dyslexic learners have the help, attention and encouragement that they need to make up for any deficiencies they may have. Motivation is a key factor in the success of students with learning differences. Teachers, parents, colleagues, and stockholders need to understand the titanic effort these students make to learn and they should be emphatic and supportive all along the way. In this sense, Owen (2018) proposed that teachers must become motivators and make clear that they expect dyslexic students to reach the same goals as their non-dyslexic peers.

### **Important Steps for Inclusion**

Education professionals have outlined steps to take to promote an inclusive learning environment in the EFL classroom. From my perspective, some are feasible and others may be harder to adapt according to the specific situation of each teaching environment. However, the simple fact of creating awareness and adopting some changes can make a big difference for dyslexic learners. Kormos (2021) and Owen (2018) proposed different ways in which teachers can create an inclusive environment in the EFL classroom. Basically, there are three different areas that teachers need to target in order to include learners with different needs in their classrooms. First, teachers must pay attention to communication and interaction: not only student-to-student communication and interaction but also teacher to student communication and interaction.

Kormos (2021) argued that grouping or pairing students with different skills may prove highly beneficial for students with dyslexia. Thus, the student-to-student interaction may be a key tool that teachers can use to optimize the performance of dyslexic learners. However, Owen (2018) asserted that language teachers should consider the talents and difficulties learners have to make sure that the pairs or groups work well together. For instance, pairing two students with reading difficulties may not be a good idea. But pairing a student with reading difficulties but with writing abilities with a student who finds it difficult to write but is a good reader, may prove a successful collaboration as they will help and complement each other. Besides, teachers should be aware that students with dyslexia might find these interactions stressful. Hence, through close and sensitive observation, teachers need to find the most effective pairing or grouping strategies.

Moreover, the teacher to student interaction and communication needs to be clear and effective. For instance, Kormos (2021) argued that providing summaries at the end of the lesson might prove really helpful not only for dyslexic learners but also for other learners who may have difficulties taking notes during the class. In addition, breaking down big tasks into smaller tasks may help dyslexic learners to concentrate better and focus on a specific task. I find this particularly useful for all learners, as they will be able to complete their tasks, have a sense of accomplishment, and increase their motivation.

Nijakowska (2019) recommended reducing the amount of work by eliminating redundant tasks, which will help reduce the levels of anxiety in all learners. Teachers can present contents in smaller assignments, avoiding in this way, to dishearten learners with long complicated tasks and the amount of work to complete. Instructions and feedback are fundamental in second language teaching/learning. Therefore, teachers should strive for clear and easy to follow instructions and straightforward and motivating feedback. Kormos (2021) explained that both instructions and feedback need to be clear and unambiguous.

Besides, the feedback has to motivate students and help boost their self-esteem; having in mind that dyslexic learners are making a tremendous effort to learn a second language. Again, this practice will help not only the dyslexic individuals but also all students

in general. Additionally, Kormos (2021) suggested that teachers should focus on the progress and improvements that dyslexic learners have made rather than on the issues that need to be worked on. I consider that focusing on the gains instead of focusing on the errors changes the perspective of the learning process completely. Focusing on progress and gains gives a positive insight and fosters a good attitude on the part of the learners promoting, in this way, a constructive and inclusive learning environment. Yet, the teacher should be skillful enough to develop concrete strategies to target the issues that need work.

The second area to consider is the classroom environment. Kormos and Smith (2012) explained that dyslexic individuals might be sensitive to different external factors such as temperature, light, noise, among others. Conditions that teachers and other students consider normal and acceptable could be distracting or distressing for dyslexic learners. For this reason, it is important for teachers to know each individual's needs and try to meet those needs as far as possible. Obviously, this will depend greatly on the availability of resources such as physical space, furniture, technology, among others. However, sometimes a simple and slight change like moving a student to a well-lit ventilated area, closer to the whiteboard, or away from the noise and distractions can have a positive impact.

Besides, Owen (2016) explained that texts or spaces cramped with visual information may be overwhelming for dyslexic students. Teachers tend to include lots of visual aids both in their texts and in the classroom as a way to catch the students' attention. However, this might prove distracting for some learners. The experts recommend keeping the area near the board and screen free of visual distractions, and also provide texts, charts, handouts, and materials that are simple and neat without a lot of visual clutter. Sometimes less is more. Moreover, these simple adaptations of material could benefit students in general and not only students with different learning needs.

The third aspect to consider in the inclusion in the EFL classroom is the content of the language course. Although most of the time teachers have to follow specific plans or programs for the courses they have to teach, they can make some adaptations that will have a positive impact on the learning experience of dyslexic individuals. For instance, Kormos

and Smith (2012) proposed that teachers can modify the material appearance in order to avoid anxiety that dyslexic learners experience when exposed to visual disturbances. Materials should be uncluttered and easy to navigate.

