Research Insights
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PHONICS AND INSTRUCTION IN READING COMPREHENSION FOR PUPILS WITH DYSLEXIA: SIX LITERACY TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract. The paper presents the perspectives of six literacy teaching professionals on the use of phonics and reading comprehension in the instruction of English to pupils with dyslexia. Although synthetic phonics is one of the major components of intervention work for children with reading difficulties, reservations for its panacea-like attitudes have been expressed combined with a recommendation for a shift away from individual sound instruction towards work on larger sublexical and lexical units. Enhancing reading comprehension skills has been identified as an important element of reading instruction, though underestimated by some of the respondents in the study, and in spite of it not being normally compromised in pupils with dyslexia. The overuse of books based on regular phonetic patterns is strongly criticized as it deprives children of involvement with the text and do not reflect natural language.

Keywords: dyslexia; phonics; reading comprehension; teachers; English

Introduction

Systematic phonics is one of the major components of intervention work for children with reading difficulties including those with dyslexia. The benefits of phonics are observable in pupils' development of skills in decoding, word recognition, reading comprehension and spelling (Ehri et al., 2001). Being more effective when started before second grade, it has been found to help both younger and older students, and produce comparable results when delivered in small groups and individually (Ehri et al., 2001).

In its *synthetic* form, it involves learning to link letters to phonemes and blending them to make words, as well as segmenting spoken words into their constituent sounds and linking them to letters in order to write1). Synthetic phonics has been recommended by the influential Rose Review (2006) as particularly suitable for intervention work with pupils with dyslexia and other reading difficulties.

However, researchers such as Goswami (2007) point out that synthetic phonics is not sufficient. It is a fact that English is highly inconsistent at the grain size level of phonemes, but still it has repeated patterns at the onset-rime level

(e.g. in words like *talk-walk*). This underlies the necessity of extensive use of *analytical phonics* as well. The latter involves inferring of phoneme-grapheme correspondences from sets of words sharing a sound and a letter (Torgesen et al., 2006: 1).

Further, when an increasing number of words are accumulated into the lexical store, they are recognized at sight without an undergoing process of decoding. Even in the early stages of reading, the inconsistencies in the English orthography require some irregularly spelt words such as '*one'* or '*yacht'* to be taught as 'holistic patterns" (Goswami, 2007: 140). That is, developing skills in *sight word recognition* is also essential for achieving effortless and fluent reading, for automaticity.

Despite being at the core of reading interventions, phonics has been reported as less effective if taught in isolation (Rose 2006; Wyse et al, 2013). *Context* provides important semantic and syntactic clues and enables learners to use an important strategy of reading – prediction. Hence, contextualization has been proven to help improve both accuracy and speed of word recognition.

Word recognition is one of the two dimensions of reading according to the Simple View of Reading (SVR) (Hoover and Gough, 1990), which has been informing literacy approach in English schools for over a decade. The second dimension is language comprehension. Typically, only the former is thought to be compromised in most readers with dyslexia. Individuals with dyslexia are found to experience difficulties in fluent and accurate reading, writing and spelling[2)] but their language comprehension capabilities seem to be predominantly intact. Still, comprehension can be hampered by slow and arduous reading, as learners with dyslexia are struggling with poor decoding skills, deficits in verbal memory and verbal processing speed[2)].

Aims

The paper presents the unpublished findings of a study on the strategies used by English teachers when teaching reading skills to pupils with dyslexia in a Greater London area. A previous paper presented the findings related to two of the research questions in the study, not covered in this paper, i.e. teachers' views on the differences in dyslexic students' profiles and on the necessity of having dyslexia assessment (Troeva, 2015). A third question, *What strategies do teachers find most essential to use when teaching reading skills to pupils with dyslexia?,* aimed to explore what approaches to teaching teachers adopted when having learners with dyslexia in their reading classes. While carrying out a secondary analysis of the data, the author came upon interesting results related to the most prominent strategy, phonics, in its synthetic and analytical forms, as well as the role of context and the conscious instruction in reading comprehension. The present paper will introduce the views of the participants on the latter, in an attempt to gain a better understanding of the practical application of recommendations for reading instruction to students with dyslexia by a diverse group of literacy teachers.

