

Learning support and testing accommodations for he students with dyslexia, with emphasis on English as a foreign language

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Introduction

In 2015, in their office centre in Silicon Valley, Microsoft organized a conference on Neurodiversity and Self-advocacy. As their conference invitation states, “neurodiversity maintains dyslexia to be a variation of human brain wiring” (NCBIDA, 2015). At the conference, Brock Eide, M.D., M.A., an internationally recognized authority on dyslexia and learning differences, delivered a presentation called Neurodiversity in the High Tech Workforce, in which he explained the concept of neurolearning. Neurolearning is an emerging science that examines the brain and focuses on how the brain processes information. In his presentation, based on wide research results, Eide advocates the idea that it is essential to change the way we look at and train people who have traditionally been viewed as learning disabled as they “have some of the most incredible skills to offer”: “We’ve built our educational system around a mistaken set of assumptions that really places superior value on a very narrow set of cognitive abilities that relate to the kind of skills that allow students to achieve high grades and high scores on tests, like skills in rote memorization and recall of facts, the ability to learn quickly and accurately repetitive procedures, and strong written communication skills.” To Eide, this is itself, “a narrow set of specializations that comes with a set of trade-offs and is usually achieved with the cost of strengths in other areas”. Or, in other words, our modern, highly specialized society and economy, in which “talent in one area is typically achieved by loss of skill and potential ability in another area”, can only achieve prosperity if it discovers how to “harness the full range of these different kinds of optimizations” (Brock, 2015).

The author of this paper shares both of Dr. Eide’s principal views, i.e. that the common features that people with individual specific learning differences, namely dyslexia, share are to be understood as optimized for different talents and strengths rather than simply disabled, and that instruction and testing delivered in a manner adjusted to their patterns of reasoning can help to change the practice that currently bars many bright dyslectics from higher education, depriving them thus of the possibility to compete for the same opportunities and life success.

The primary aim of this paper is to present some ideas that proved useful while providing learning support and adjusted testing conditions to dyslexic students of English as a foreign language at the University of West Bohemia (UWB) in Pilsen,

CR. This, naturally, will be done against the background of the nature of dyslexia, and will benefit from the author's experience from 1:1 dyslexia consultations.

To start with, attention will be paid to the extent and degree of learning support and testing accommodations guaranteed to students with learning differences by UWB and its language preparation body, the Institute of Applied Language Studies.

1 The role of uwb and the Institute of Applied Language Studies (IALS)

1.1 Institutional Authority

English language training for the specific needs of university students with dyslexia at the University of West Bohemia (UWB) in Pilsen needs to be understood both in a broad context, i.e. under existing legislation, specifically *Act No. 111/1998 Coll. On Higher Education Institutions and on Amendments and Supplements to some other Acts*, and in the narrower sense, based on the *Statute of the University of West Bohemia in Pilsen* and the *Study and Examination Rules of the University of West Bohemia in Pilsen*. Students with dyslexia as a specific learning difficulty are here, as well as at other public universities in the Czech Republic, perceived as students with special educational needs (SENs). Only applicants who meet all the legally defined eligibility criteria are entitled to apply for UWB exam and testing accommodations and can have access to the support system and special language tutorials. These criteria include the requirement of becoming a registered client of the Information and Counselling Centre of UWB (ICC) and either undergoing a (three-hour) professional diagnosis within the ICC premises, or submitting a current (defined as not more than two-year-old) specialist report from a recognized educational-psychological counselling centre as proof of a learning difference. Exceptionally, in justified cases, upon the recommendation of the ICC, the dean may adjust the conditions of the (entrance) examination, lower the required foreign language level, or substitute the otherwise required English with another language—all this without lowering the level of demand for a particular output.

