

# Innovative Methods in Teaching Foreign Languages to Dyslexic Learners

Ágnes Magnuczné Godó

Institute of Modern Philology

magnuczagnes@gmail.com

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## 1. Introduction

In Hungary dyslexic learners are educated in integrated classrooms. Dyslexic learners (DLs) form a special group within learners with Special Educational Needs (SEN) representing about 7–10% of all learners in Hungarian public education,<sup>1</sup> and their number is continuously increasing. Teachers are expected to recognise the characteristic symptoms of dyslexia, and direct learners to qualified teachers of SEN. However, in integrated education DLs would be entitled to receive special scaffolding necessary for their development, which, in lack of training and experience, is often beyond the competence of teachers.

Research, which seems to have intensified in recent years, suggests that dyslexia presents an especially grave challenge in foreign language learning,<sup>2</sup> as compensation strategies having been developed in the mother tongue cannot be directly transferred into learning additional languages. In addition, DLs represent a heterogeneous group and their tailor-made development would require awareness, training and appropriate resources. Problems resulting from the lack of the above mentioned conditions are often remedied by exemption from grading or foreign language learning in general. This might seem to be the easiest short-term solution, but it effectively breaches the DLs' right for equal chances in language learning. A more constructive approach could be recycling available research results into education both in the area of teacher training and material development.

This objective has inspired the „ENGaGE Digital English and German task bank for 4th-8th class dyslexic learners” TEMPUS Erasmus+ project (<http://engage.uni-miskolc.hu/>). The principal undertaking of the project, the ENGaGE

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<sup>1</sup> MEIXNER Ildikó, *A dyslexia prevenció, reeducáció módszere*, (Budapest: Bárczi Gusztáv Gyógypedagógiai Főiskola, 1993)

<sup>2</sup> Judit KORMOS and Anne Margaret SMITH, *Teaching languages to students with specific learning differences*, (Bristol: MM Textbooks, 2012)

Task Bank offers a flexible, thematically organised English and German digital task bank for primary school learners with dyslexia and the inclusive classes they are educated in. The Teacher Training Programme accompanying the Task Bank provides information about dyslexia and foreign language learning, the benefits of digital technology, the possibilities of differentiation and inclusion, as well as project pedagogy. The project is realised in the cooperation of the following seven partner institutions: the University of Miskolc, the University of Szeged, Lingua-Met Gp. and Navigates Ltd. from Hungary, Lancaster University (UK), Masaryk University (Czech Republic) and Warsaw University (Poland).

The project is based on the available results of recent research and international projects related to the topic (DysTEFL 1–2, CalDys 2), which focus on three main areas: the difficulties and tailor-made skills development of DLs, the scaffolding potential of digital technology, as well as the significance of inclusive teaching and differentiation. In the following I shall introduce the theoretical background of the project and outline how the relevant results of recent research have been integrated into material development.

### *2. Specific difficulties of DLs and tailor-made skills development*

Dyslexia is a specific learning difference that demonstrates itself most evidently in reading and writing difficulties.<sup>3</sup> Fluent and accurate word coding and decoding might cause problems,<sup>4</sup> reading and writing do not become sufficiently automatised,<sup>5</sup> exchanging letters (b–d) and reading backwards (was-saw) are typical, and all this is often accompanied by disorganised or illegible handwriting. According to Everatt and Reid's Phonological Deficit Hypothesis,<sup>6</sup> reading/writing difficulties are caused by shortcomings of phonological awareness, and short-term and long-term memory, which are also responsible for problems of recalling words, discriminating sounds, phoneme – grapheme correspondence, and focusing attention.

However, besides the outlined difficulties, DLs might have numerous compensation strategies as well, which are important to consider when developing learning materials for them. Research suggests that these tend to include visual abilities, especially good long-term visual memory in remembering faces, shapes and colours, as well as creativity, effective problem-solving ability, and

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<sup>3</sup> KORMOS and SMITH, *Teaching languages, op.cit.*

<sup>4</sup> Joanna NIJAKOWSKA, *Dyslexia in the foreign language classroom*, (Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 2010)

<sup>5</sup> KORMOS and SMITH, *Teaching languages, op.cit.*

<sup>6</sup> John EVERATT and Gavin REID, „Dyslexia: an overview of recent research”, in *The Routledge companion to dyslexia*, ed. Gavin REID, (London: Routledge, 2009) 3–22.