Method

For the purpose of answering the three main research questions, the author contacted and carried out interviews with six professionals teaching literacy in English schools. An interview protocol was followed as far as it served as a guidance, providing 'merely an aide-mémoire of the important points for discussion' (Thomas, 2009: 164). The semi-structured interviews lasted for an average of 45 min. Following the thread of conversation, the author asked a number of additional and specific questions not included in the protocol. The data was analyzed qualitatively through coding. A secondary analysis of the transcribed interviews was carried out later, focusing only on the ***phonics***, ***comprehension, context*** **and** ***vocabulary*** themes. Where a distinction between synthetic and analytical phonics was possible, subcodes were introduced. The participants' views on the above topics were categorized and compared in an attempt to answer the questions: *What is the role of phonics (synthetic and analytical) for teachers and literacy support assistants when teaching pupils with dyslexia?* and *How do they view the role of reading comprehension development in reading instruction*? Both the primary and the secondary analysis did not aim for generalizability but for exploring the teaching approaches of a diverse set of professionals working directly with students with dyslexia.

Participants

The respondents assumed various professional roles in supporting students with dyslexia and other reading difficulties. Participant 1 (P1) (woman, age 35+) was the head of a borough's literacy support centre, having the greatest experience in the area. She had worked also as a learning support assistant in a number of schools. Participant 2 (P2) (woman, age 35+) worked both as a special needs coordinator (SENCO) and a learning support assistant at a primary school. Participant 3 (P3) (woman, age under 35) was a teaching assistant and a learning support assistant at the same school. Participants 4 (P4) (woman, age under 35) and 5 (P5) (man, age under 35) worked at another primary school, the first one as a SENCO and a class teacher and the second one as a class teacher. Participant 6 (P6) (woman, under 35) worked as a learning support assistant in a special support centre attached to a secondary school. For the purposes of the paper, all participants will be collectively called 'teachers'.

Findings

1. Phonics

Phonics teaching has been highlighted as the most efficient approach for teaching reading to students with dyslexia, the major method for developing word recognition skills. Understandably, the interviewed teachers (with one exception) displayed considerable trust in following a phonics-based system. All reported

feeling comfortable in combining elements of different programmes or filling in gaps in areas which they found insufficiently addressed.

As far as specific phonics class activities were concerned, only two teachers could expand on their precise functions in reading instruction, among those being reported: strengthening phonemic awareness (e.g. through sounding sounds back), improving letter recognition (e.g. through jumbled letters matching exercises), practising left to right sequenced reading (e.g. through tracking exercises), increasing speed of processing (e.g. through timed word reading). Two teachers identified blending as particularly challenging for children, and pointed out the need of additional exercises to help some learners '*push [the sounds] back together*' and '*get the flow of the sound*'. Apart from that, phonics activities appeared to be a rigid component of both literacy lessons and intervention programmes and five of the six teachers seemed not to feel any need to question or evaluate their efficacy.

By comparison, the unreserved dominance of phonics was repeatedly called into question by the head of a literacy support service (P1). She did recognize the need for phonological awareness to be addressed as, in her opinion, it was the core difficulty in dyslexia. However, she shared her concern about the over-emphasis on phonics: '*if phonics didn't work in year 1, they would give them more phonics in year 2, and it was just continuing and continuing*'.

P1 pinpointed the risk in such uncritical adherence to a phonics programme. Some children could get '*stuck at a phase where they think that they have to sound every lette*r'. An evidence of that was the case of a girl with dyslexia who in year 6 was still sounding out every single letter. P1 claimed this was a consequence of a '*belief'*, a '*mindset'* that only phonics would '*solve everybody's problem… and it hasn't really*'. She suggested that breaking the word into '*tiny chunks*' is '*a move towards rather than an aim*' and expounded the necessity of '*shifting mentality, of finding further options*'. Some of these options were: a stronger focus on comprehension and shifting the emphasis from the individual letter/sound to larger units – looking at '*chunks in the bigger chunks*', at morphemic structures, which '*do not change*'. P1 stressed on the necessity that '*the sounding out should stop*' and the child should eventually obtain an '*orthographic store*'. For this to happen, teaching whole words, especially high frequency words, was seen as an essential strategy that leads to automaticity in reading.

