

Dyslexia and EFL examinations – case closed?

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Abstract

This article discusses how the Method of Multiple Interactions with the Text may be applied to EFL examination preparation of dyslexic candidates. The method, originally dedicated to teaching literacy and reading comprehension skills to Polish learners (Pawłowska 2002), is particularly effective if combined with multisensory stimulation. The open-cloze task, which tests awareness of collocation and complexities of grammar, poses considerable problems for dyslexic learners. Therefore, the article presents a battery of exercises of Multiple Interactions with the Text which may facilitate the acquisition of grammatical structures and word combinations frequently tested in EFL examinations. The exercises appeal to different senses and give many opportunities to preserve the input material in the learner's long-term memory, which, in turn, may influence positively their performance in EFL tests.

Key words

dyslexia, EFL examinations, multiple interactions with the text, long-term memory, multisensory approach to teaching, open-cloze, short-term memory

Dysleksja a egzaminy z języka angielskiego jako języka obcego – sprawa zamknięta?

Abstrakt

Niniejszy artykuł podejmuje próbę wyjaśnienia w jaki sposób metoda wielokrotnego obcowania z tekstem może okazać się przydatna w przygotowaniu kandydata z dysleksją do egzaminu z języka angielskiego. Metoda ta, pierwotnie stworzona na potrzeby polskiej szkoły w celu kształcenia sprawności czytania (Pawłowska 2002), jest szczególnie skuteczna w połączeniu z nauczaniem polisensorycznym. Zadanie egzaminacyjne z luką, które sprawdza znajomość związków frazeologicznych oraz niuanse gramatyczne, stanowi wyzwanie dla ucznia z dysleksją. Poniższy artykuł przedstawia przykłady ćwiczeń wykorzystujących metodę wielokrotnego obcowania z tekstem, które ułatwiają uczniowi ze specyficznymi trudnościami w nauce przyswojenie struktur gramatycznych oraz kolokacji, których opanowanie jest warunkiem koniecznym do zdania egzaminu z języka angielskiego na określonym poziomie. Ćwiczenia te stymulują różne zmysły i zwiększają możliwość przyswojenia informacji oraz zachowanie jej w pamięci długotrwałej, co w konsekwencji może doprowadzić do sukcesu egzaminacyjnego.

Słowa kluczowe

dysleksja, egzamin z języka angielskiego jako języka obcego, pamięć długotrwała, pamięć krótkotrwała, stymulacja wielozmysłowa, wielokrotne obcowanie z tekstem, zadanie z luką

1. Introduction

With each approaching examination session, be it A Levels in English or Cambridge English Examinations, a great number of students with specific learning difficulties as well as their English teachers might ask themselves this pertinent question: *Have we put enough time and effort into getting ready for the vagaries of English grammar, lexis and spelling?* In all likelihood, they have. They have studied as hard as anyone else or

probably even harder. They might have memorized the whole textbook but on entering the examination room, they might not have enough time and the right tools to translate their knowledge into coherent and correct answers.

2. Extended time as the ultimate solution

What is dyslexia and why do dyslexic candidates need more time to complete examination tasks? Briefly, it is an unexpected learning difficulty to read despite intelligence, motivation and education, which might be linked to the phonological deficit hypothesis (Shaywitz 1996: 100). Extensive research by Nijakowska (2010) shows that due to this deficit, dyslexic learners experience numerous problems with identifying, processing and retrieving linguistic information, which results in their educational achievements being much below their intellectual potential.

To compensate for this impairment, the Cambridge English Language Assessment examination body offers dyslexic candidates 25 per cent extra time in the written part of the examination. They can also choose the computer-based version of the test. They may not, however, use any spellcheck, grammar check or thesaurus functions. Neither are they assessed more leniently should they make spelling mistakes nor are they offered dyslexia-friendly tasks (www.cambridgeenglish.org/exams-and-qualifications/special-circumstances). Likewise, dyslexic A Level candidates in Polish schools are allowed extra time to complete the language test. Additionally, dyslexic candidates with a very low graphic level of writing, which renders it illegible, are entitled to the computer-based version of the examination. (Komunikat Dyrektora Centralnej Komisji Egzaminacyjnej 2016: 13)

In light of the above, it is quite a challenge for a dyslexic candidate to be successful in both A Levels and Cambridge English Tests such as PET, First or Advanced as extended time does not resolve the issue. The challenge may seem insur-

mountable, given the fact that dyslexic learners experience a great number of difficulties when learning a foreign language, of which correct spelling appears to be the least acute problem. The challenges they face include getting to grips with the English tenses, memorising irregular and phrasal verbs, learning sequences or grappling with prepositions, to name just a few. Dyslexic learners also find it difficult to master the word order of the English sentence. Above all, they struggle with the application of theoretical knowledge of grammar to real life language use (Nijakowska 2010; Bogdanowicz 2011). As a result, many dyslexic English language learners decide not to take examinations such as Cambridge English Tests for fear of poor results or failure, or do not achieve top results in their A Levels.