1.2 RoPoV Project

The existing support for disadvantaged students at UWB (monitoring of physically challenged students dates back to 2004 and those with learning differences to 2007) had a major impact on the approval of the EU Funds Project OPVK CZ.107/2200/29.0016 *RoPoV* (Rovné příležitosti pro všechny—Equal Opportunities for All) accessible to persons with special educational needs studying at UWB, which took place from 06. 01. 2010 to 31. 5. 2015. The objectives of this project included the “creation of a university-wide support system for people with special educational needs (SENs) and for socially disadvantaged people, and assistance

in their full-fledged social and professional life” (*RoPoV*). Thanks to the project, basic rules for training and examination of these people within the UWB system were set up, courses, exercises and motivational coaching were established and a methodical manual was created. Above all, it gave rise to the Center of Advisory and Support Services (CASS), incorporated in the Information and Counselling Centre of UWB (ICC), which provides information, educational and consulting services (legal, social, psychological, career and special language services) to UWB students and prospective UWB students. An important part of the project was to organize two conferences on contemporary possibilities and methods of educating students with special educational needs (in 2013 and 2014), short study visits for disadvantaged students and employees at foreign institutions, and the creation of a network of collaborating institutions in the region (secondary schools, potential employers, employment agencies, and NGOs).

The big challenges ahead of UWB on the road to full integration and inclusion of students with SENs are not a matter of one project and one centre, but of a number of workplaces across faculties, and their activities and cooperation have not ended with the termination of the *RoPoV* project. This is evidenced, among other initiatives, by the close cooperation of CASS with the Department of Machine Design at the Faculty of Mechanical Engineering, whose activities literally count on the involvement of handicapped students within the Construction of Medical Equipment course. Another example is the Summer School for candidates and students with special education needs organized by CASS before the start of the academic year 2016–2017 to support both newly accepted and current UWB disadvantaged students.

1.3 The Role of the Institute of Applied Language Studies (IALS)

English language training and examining for specific needs of university students with dyslexia at IALS also needs to be seen as part of that broad context and effort described above, and it too is carried out in collaboration with the Information and Counselling Centre of UWB (ICC).

IALS provides courses to students not majoring in foreign languages. The most noticeable increase of students with dyslexia is in English language courses. Leaving aside the probability of this occurrence resulting from the fact that, as a lingua franca, English is a required subject, it is certainly largely also because of the increased number of students entering university with dyslexia diagnosed already at lower educational stages. Further, due to the gradually decreasing level of stigmatization of learning disorders, together with the offer of possible compensation measures provided on the part of IALS and UWB, a higher percentage of undiagnosed students than ever before is ready to be diagnosed if they continue to struggle with English—often due to the non-transparent character of English, which is in conflict with the transparent character of Czech.

1.3.1 Dys Test

The diagnostic material currently used is The Battery of Tests for the Diagnosis of Specific Learning Disorders in College Students and Applicants for University Study, abbreviated Dys Test (Dys Test, 2014), developed in cooperation with Masaryk University in Brno. (Doc. Marie Kocurová from the Department of Psychology of FPE UWB in Pilsen contributed to the drafting of precise criteria for the diagnosis of these disorders.) Students with dyslexia submit their dyslexia test report to their foreign language teacher, who may consult the suggested practices and teaching methods with the IALS dyslexia contact person.

1.3.2 Regular 1:1 dyslexia consultations

These extra special consultations take place with a trained dyslexia contact person. Close collaboration of this specialist and an individual foreign language instructor, together with a student's regular attendance both in class and in these consultations (focused on a targeted development of skills and strategies needed to cope with dyslexia), not only often lead to a dramatic academic improvement, but also play an important role in restoring the self-confidence and self-respect of such a student. Moreover, from the educator's perspective, consistent attention to an individual student's needs and development of tailor-made compensation strategies fundamentally increases the educator's ability to choose adequate procedures for evaluation and testing.

1.3.3 Staff training

With regard to the incidence of people with dyslexia in language courses, IALS pays attention to raising teachers' awareness about specific educational needs through in-training seminars and workshops delivered by both a trained IALS dyslexia contact person (S. Heinlová) and invited experts, such as S. Lozanova, B. Savtchev, or S. Hanušová.

2 Learning support adjusted to the specifics of dyslexia in foreign languages

If there is traditionally room for improvement in teaching the structured skills of listening, reading and writing, it is particularly true for students with dyslexia. The problems of these students are in fact associated with poor phonological awareness and problems with short-term memory, which occur on different levels.