Although the other respondents did not reflect on the possibility that phonics was counter-productive, the interviewer did not find sufficient evidence of overindulgence in phonics limited to the individual letter/sound level (i.e. synthetic phonics). At a practical level *all* the participants reported to be working on individual letter-sound relationship, as well as on larger structures and sight word reading (i.e. employing both synthetic and analytic phonics): (e.g. *'… there is a word within a word... They can use a bit of what they know and try to work out the rest.' (P4), 'We often have to use a precision scheme teaching high-frequency words' (P2)*).

2. Instruction in Reading Comprehension

Language comprehension skills have a critical role in the acquisition of reading, together with word recognition skills as per SVR (Hoover and Gough, 1990). They entail 'lexical knowledge, semantics and syntactic processes' (Stuart et al., 2008: 62), that is, they are closely connected to vocabulary and sentential context. Among the interviewed teachers, only the head of the literacy support service (P1) stressed on including comprehension development in the reading instruction programme for young learners with dyslexia.

Comprehension development seemed to be markedly underestimated in the responses of three interviewees. For example, P6 responded: '*I don't know how deliberate it is ... I've never thought about it.'* Furthermore, P4 thought comprehension activities were inappropriate for early reading development:

> *I don't even try and teach comprehension as a skill until they are reading quite fluently… first they need to read words and to decode and then we'll teach comprehension.*

As far as out-of-class intervention was concerned, P3 even expressed the idea that it was meant to strengthen phonological but not comprehension skills: '*I think I haven't been involved so much to work on comprehension, that goes with the class.'* Interestingly, the same teacher had recognized in another statement that comprehension was often impeded for some pupils with dyslexia because '*they are so busy concentrating on reading, the decoding, they do not always take in the meaning*'. Still, the prevalent role of phonics in intervention delivery underlay the conscious and focused development of mainly phonological skills.

Age seemed to be a factor for the inclusion of comprehension into the teaching agenda. P4, who claimed she did not focus on comprehension with her year-1 poor readers, later on expounded on using the strong comprehensive abilities of an older boy with dyslexia to bootstrap his poor decoding skills:

> *You've been reading a particular book, you've talked about it in class, he knows the context, he knows the characters, you can use all of those clues to help him work out what's happening.*

As pointed out earlier, comprehension was suggested as one of the alternatives for shifting away from phonics. P1 highlighted that using semantic cues was very important in developing reading skills and stressed that '*reading is about meaning, about understanding*', while decoding is just '*a means to understand*'. While acknowledging that pupils with dyslexia usually had good comprehension skills, she still recommended that those skills were further developed through the pupils' being read to, listening to audiobooks, or doing oral work and discussion of characters.

Although comprehension at a syntactic and textual level seemed to be belittled by most of the participants, meaning was given due importance at the lexical level. Four of the six teachers emphasized work on vocabulary through highlighting new

items in texts, using visual displays, revisions. P1 noted that such activities were useful not only for children with dyslexia but for those with speech and language issues, vocabulary difficulties, and pupils with English as Additional Language. An important strategy that P6 suggested was to pre-teach vocabulary in order to facilitate the access of pupils to certain texts. All participants considered the introduction of new vocabulary in context important, with the exception of one (P3), who stated that she worked predominantly on the word level.

A strategy that two participants suggested for developing children's vocabulary was for students to dictate their ideas to a teaching assistant or a learning support assistant. The avoidance of writing being able to help children enlarge their vocabulary may be counter-intuitive. The explanation provided by the respondent (P3) was that as children with dyslexia were usually reluctant to use sophisticated words in writing, dictating enabled them to express deeper and more abstract ideas through complicated vocabulary. Moreover, according to P6 it allowed them to 'showcase their ability'. Such a practice brings about a two-fold benefit, as on the one hand it opens up opportunities for pupils to use a wider range of vocabulary, and on the other, it boosts their confidence and self-esteem.

All teachers recognized the need to improve word recognition and comprehension skills by exposure to texts. However, P1 strongly criticized the overuse of books based on regular phonetic patterns and expressed three arguments against those.