It seems that extended time and modified assessment criteria would be the most appropriate combination to accommodate dyslexic EFL candidates' needs. However, what also calls for revision are the methods that we, English teachers, use to prepare our students for language examinations. In this article, I will try to show that dyslexia should not prevent potential candidates from excelling at Cambridge English Examinations or A Levels in English. The key to success is in the nature and the focus of the preparation process. The approach that may give dyslexic students a head start is the method of *Multiple Interactions with the Text*.

3. The Method of Multiple Interactions with the Text

The method is not new as it was originally invented by Professor Regina Pawłowska from the Department of Polish Philology at Gdańsk University, Poland, to teach reading skills to children at Polish schools. It is based on the linguistic theory of literacy development. According to Pawłowska (2009: 13), while literacy itself is the fundamental tool of cognition, the process of learning *how to read* not only shapes human thinking, but also improves concentration, imagination and

memory. At the same time, it enriches our lexical and grammatical resource, which results in greater precision of expression and grammatical accuracy. Ultimately, it helps learners visualise and imagine the characters and the events a story describes. However, to achieve this, the learner must interact with a given text several times in order to comprehend and appreciate it fully. This is achieved by means of a wide range of clearly structured tasks that the learner must perform in and outside the classroom. What also matters is the gradation of the complexity of exercises and activities, which facilitates the process of cognition (Pawłowska 2002).

Multiple interaction with the text is invariably overlooked or superficially treated in EFL coursebooks, especially those designed for examination preparation. Additionally, seldom do these textbooks cater for the needs of dyslexic students, who in order to become efficient readers, must be exposed to multiple repetitions of the input material through a variety of multi-sensory exercises, which, in turn, will boost their chances of becoming proficient users of a foreign language. What I have attempted to do is adapt the theory to meet the needs of dyslexic students preparing to EFL examinations because it lends itself well to identifying and decoding the linguistic hurdles that prospective candidates might face.

4. The advantage of the multiple and the multisensory

Nijakowska (2010) stresses that learners with dyslexia are in need of constant repetition, reinforcement and overlearning as this will result in the automatic use of the input material. She also states that the skills that are the most difficult to acquire call for the most intense practice through multiple activities. This is in line with Pawłowska (2009), who stresses that a well-constructed literacy course must include tasks which are repeated systematically. In addition, these tasks should aim at stimulating the visual and auditory channels in such a man-

ner that every single student is involved in the learning process and benefits from it (Pawłowska 2009: 142).

Indeed, traditional school instruction relies heavily on the auditory and visual perception. Students whose style of learning follows the pattern: *I hear – I see – I do / I see – I hear – I do* are the teacher's dream in a traditional learning environment (Dyrda 2004: 152-158). But what should be done with those who have a different learning style? Invariably, these students happen to be dyslexic and the traditional mode of instruction will not give them much chance of progress. In other words, their success depends on the unconventional design of the techniques used in the classroom and here the term *multisensory* is appropriate. Apart from engaging the eye and the ear, exercises should also appeal to the sense of touch, the sense of smell and kinesthetic intelligence (Bogdanowicz 1999; Nijakowska 2010; Townend and Turner 2013).

The choice of multisensory instruction can be further corroborated by the work of Lawrence Baines (2008), who points to the fact that multisensory stimulation enables the learner to interact with the material more intensely and retain the input much longer than when using traditional teaching methods based on the idea that the new information should be highlighted three times, then defined and finally used in practice. This method of instruction is active and interactive and it is particularly appropriate to the teaching of young children and dyslexic learners of all ages (Townend and Turner 2013:18).

5. The nightmare of the open-cloze

One of the popular examination tasks that poses serious problems for dyslexic candidates is the *open-cloze* where by means of gapped sentences the candidate's ability to use *grammar words* is tested. The list of the tested items includes: auxiliaries, dependent prepositions and prepositional phrases, determiners and pronouns, question words, modal verbs, quantifiers, conjunctions, reference words, to name just a few.