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holistic thinking.<sup>7</sup> Table 1 summarises the main requirements for DLs' scaffolding and how these are met by the ENGAGE Task Bank.

Table 1. Main requirements for DLs' scaffolding and how these are met by the ENGAGE Task Bank

Requirements of scaffolding DLs	Meeting the requirements in the ENGAGE Task Bank
Continuously recycling learnt information to help internalisation	<p>Every module consists of six lessons focusing on the same topic, which support recycling in the following ways:</p> <p>Lesson 1 offers special developmental tasks for DLs relying on the new vocabulary introduced in lessons 2-3.</p> <p>Lessons 2-3 share an identical structure developing all four skills with 2-2 graded task blocks. A maximum of ten new vocabulary items and one language function per lesson are introduced and practised in these lessons.</p> <p>Lesson 4 contains an individual and a group project idea encouraging learners to recycle acquired new vocabulary and language functions in a creative way.</p> <p>Lesson 5 revises the content of lessons 2-3.</p> <p>Lesson 6 offers flashcard based practice tasks recycling the vocabulary of lessons 2-3.</p> <p>The leading topics of the modules are identical across the four levels of the Task Bank, facilitating the recycling and extension of previous content.</p>
Developing working memory	Lesson 1 in every module contains tailor-made developmental tasks for DLs based on the topics of the module, appropriate for differentiated home or classroom work.
Multisensory approach in introducing new vocabulary and language functions	New vocabulary is introduced with flashcards using audiovisual support in lessons 2-3. Key words are visualised in big letters on flashcards, extended with a sample sentence in smaller letters and accompanied by parallel audio materials and a picture acting as an associative anchor. These pictures are recycled later in the module when the flashcard vocabulary is to be recalled, supporting associative vocabulary learning. New language functions are also introduced with the help of figures, colour coding, and audio materials.
Providing audiovisual support to reading and listening comprehension tasks	Reading texts are accompanied by audio materials and visual illustration. Texts are segmented into smaller blocks and presented against a tinted background. Most texts represent genres that typically consist of small, independent parts in real life as well, e.g.

<sup>7</sup> Aisha Yakoub ALSOBHI and Nawaz KHAN and Harjinder RAHANU, „Personalised learning materials based on dyslexia types: Ontological approach”, *Procedia Computer Science*, 60(2015) 113-121.; Janice EDWARDS, *The scars of dyslexia: Eight case studies in emotional reactions*, (London: Cassel, 1994); Éva GYARMATHY, „Gifted Children with Specific Learning Difficulties and Teaching Foreign Languages”, in *Double exceptionality. Special Educational Needs in Europe Teaching languages to learners with special needs*, (Brussels: European Commission, 2005) Online: [diszlexia.hu](http://diszlexia.hu) - 2018. január. 73-74.

	<p>letters/email exchanges, advertisements, online media posts, online quizzes, etc.</p> <p>Listening comprehension tasks are also supported by tapescripts and visual illustration, but most lessons contain short videos, too. These are produced by the project team, and narration is supplemented with subtitles of varying complexity (full text appears in the subtitle, showing only key phrases, no subtitles at all).</p>
<p>Supporting and offering alternatives to writing</p>	<p>Scaffolding writing follows the principle of graduality. At levels 1 and 2 all task blocks offer task options enabling the learner to avoid writing (e.g. choosing pictures, ordering items, picture-text/text-text matching, etc.), to lead them towards more complex writing tasks through further completion options (e.g. choosing item from drop-down menu or typing it in). However, in all open-ended tasks learners are offered the possibility to write down or record their oral responses.</p>

### 3. The supportive potential of digital technology

The members of Generation Z are growing up immersed in digital game culture, which shapes their affective and cognitive skills as well as social attitudes. One of the greatest challenges of our educational systems is that many of today's students are looking for the same impulsive, fast and experience-based learning, immediate feedback and rewarding mechanisms in formal school contexts as well. An effective way to meet this challenge is involving digital technology in education: it might improve motivation, help understanding and decrease cognitive workload.<sup>8</sup> For DLs digital platforms can provide the individualised learning content which might enable them to keep pace with their groups with the help of individual work or differentiated group work.<sup>9</sup>

An effective way of increasing motivation is gamification: using gaming elements in non-gaming situations to engage learners in various activities, motivate them to act, facilitate their learning and solve problems. It is important to note here that game-based learning does not equal playing. In the case of „structural gamification”<sup>10</sup> regular learning content is surrounded by the mechanisms, design and interactional features of games such as competitive challenges, performance and progression based games, collecting points and badges. „Content gamification”,<sup>11</sup> on the other hand, relies on using game-like

<sup>8</sup> JAMES ALTY and A. AL-SHARRAH and Nigel BEACHAM, „When humans form media and media forms humans: An experimental study examining the effects different digital media have on the learning outcomes of students who have different learning styles”. *Journal of Interacting with Computers*, 18(2006) Nr. 5. 891–909.