On the visual level, they are demonstrated by impaired visual differentiation, analysis and synthesis, impaired sequential perception, and impaired visual memory (confusing and omitting of letters of words or putting them in the wrong order, inability to remember all the letters of the word).

On the hearing level, they are characterized by impaired auditory perception (inversion of short and long sounds, inability to differentiate different sounds and syllables, e.g. hard vs. soft sounds and syllables, or different sibilants) and disruption of the time sequence of auditory perception (inability to repeat a sequence of sounds, divide the word into individual sounds and connect individual sounds in words).

Impairment in the lexical-semantic field is reflected in misunderstanding of the reading text and the inability to reproduce in their own words the content of the text read. Effective procedures of remediation include the explicit and multisensory presentation of new phenomena in small increments, concreteness, clarity, always focusing on only one activity and frequent reinforcement and repetition of the learned material. Practicing lexical and grammatical units represents a real difficulty. Acquisition of vocabulary is a complex process that combines the audio and graphic form, meaning and practical use of the word in context.

Regardless of specific learning needs of individual dyslectics, the fundamental principle in their re-education is to progress from decoding processes of a lower-order to decoding processes of a higher order. This means that it is first necessary to proceed from the phonetic-graphic correspondence and semantics to morphological and semantic structures (units of lower order). Only then can we proceed to evaluating information from text (units of higher order), i.e. to develop strategies needed for selective and detailed reading, all this again incrementally, first as part of pre-reading activities, then during reading activities, and finally the application of information after reading. Practicing reading subsequently leads to practicing writing, first in the form of excerpts and summaries (e.g. with the use of mind mapping), and then in the form of reconstruction of the original written text from notes, summaries or mind maps. The culmination of practicing the skill of writing is then the construction of the student's own texts. (Kormos & Smith, 125-144).

As for teaching the fourth skill, speaking, the principle of cumulative progress is also observed here: from the production of simple one- or two-word utterances to complex sentences and from being able to respond in one or two sentences to constructing longer pieces of oral discourse (Kormos & Smith, 139-140).

At UWB, dyslexic students of English courses can also receive specialized training (and moral support) during individual 1:1 consultations, in a quiet environment, where they subsequently take, individually, two to three parts of their graphically adjusted (with respect to individual needs) final credit test (mostly listening, writing and/or reading sections) as they are guaranteed an increased test-taking time, while the Use of English section of the test is normally undertaken in class. When there is an oral examination (in the form of a presentation on a topic related to their field of study), it is again taken individually, with just the board of examin-

ers, and in the presence of their special language tutor. A detailed description of testing and exam accommodations is in the following chapter.

3 Testing and exam accommodations

As stated above (section 1.1), there are two key requirements concerning testing and exam accommodations at UWB. Firstly, only students who meet all the legally defined eligibility criteria are entitled to apply for accommodations. Secondly, accommodations are about fairness, not advantage. They do not alter the content of assignments, do not lower the level of a chosen test or examination and, as for assessment, do not give disadvantaged test-takers an unfair advantage.

3.1 Standardization and individualization

Written tests and oral exams are standardized on different levels. First of all, they need to observe the standards required for a particular output, as discussed above. As tests for dyslectics are based on the tests created for their intact peers, they need to be adjusted to correspond to specific dyslexia characteristics, i.e. undergo another stage of standardization. It needs to be highlighted here though that such tests and exams cannot be fully standardized across all dyslectics because of the complexity and variations in which they manifest themselves. This fact, which corresponds to the findings of Schneider, Gong and Egan (2016), also explains why some dyslectics may require computer-based testing, while others ask for a paper-and-pencil test, and still others opt for a combination of the two. Testing and exam accommodations are further personalized to a certain degree in accordance with the individual's level of severity of dyslexia, language development stage and command of personal compensation techniques. Years of practice at IALS have proven that regular attendance in individual 1:1 dyslexia classes in the course of the semester has a positive impact on the test scores achieved. This is to a large degree thanks to the tailor-made format of the test, which makes the best possible use of the individual dyslexic student's potential.