Learners with dyslexia find it particularly challenging because a gap in a sentence is like a hole in the pavement. It disrupts the process of reading comprehension just like a hole may make one stumble if one fails to notice it. Therefore, the role of the teacher is to prepare a dyslexic candidate for such pitfalls. The process is long and time-consuming. It also requires a great deal of revision and organization, but the results are rewarding.

The general advice that is given on how to cope with the open-cloze task is to read the text ignoring the gaps in order to understand its meaning. Then, it is necessary to read each gapped sentence again, paying particular attention to the words which come before and after the gap. Next, one should consider what type of grammar word is required to finally search one's memory for the correct option, write it and make sure it fits in grammatically and semantically. And, indeed, this advice is invaluable. However, to prepare a dyslexic candidate to take the above-mentioned steps, the teacher needs to prepare a battery of multisensory exercises which will give the student the opportunity to interact with the text a number of times.

6. The open-cloze in practice exercises

The exercises that are presented in the Appendix are based on a text taken from an English course for teenagers preparing to B1 level examinations, namely *English in Mind Level 3* student's book (Puchta and Stranks 2010: 94). However, any text may be adapted, depending on the needs and interests of the individual student or group of students. It is also highly advantageous to make use of past examination papers as they contain the kind of language that the candidate is expected to master. Moreover, it is imperative that the student's first encounter with the text should be through simultaneous reading and listening. Many course books offer recorded versions of the reading passages, but if this does not exist in the book, the

teacher should read the text to the learner, paying attention to phonological features such as sound articulation, word and sentence stress and intonation (Pawłowska 2009). Another solution is to make use of text-to-speech computer software such as Ivona Reader (www.ivona.com/pl), which is a text-to-speech synthesizer. Owing to rapid advances in technology, it offers excellent quality male and female voices, which sound natural and interpret the reading material effectively to convey and enhance meaning. In addition to this, Ivona voices speak with British and American accents. Finally, patience is the key to success as dyslexic learners must not be pressurized to give instant responses as the phonological deficit often masks their comprehension skills (Shaywitz 1996: 104).

7. Homework

No lesson, even the most impressive, would be complete without homework. We could ask the learner to write their own sentences or to prepare a story with the lexis and grammar we studied in class as storytelling, which is learning by doing, activates the skills of reorganization, categorization and analytical thinking, which are essential for long-term memorization of the input material. Moreover, an effective technique that can be used with students is making posters on sheets of different coloured paper: white for nouns and noun phrases, blue for verbs and verb phrases, yellow for adjectives, orange for prepositional phrases etc. This, however, requires good management skills on the part of the dyslexic learner, which is a topic for another paper.

8. A final word

The open-cloze is only one of many tasks that examination candidates with specific learning difficulties find particularly problematic. Others include key word transformations, open-ended transformations, word formation and multiple-choice.

A great deal of training for different kinds of reading tasks is also required.

The method of *Multiple Interactions with the Text* combined with the multisensory approach to foreign language instruction may facilitate the process of preparation to all the aforementioned tasks, provided we compile a set of clearly organized, inspiring and meaningful training materials. We should also be prepared to adapt examination papers to compensate for the weaknesses and reinforce the strengths of our students. The saying *One man's meat is another man's poison* aptly illustrates the point that no two dyslexics are the same. Therefore, it is worth finding out "what makes them tick".

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Appendix

Open-cloze preparation materials

Exercise 1: The first encounter

The teacher asks the student to *listen and read the following text*.

A few years ago the company I work for sent my wife and me to live in New York for a year. I have always loved jogging, so I was really happy when I found out the apartment they had rented for us was next to Central Park. This meant that every morning I could go for a run before I went to work.

Because a lot of people had told me to be careful of muggers in the park, I didn't usually take anything with me. How could they rob me if I didn't have anything? But this one morning my wife asked me to buy some bread on the way home so I put a ten-dollar note in my back pocket.

While I was running through the park, another jogger bumped into me. He apologised and continued running. I thought it was a bit strange so I checked my pocket and found that the money was missing. I immediately started to run after the other jogger. I finally caught up and grabbed him by the arm. I started shouting and demanding that he gave me the money. I'm not usually a hot-headed person but I really lost my temper. This seemed to frighten him and he quickly put his hand in his pocket and gave me the money. Then he ran away as fast as he could.

I bought the bread and went home. As soon as I got there I began to tell my wife my story. "You won't believe what happened to me", I started. She immediately interrupted, "I know, you left the money for the bread on the kitchen table."