The main one was that they distorted children's perception of reading as '*it is all about working out the word, the next word, the next word*'. P1 implied that if reading turns into an exercise in decoding, a meaningful interaction with the text might be lost. In her opinion, books like *Fox in Socks* (Seuss, 1965) brought '*no reward*' for the children as '*there is no engagement in the process*'. By this she inferred that if the guiding principle of the book was a particular phonetic or letter pattern, the meaning of the story could be compromised and the children would get less involved with it.

The second argument claimed that such books did not reflect natural language. P1 illustrated the trend of sacrificing '*normal language*' with an example of a book throughout which the main character, a duckling, was called a 'duck chick' to reinforce the 'ck' spelling pattern. As a word such as 'duck chick' did not exist in the English dictionary, she asserted that: '*To have that sort of quite strangulated words and sentences is not really helpful*.'

The third argument suggested that the books should not only be at the appropriate reading but also at the appropriate interest level. A conscious effort to find more '*interesting'* books was reported by other teachers as well – because the children '*are usually quite bright… Just because they are dyslexic that does not mean they can't understand what is going on'* (P3).

This last statement served as a warning against the unnecessary simplification of study materials based on wrong assumptions about the abilities of children with specific learning difficulties and the resulting lowered expectations.

Discussion

Phonics intervention for most interviewees was indubitably the most essential strategy of reading to pupils with dyslexia. The trust in it is understandable in view of its being part of major guidelines for literacy instruction (Rose (2006; Singleton, 2009) and positive results in phonologically-based intervention research (Duff et al., 2012). Only one of the teachers questioned the overwhelming focus on phonics and the panacea-like attitude towards it. She called for a shift of emphasis, for recognition that sometimes synthetic phonics at an individual sound level was not effective and that literacy work should turn onto larger language units. Such criticism is compatible with Ehri's (2005) view that decoding practiced only as a means of sounding out letters but not as sight reading could not advance reading. The essence of this debate reflects the contradistinction between synthetic and analytic phonics (Goswami, 2007). Some authors have claimed that the deep and complex orthography of English requires focused work on *a variety of* 'grain sizes' (Ziegler & Goswami, 2005: 3), that synthetic phonics can be only one of the many methods for teaching word recognition (Goswami, 2007).

Although most of the participants did not express any reservations against synthetic phonics, four of them did accentuate their work on larger units such as rimes and morphemes and building up a sight vocabulary, especially of high frequency words. While Snowling (2000) claims that awareness of rime does not help children's first reading attempts, others like Goswami and Mead (1992) show that children's making analogies between spelling patterns (e.g. beak – peak) facilitates their reading of unfamiliar words. Although Strauss and Altwerger (2007) perhaps go too far claiming that 'the English phonics system operates at a level of complexity that essentially defies teachability', they too recommend a focus on larger word units such as rimes. Working with units that '*do not change*', as P1 noted, allows pupils to detect patterns and provides them with the strategy of making analogies. *Analogy* is one of the four strategies for reading unfamiliar words put forward by Ehri (2002), besides *decoding*, *sight reading*, and *prediction*. Its importance was implied by all participants indirectly, although the term 'analogy' was used only by one of them.

It was found that the participants considered it important to teach sight word reading parallel to decoding skills, thus working on both routes for reading words according to the Dual Route Cascaded Model (Coltheart et al., 2001). The recommendation for an early introduction of sight vocabulary can be found in Wyse et al., who assert that 'sensitivity to larger phonological units including words, rhymes and syllables occurs at an early age and before awareness of individual phonemes'.

The more sight words are retained in memory, the easier new words are acquired (Beech, 2005). Moreover, rapid and automatic recognition of written words bolsters up the understanding of sentences and texts (Sprenger-Charolles & Willy, 2006). It reduces the extra load on the memory (Reid & Green, 2007). Some participants gave examples of pupils stranded in a phase of sounding out sounds without being able to generalize their phonics knowledge. Whether this lack of development was due to an inappropriate focus on synthetic phonics or was a result of an impaired development of the self-sustaining word recognition system, a possibility noted by Rose (2009), remains unknown. Some teachers, however, did acknowledge that lack of automaticity and fluency hampered comprehension as they imposed extra load on the memory. Slower and effortful decoding has been found to exhaust the working memory resources needed for comprehension (Kirby & Savage, 2008; Reid & Green, 2007).