3.2 Written test accommodations

Written test accommodations always need to take a specific SEN into account (though some accommodations, such as those relating to timing and setting, are generally applicable across the whole spectrum of SENs). Moreover, accommodations should address an individual student's specific areas of need as well. This is true especially about accommodations involving the presenting format (e.g. large print, screen reader, colored overlays, etc.) and the response format (e.g. using a computer, underlining, selecting, sorting, responding directly in the test booklet rather than on an answer sheet, using organizational devices, such as spelling assistive devices, and visual organizers).

Assessment tasks for dyslectics to a large extent follow general principles: they need to be relevant, motivating and enjoyable. Other general issues to consider in designing assessment tasks include the validity of the task, and difficulty level of input and response. Tests for dyslectics should limit use of two-dimensional and reading-based scenarios, as those do not correspond with the higher level reasoning skills in dyslectics (Schneider & Gong 2016), and instead should make use of multisensory principles, together with non-verbal, three-dimensional, spatial and interconnected reasoning, since, as Brock Eide (Eide, 2015) has postulated, that is what dyslexic brains are optimized for. The specific issues to consider include potential assistance (especially with adaptive devices, such as screen readers or screen magnification), clarification and simplification of instructions presented in a step-by-step manner, combination of verbal information and visual stimuli, provision of background information, provision of graphic organizers to fill in during listening tasks (such as an outline or chart – these help students see relationships among concepts and related information), breaking of longer texts into shorter paragraphs or smaller parts (chunks), highlighting of essential information, possible visual segmentation of texts into syllables/morphemes, and, obviously, time needed for completing the task.

According to Fernet Eide (2015), several factors may contribute to the need of double-time accommodations. “For dyslexic students writing can take more than twice as long as age peers because of weak letter writing automaticity (fingers cannot automatize the formation of letters), trouble calling up the correct words and spelling and grammar rules when you need them, and executive function and working memory challenges that make it difficult to put everything together. For the typical dyslexic student, the thinking and problem solving is easy it’s case building and writing that are the hard part.”

3.3 Oral exam accommodations

At IALS, students undertake the speaking part of their final exam in the form of a PowerPoint presentation on a study-related topic. The words above about thinking and problem solving not being the problem prove true for speaking too. It is especially students of technical faculties who also in speaking often experience enormous problems with the usage of appropriate vocabulary and grammar: “The major challenges these students face in speaking in L2 involve the quick and efficient retrieval of words, remembering the pronunciation of words, articulating the words correctly, consciously constructing sentences from word constituents and producing longer coherent monologues (...), especially in front of a large group.” (Kormos & Smith, 139–140). At IALS, students are entitled to oral exam accommodations, which include the possibility of taking the exam individually, with just the board of examiners, and in the presence of their dyslexia tutor as a sort of moral support and a guarantor of fair assessment. To help dyslexic students re-

duce stress, the board is less strict if they exceed the set time limit. In the testing room there is also a white board available and at students' disposal (beyond the regular conditions) in case they need to support their reasoning with an on-the-spot (spatial) drawing. Pronunciation is assessed less strictly, which is, however, balanced on the student's side by the requirement to prepare a detailed handout of the speech to enable the examiners to follow the presentation more easily.

Conclusion

Individuals with different learning styles have often been routinely and unjustly stigmatised, and their access to fair opportunities, including access to higher education, in the past was complicated and limited. At last, these attitudes are changing. One indication of this, after all, is the gradual shift in labeling dyslexia—from disorder to disability to difference to gift. Another, much more substantial indication, is the gradual but steady increase of dyslectics at universities. The paper tries to raise awareness of the general nature of dyslexia and discusses the specifics of needs resulting from different reasoning of dyslexic HE students. It then provides suggestions for methods of learning support and testing and oral exam accommodations to be considered and incorporated into the educational system if the talents of numerous gifted people are not to be neglected or lost, to the detriment of the general interest, just due to our reluctance to accept patterns of reasoning different from those of the majority population.

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