<sup>9</sup> ALSOBHI and KHAN and RAHANU, *Personalised learning materials, op.cit.*

<sup>10</sup> Karl M. KAPP and Lucas BLAIR and Rich MESCH, *The gamification of learning and instruction. Fieldbook*, (New York: Wiley, 2014)

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

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characters/avatars, contexts, narratives, and related role plays, co-creation and small group work to develop different skills. The activities can be facilitated by group forums and various forms of social networking, providing further opportunities for learning and communication almost unnoticeably.

By combining various online educational platforms, we can create Virtual Learning Environments (VLE) to support learning. According to Rouse,<sup>12</sup> a VLE comprises curriculum mapping (breaking the curriculum into sections that can be assigned and assessed), student tracking, online support for both teacher and student, electronic communication (e-mail, threaded discussions, chat, Web publishing), and Internet links to outside curriculum resources.

Most VLEs are closed systems where the teacher is authorised to form groups and edit materials.

For the purposes of the planned task bank we sought for a platform which makes it possible to access materials from a public website, but if need be, can be operated as a closed system as well having the above described functions. Based on these criteria, the Screenager educational platform has been chosen, which offers the features summarised in table 2:

*Table 2. Requirements related to the digital educational platform, and how they are met on the Screenager platform*

<b>Requirements related to the digital educational platform</b>	<b>Meeting these requirements in the Screenager platform</b>
Makes it possible to access materials from a public website, but if need be, can be operated as a closed VLE	The tasks created in the Screenager system accompanied by feedback functions are available from the open link, except for the open-ended tasks, which can only be saved and sent in the closed Classroom function tied to registration. In the Screenager Classroom the curriculum mapping function enables teachers to send the chosen assignments to their groups, then trace students' progress by checking the submitted, automatically corrected responses as well as the number of attempts at solving the tasks. Teachers can send tasks and messages to their groups, but students can only submit their responses. Links to outside sources such as supplementary materials and online dictionaries can be integrated into the materials and sent via the message system as well,
Facilitating gamification by built-in functions and game templates	The decisive factor in choosing the Screenager platform was that its editing surface is user-operated with no or minimal need for IT support. This is largely due to built-in tasks supporting text processing (e.g. true or false, MCQ, matching, gap-filling)

<sup>12</sup> Margaret ROUSE, „Virtual learning environment (VLE) or managed learning environment (MLE)“, (2011) Online: [whatis.techtarget.com](http://whatis.techtarget.com) – December 2019.

	task, etc.) and game templates (falling words, word search, picture matching, memory game, online quizzes, etc.). The flashcards introducing key vocabulary in lessons 2–3 can be turned into 12 different playful word games, recycling vocabulary through varied task types.
Effective feedback system	The Screenager platform includes an effective, multi-level feedback system. Learners receive immediate visual (green and red indication of correct and incorrect answers) and audio feedback after completing closed tasks, but the correct answer is not given automatically, encouraging learners to make further attempts at task solution till perfection is achieved. At the end of lessons a summative lesson result can also be generated.
Possibility to upload visual, audio and video content, or connect them to the course material via external links	Screenager offers a freely editable online surface, the design of which is determined by the user-editor. We can upload texts and images, mp3 audio and mp4 video materials, pdf and excel files, links to online extensions, as well as game templates filled with the desired content.
Varied text design options (font size, background, segmenting)	The platform offers more than ten text frames/background schemata, each of which includes four text boxes and a task box of matching colours to differentiate titles, remarks, and different types of text. The font type is given, but size and highlight functions can be chosen.
Built-in alternatives and support mechanisms for writing	Flashcards and text processing tasks, as well as game functions offer more than 15 different options to avoid or support writing.