For most of the participants in the study, the phonics-based approach seemed to have assumed a role of a compulsory and leading element of dyslexia interventions, and the only objection made, besides P1's, was that the programmes were to a certain extent boring. The solution to what Dombey (2010) called 'an unbalanced diet, the thin gruel of a phonics-dominated approach', for the participants, was diversifying the phonics programmes with additional activities. Those would aim at not only filling in for areas that are not sufficiently addressed, but also involving teachers' creativity to make lessons more engaging and keep up the pupils' level of interest.

According to the Simple View of Reading, reading is constituted by two dimensions, which interact and support each other – decoding and comprehension (Hoover & Gough,1990). While instruction in the first one was highly emphasized in the study, *comprehension* work was found to be considerably undervalued by most of the participants. Such a bearing might be brought about by the developmental models which focus extensively on word recognition skills (e.g. Ehri, 2005). Also, decoding skills are found to carry more weight as determinants of reading comprehension in the early stages of reading development, while language comprehension does at later stages (Vellutino et al., 2004). In the case of P4's year-1 students, their budding skills in reading may not have allowed them to be engaged in comprehension tasks. Some participants pointed out that pupils with dyslexia generally have good comprehension skills, so they do not need to focus on those. However, Snowling (2006) strongly recommends that the latter are used to bootstrap the learners in view of their other weaknesses.

The teachers in this study did recognize that strong language comprehension abilities were the key to some of their pupils' success. Oral skills, however, seemed not to be purposefully supported. Once again, it was the head of literacy service who presented a very critical viewpoint on the importance of comprehension work, which, in her mind, was often neglected. She echoed Wyse et al.'s statement that

'reading comprehension is the essence of reading' (2013) and that 'phonics teaching should be carefully contextualized in real texts, sentences and words.' (2013). Snowling and Hulme (2011) too insisted that children should learn with understanding. Wray (Wyse et al., 2013: 156) rightly remark that it is unfortunate that comprehension is often considered a higher-order skill as most children are being read to stories and taught to narrate stories in an early pre-school age, and their comprehension skills should not be underestimated.

Although comprehension work seemed overlooked by five of the participants, most of them recognized the role of *context* in reading acquisition, predominantly in introducing and reinforcing word meaning. Its contribution has been strongly supported by research findings (Everatt et al., 2007). On the one hand, context provides children with the opportunity to use a very powerful strategy for reading unfamiliar words – prediction (Ehri, 2014). On the other hand, in the presence of poor decoding skills utilization of semantic and syntactic cues can act as a compensatory strategy (West and Stanovich,1978).

The importance of textual contextualization has been highlighted in a very recent study by McQuillan (2019), who pointed out that simple reading for pleasure or being read to results in more efficient word acquisition compared to explicit vocabulary instruction. However, one has to bear in mind the critique in this study directed at the oversimplified books for struggling readers. It argued that such books did not reflect natural language and might distort children's perception of the reading process, while revolving around decoding and not meaning, and undermine their engagement with the text.

Conclusion

Although the study was of a small scale, its value lies in exploring the perspectives of six professionals involved directly in teaching pupils with dyslexia how to read. It showed that the interviewees' diverse professional roles and experience molded their depth of reflection and approach to teaching. Most of them expressed an overall trust in the teaching of phonics as recommended by educational authorities, but did not critically reflect on its underlying principles or how they were related to dyslexia-specific difficulties. Critical insights were offered by the highest ranking professional in the group, which are worth taking a note when planning reading intervention with dyslexic learners.

All teachers, though to a various degree, recommended phonics teaching to be focused not only on individual sound-letter relationships, but also on larger sublexical units such as the morpheme or the rime, and to be accompanied by instruction in sight word reading; i.e. they relied both on synthetic and analytical phonics in their teaching practice. Some of the respondents underestimated the need of comprehension development at a syntactic and contextual level, which has been found to need serious reconsideration in view of the available scientific evidence on the subject.

NOTES

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