Furthermore, teachers have the challenge to maintain a class pace that is engaging and challenging for students but also that learners can follow with ease. It is important to emphasize that most dyslexic learners have issues with short-time memory and may need extra time to process information, and think through issues and concepts, especially when learning a new language. Aspects such as learning new vocabulary, new sounds, or new grammar rules may prove highly challenging. Kormos (2020) also explained that not all dyslexic individuals show the same difficulties, or the same level of difficulty when learning a second language. Each case is unique and different. For this reason, I consider that teachers need to observe, analyze and take action to modify, present, and implement the content of the language course in a way that best benefits all the students.

### **Providing Additional Support**

Another way teachers can help dyslexic students thrive in the EFL classroom is by providing additional support. For instance, teaching study techniques will have a big impact on the learning process of dyslexic individuals. It is important to emphasize that dyslexic students make a big effort to learn and giving them learning opportunities can ease their burden. Kormos and Smith (2012) have identified different easy-to-follow study strategies that used in the specific learning context may improve the students performance in the classroom. For example, using color-coding may help dyslexic students to remember important information like dates or to organize material at a macro level and at micro level, using different colors for different parts of speech may help them see patterns in language in an easier way. Importantly, these techniques may be introduced to the whole class and will be useful for all students regardless of whether they have a different learning need or not.

Besides, time management is a skill that usually is not included in course programs and that dyslexic learners may find difficult to control. Thus, teachers need to provide

coaching in work organization and time management using different means like timetables, personal organizers, mobile phones, or any other methods that both teachers and students find suitable. Luckily, nowadays there are many technological tools that can be utilized like apps, voice recorders, and digital planners, among many others that are useful and effective. In addition, for important assessment tasks it might be necessary to provide a timetable or mind map that clearly specifies the deadline and the stages to be completed. In addition, learning styles and preferences should be considered, allowing dyslexic students to work in their comfort zone at first, and then gradually introducing new techniques that draw from different learning styles.

Kormos and Smith (2012) also have emphasized the importance of metacognitive thinking skills. Teachers can help dyslexic students develop self-awareness and self-monitoring of the learning process, and in that way, they will have agency and they will be able to gain control over their instruction. Developing metacognitive thinking processes may help students solve different problems they encounter while learning the language and also may help teachers discover which areas need improvement.

The specialists have suggested that metacognitive thinking may start as a “thinking-out-loud” process in which students analyze the problem they encounter taking into account what they already know until they develop the automatization to solve the problem eventually. Besides, students can learn other memorization techniques like mnemonics and visualization, which help them remember their previous knowledge, establish connections with the new contents, and see patterns in the language that they had not noticed before. These techniques not only will influence their progress positively but also will increase their sense of achievement, self-esteem, and motivation.

### **Concluding Remarks**

From my perspective, a complex, multifactorial learning difference like dyslexia may represent an important challenge for EFL teachers. However, they need to be reassured that by adopting some elemental pedagogical strategies they will be able to cater for dyslexic

learners in the classroom. Some aspects are important to consider. The first aspect to acknowledge is that dyslexia is quite common, which means that it is highly probable that teachers will encounter dyslexic individuals in their teaching practice eventually. The International Dyslexia Association (2002) has estimated that one in ten individuals has some sort of learning difference associated with dyslexia, which means that in a group of twenty students a teacher is likely to have two pupils with different learning needs. Although the studies were carried out in the UK and the US, experts confirm that these numbers may be very similar for other countries.

The second aspect is to realize that dyslexia is a learning difference and not a learning disability, which means that with the appropriate coaching and instruction dyslexic individuals can learn a second language. The third aspect is to understand the concept of dyslexia: its origin, characteristics, and possible consequences for learners, considering that this is a life-long condition that requires constant mentoring and support during the learning process. The fourth aspect is to recognize the different manifestations of dyslexia in the students, remembering that all individuals are unique and that they may have different levels of this learning difference. Having all these aspects in mind, teachers can provide the help, assistance, and motivation that students with different learning needs require.

Thus, enforcing pedagogical tools is basic to cater for learners with dyslexia in the EFL classroom. By incorporating different teaching strategies and pedagogical tools like the adaptation of materials, the use of constant praise, the implementation of mnemonics and overteaching, the application of effective pairing and grouping techniques, and the utilization of multisensory learning approaches, among others, educators can make a big difference. As a matter of fact, in this way, teachers can optimize the learning experience of dyslexic individuals. Importantly, teachers, students, stockholders, and anyone involved in the learning process of a dyslexic pupil should commit to support and motivate the learner during the process.

Other accommodations may be necessary to cater for dyslexic learners in the EFL classroom. For instance, providing special conditions for assessments and exams may be

really helpful for dyslexic learners. Also, keeping a class routine and a balanced pace will positively impact the performance of students with different learning needs. In addition, giving instructions and providing feedback, as fundamental activities in language learning environments, should be adapted to meet the needs of these students. Besides, implementing effective time management tools for important activities like tests and assignments will help dyslexic students perform better in the EFL classroom.