#### 4. Inclusive education and differentiation

While learners with SEN are obliged to learn with methods and resources designed for learners with no apparent learning difficulty and proceed matching the pace of the „average”, it is no wonder they rarely enjoy a sense of success. Owing to their failures, their group prestige tends to be low, they are characterised with a higher level of foreign language use anxiety,<sup>13</sup> and typically have a lower level of motivation and self-confidence.<sup>14</sup> What makes the situation even more difficult is that being afraid of peer judgement, learners with special learning differences often refuse the help offered to them because they do not want to seem „different”. Thus the opportunities of development are continuously dwindling.

Solution might be offered by inclusive education, which provides differentiated learning options to learners with SEN. Their active participation in the

<sup>13</sup> Ewa PIECHURSKA-KUCIEL, „Input, processing and output anxiety in students with symptoms of developmental dyslexia”, in *Language learners with special needs: An international perspective*, ed. Judit KORMOS and Edit KONTRA, (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 2008) 86–109.

<sup>14</sup> Kata CSIZÉR and Judit KORMOS and Ágnes SARKADI, „The dynamics of language learning attitudes and motivation: Lessons from an interview study of dyslexic language learners”, *Modern Language Journal*, 94(2010) Nr. 3. 470-487.

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learning process is supported by principled scaffolding, which means that helping mechanisms are carefully matched to the learners' development and are gradually withdrawn to support learner autonomy. Part of scaffolding is differentiated instruction, which might involve modification of the learning material (e.g. reducing the number of words to be learnt, shortening/simplifying the text for reading comprehension, etc.), as well as accommodation of the processes of learning and assessment (e.g. providing more time or reducing the number of questions in tests, giving options for written or oral assessment, etc.).

The central concept of inclusive education is accepting differences: it is natural that learners have their individual strengths and weaknesses, and consequently might make different, individual contribution to group activities. This concept can be effectively supported by developing transcultural competence as well, which reaches beyond getting to know the target language and culture and encourages learners to adopt a conscious mediating role between languages and cultures. Table 3 presents an overview of the principles of inclusive education, and how they are addressed in the ENGAGE Task Bank.

*Table 3. Principles of inclusive education, and how they are addressed in the ENGAGE Task Bank*

<b>Principles of inclusive education</b>	<b>How they are addressed in the ENGAGE Task Bank</b>
Flexible scaffolding options	The Task Bank offers varied scaffolding mechanisms: 1) optional drop-down mother tongue translation for instructions and key vocabulary, 2) colour-coding for different text types, 3) function icons consistently accompanied by matching, highlighted function verbs, 4) unified, predictable module and lesson structure.
Differentiated instruction for DLs	Of the six lessons comprising a module, lessons 1, 5 and 6, and the first project task in lesson 4 are ideal for individual work, while lessons 2–3, and the second project task of lesson 4 are designed for group work. Lesson 1 presents tailor-made developmental tasks for DLs, which, however, might be useful for ALL learners to develop their language learning skills and revise the material – just as the revision tasks of lesson 5 and the flashcard tasks of lesson 6. The task blocks of lessons 2–3 contain three increasingly difficult tasks each, connected to a central language input. The aim is not to have all learners complete all three tasks, but to give each learner a task that suits their language competence. In a significant number of tasks learners can choose between two task solution options: writing or speaking and recording it, choosing items from a drop-down list or typing them in, etc.
Facilitating cooperation between group members	Graded tasks facilitate participation in whole group work as well by enabling all learners to work on the same task and contribute to the discussion of the task, although at different language levels. Task C

	(the third task of the task blocks) is mostly open and often interactive, to provide opportunities for group discussion and role play. The group projects of lesson 4 invite learners of different abilities to form small groups to work together and produce a creative outcome. The project ideas are based on the topic of the module, but the tasks are open-ended: learners can produce alternative solutions involving language items and connected topics depending on their language level.
Developing transcultural competence	The materials of the Task Bank provide opportunities for <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) familiarising learners with the linguistic varieties of English/German,</li> <li>2) exploring English/German-speaking cultures as well as other cultures of the world,</li> <li>3) comparing first language and foreign language cultures,</li> <li>4) raising awareness of first language culture and discussing it in English/German.</li> </ol>

### 5. Conclusion

The ENGaGE Task Bank is an innovative, experimental learning material offering English and German supplementary tasks for inclusive classes to facilitate the differentiation of dyslexic learners and learners with other learning differences. Differentiated scaffolding is provided by tailor-made developmental tasks on the one hand, and task solution options offered by the Screenager platform on the other hand. The main ambition of the Task Bank is to support inclusive learning environments, which contribute to decreasing the learning disadvantage of learners with SEN and promote their equal access to education.

### Further references

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