Exercise 2: Comprehension

The teacher makes sure the student has understood the text by asking them comprehension questions. It must be stressed that the teacher should pay particular attention to the grammar in the questions so that they always contain the structures which are intended

to be elicited. This tip is extremely important for students with learning difficulties as it helps them focus. Here are some of the questions that the teacher may ask:

1. Where does the story take place?
2. When did it happen?
3. Why was the writer of the story there?
4. Where was his flat located?
5. What was the writer particularly happy about?
6. What had many people warned him not to do?
7. Did he always follow their advice? Why/Why not?
8. What happened one day while he was running?
9. What was his reaction?
10. How did the other runner behave?
11. How was the story resolved?
12. How do you think the writer felt about the situation?
13. What do you think he did afterwards?
14. What would you have done?

The teacher should insist that the student find the line in the text that answers each question. It is worth noting that almost all questions begin with a wh-word. This not only allows the learner to produce longer utterances, but also to access the level of semantic interpretation of the input material which is conducive to effective retention of new information.

Exercise 3: Building up vocabulary resource

Once the comprehension stage is completed, the student should be asked to scan the text for any vocabulary they might be unfamiliar with or they find particularly interesting or useful. It is of paramount importance to involve the learner in the vocabulary selection process as it gives them a sense of empowerment. It also takes this exercise beyond sensory data analysis which is quite superficial. The next step is to write each word or phrase that the student suggests on the whiteboard, avoiding the linear organization of the lexical items. The vocabulary should be scattered over the surface of the whiteboard, with the words the teacher considers to be particularly important written in the upper case or a different colour. The teacher may add any other words as appropriate. It is not advisable, however, to place

more than ten items. Then, together with the student, the teacher explains what the items mean either with the help of a dictionary or by mime or definition in the target language. Finally, the student must be given some time to look at the whiteboard and asked to make an effort to memorise the words and phrases. Depending on how many new vocabulary items there are, the time limit of one or two minutes should be set. It is also interesting to ask the student after completion of the exercise what kind of techniques they used to remember as many items as possible. To round off the activity, the student could be asked to close their eyes while the teacher wipes off one of the words and the student's task is to recall which one has been erased. If they recall the word successfully, they write it on a pre-prepared flash card (a piece of paper the size of a post-it note). The student may now be prompted to spell the word, too. After all the phrases have been wiped off and scribbled on flash cards, the student is asked to recall the words that were written in capital letters. Amazingly, they always remember. This is due to the von Restorff effect,¹ which means that we have a tendency to remember and retain the information that has somehow been made conspicuous, be it by means of capitalization, the use of colour, categorization or reorganization. Finally, the flash cards should be stored in separate vocabulary boxes: for nouns, verbs, adjectives, etc. They will come in useful at a later stage.

Exercise 4: Application of rules

Now, it is time to increase grammatical awareness. Dyslexic students are usually adept at remembering the rules of grammar. What might be problematic, however, is the retrieval of a particular grammatical structure if asked to do so, e.g. say something in the Present Simple. Therefore, it is advisable to concentrate on the grammar in context in order to explain why e.g. a certain tense combination is used. To do this, the student underlines or highlights all verbs and auxiliaries in the text. It always works better if the student reads the text aloud. This is probably due to the combination of two sensory channels,

¹ The Von Restorff effect is also called the *Isolation Effect* or the *Distinctiveness Principle* (Nelson 1979). The same principle has also been described as *prominence effects* (Gardner 1983) *environmental salience effects* (Taylor and Fiske 1978), and *novel popout effect* (Johnston, Hawley, Plewe, Elliott and De Witt, 1990).

visual and auditory, which results in a more effective perception. Then, the text should be analysed together with the student by asking questions like: *Why is HAVE always LOVED jogging used and not LOVES jogging?* Or : *Why HAD RENTED and not just RENTED?* At this stage, the whole text may be scanned to practice irregular verbs, e.g. ask, *'What's the base form of THOUGHT?'* *'Why do we say: The monkey WAS missing?'* to probe the awareness of countable and uncountable nouns. Finally, auxiliary verbs like *DIDN'T* should be pointed out and the student could be asked to enumerate others that they know. According to the principles of neurodidactics² this activity allows for connections to be made between the existing inventory of knowledge, grammatical resource in this case, and the new input material.