Teachers also have to be careful to implement pedagogical practices that guide dyslexic individuals throughout the learning process. For example, the use of technological tools serves as a powerful ally for teachers and students alike. The use of different teaching materials fosters a productive learning environment. Setting achievable goals helps teachers have a realistic perspective of the learning outcomes. Helping students create their own study strategies gives them agency and fosters independent learning. Finally, including a Multisensory Language Learning Approach results beneficial not only for learners with different needs but also for other learners.

Inclusion has a pivotal role in the environment of the EFL classroom as it is a vested right of all students. Teachers should analyze the possible barriers that they may encounter when catering for dyslexic learners. Moreover, the premise that must inform the learning process is that denying a student the opportunity to learn a second language is to put them at a distinct disadvantage compared to their peers. Hence, educators have practical ways to implement inclusion in the EFL classroom. For example, teachers can promote effective teacher-student, student-student communication and interaction. Teachers can reduce the anxiety of dyslexic learners by eliminating redundant tasks. They can provide easy to follow instructions and straightforward feedback. Teachers can modify the classroom environment to better suit the needs of dyslexic individuals. Besides that, they can modify and adapt the content of the language course to make it more suitable for students with different learning needs.

Finally, educators can provide additional support to dyslexic learners. One tool that may go a long way is teaching students different study techniques, which will give them

agency and make them independent learners. Moreover, students will feel more supported and guided, boosting, in this way, their self-image as learners, their motivation, and their performance. Additionally, teachers can provide coaching in time management techniques, as time management is usually an overlooked skill, which represents a major burden for dyslexic individuals. Finally, teachers may emphasize the importance of metacognitive thinking skills and train learners to practice them and implement them as part of their learning strategies.

### **Recommendations**

Educators need to bear in mind important aspects when catering for dyslexic learners in the EFL classroom. One main element they should consider is the individualization and personalization of the learning experience. As it has been noted before in this paper, all dyslexic learners are unique and different, and they may need different accommodations in the classroom. Thus, one-size-fits-all type of solutions may not help learners grow and learn. Implementing special pedagogical strategies for specific learners may appear as a big challenge and a lot of work for teachers. However, as specialists have pointed out, sometimes small changes and accommodations that do not involve a lot of time investment, cost, and effort for the teacher can make a big difference for the learner. Hence, the recommendation is to apply pedagogical tools that seek to help dyslexic learners as individuals to reach achievable goals in the ESL classroom.

The second recommendation has to do with research and teaching training. One of the problems highlighted during this project is the lack of information, resources and adequate training for teachers to cater effectively for students with dyslexia. Thus, this problematic implicates a call for action for teachers in which they should become teacher-researchers. As part of their professional development, teachers should be constantly investigating, researching, and studying new teaching methods, tools, and techniques that help them do their job better.



Therefore, part of that research should make up for the lack of proper training and information in regards to catering for dyslexic learners in the EFL classroom. In other words, the recommendation is that teachers should develop a sense of curiosity directed towards research that will lead them to expand their knowledge, improve their professional career, and help dyslexic learners thrive in the EFL classroom. Although educators' lack of time and heavy workloads often prevent them from becoming teacher-researchers, small actions like taking a free online course, reading blogs and articles related to the topic of dyslexia, or participating in discussion forums may provide the input they need.

Finally, the third recommendation involves peer support and sharing advice, experience and resources. Teachers tend to isolate themselves in their own practice. Complicated working schedules, heavy workload, and failure to build rapport with their colleagues makes it difficult for teachers to establish meaningful connections. However, teachers need to look for the support of their colleagues, especially when dealing with challenging situations like catering for dyslexic learners. In this way, they can share useful information, pedagogical tools, teaching techniques, resources, materials among other things that may be helpful. Besides, teachers can share their experiences and learn from one another. Sharing stories of failure and success can prevent them from going down the wrong path.

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## DECLARACIÓN JURADA

Yo, Rafael Núñez Soto, cédula de identidad 109380218, estudiante de la Universidad Nacional, declaro bajo fe de juramento y consciente de la responsabilidades penales de este acto, que soy autor intelectual del Trabajo Final de Graduación Titulado "**Pedagogical Strategies to Cater for Dyslexic Learners in the EFL Classroom,**" para optar por el grado de Maestría en Educación con énfasis en aprendizaje del inglés.



Firma

Heredia, a los 4 días del mes de setiembre del año 2021.

## Refrendo

Los abajo firmantes avalamos el Trabajo de Graduación del estudiante Rafael Núñez Soto, cédula 1 0938 0218, que lleva como título **Pedagogical Strategies to Cater for Dyslexic Learners in the EFL Classroom**, dado que cumple con las disposiciones vigentes y la calidad académica requerida por el posgrado.

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