Exercise 5: Kinesthetic learning

This task is intended to activate the sense of touch. Magnetic letters are an indispensable teaching aid which are available in sets. Teachers usually buy them for pre-school pupils, but they are always useful in therapeutic classes for dyslexic learners of all ages. In the text above there are some prepositional phrases and prepositions that are frequently tested in open-cloze tasks. The student is prompted to read them out by giving them a clue: find phrases that contain *for*, *on*, *by*, etc. Here are some prepositional phrases from the text: *work for somebody*, *go for a run*, *grab by the arm*. The student should be encouraged to come to the whiteboard where the phrase is dictated without the preposition. They should write it leaving a gap in the phrase. Then, they must use magnetic letters to fill in the gap. Thus, the eye, the ear and touch are activated. An additional task, which is especially effective with kinaesthetic learners, can be employed here. The student is prompted to hold a teddy bear while the teacher instructs them: *grab the teddy bear **by** the arm*, *grab the teddy bear **by** the ear*, etc., stressing the preposition *by*. The student may also want to repeat the phrases while actually *grabbing* the teddy bear. We may also ask the learner to literally *go **for** a run* around the room.

² Teaching science that studies the full potential of human beings, from early ages of life to old age, thanks to the feature called 'brain plasticity', which indicates that the human brain continuously learns and adapts.

Exercise 6: Coping with hyperactivity

In order to capitalise on the student's kinaesthetic intelligence, a *running* dictation³ may be put to good use. Not all dyslexic students like this activity, although it is especially popular with learners who are hyperactive. This task stimulates short-term memory, which is one of the weaknesses of dyslexic students. The text presented above should be placed on a sheet of paper somewhere in the classroom away from the student. The student's task is to run to the text, learn a portion by heart and come back to their seat to write it down. This can be repeated a number of times, depending on the student's willingness to do so. The rationale behind it is to bring movement and excitement into a potentially "sleepy" activity and it helps to keep a kinaesthetic learner occupied as well as jogs their brain to retain the information.

Exercise 7: Fun zone

Another type of activity is a *banana* dictation.⁴ Before doing this, the teacher may prompt the student to look at the words and phrases in the vocabulary boxes (compare Exercise 3). Then, the teacher reads the story out loud omitting the practised words. The word *banana* is used instead. The student's task is to concentrate and supply the correct word for the gap. Most dyslexic students are able to rise to the challenge, but this activity takes time to perfect.

Exercise 8: Reduced multiple-choice

The penultimate task is to choose between two forms. It is important to remember that traditional multiple-choice tasks containing more than two distractors are exceptionally difficult for dyslexic learners. They create visual tracking difficulties because of problems with short-term memory that dyslexic candidates have. After the candidate reads the last option, he has already forgotten what the first one was. Therefore, in this exercise the student is given the text from exercise 1 in a reduced multiple-choice format:

³ Rinvoluceri (2010: 36).

⁴ Rinvoluceri (2010: 51).

A few years ago the company I work for sent my wife and me to live in New York *for/since* a year. I *have/had* always loved jogging, so I was really happy when I *found/checked* out the apartment they *have/had* rented for us was *near/next* to Central Park. *This/What* meant that every morning I could go for a run before I went to work.

Because a lot of people *have/had* told me to be careful of muggers in the park, I didn't usually take *nothing/anything* with me. How could they *rob/steal* me if I didn't have anything? But this one morning my wife asked me *to buy/that I buy* some bread on the way home so I put a ten-dollar note in my back pocket.

When/While I was running through the park, another jogger bumped *into/at* me. He apologised and continued running. I thought it *is/was* a bit strange so I checked my pocket and found that the money *was/were* missing. I immediately started to run *after/for* the *other/another* jogger. I finally caught *on/up* and grabbed him *for/by* the arm. I started shouting and demanding that he *gave/has given* me the money. I'm not usually a hot-headed person but I really *stole/lost* my temper. This seemed to frighten him and he quickly put his hand in his pocket and gave me the money. Then he ran away *so/as* fast as he could.

I bought *a/the* bread and went home. As soon as I got there I began to tell my wife my story. "You won't believe what happened to me", I started. She immediately interrupted, "I know, you *had left/left* the money for the bread on the kitchen table."

This task summarises all the preceding activities and reinforces the input material, at the same time preparing the student for the real examination format.

Exercise 9: Open-cloze

Finally, it is time for the student to write the test in the form of an open-cloze, as expected in some examinations:

A few years ago the company I work for sent my wife and me to live in New York 1) _____ a year. I 2) _____ always loved jogging, so I was really happy when I 3) _____ out the apartment they 4) _____ rented for us was 5) _____ to Central Park.

6) _____ meant that every morning I could go for a run before I went to work.

Because a lot of people 7) _____ told me to be careful of muggers in the park, I didn't usually take 8) _____ with me. How could they 9) _____ me if I didn't have anything? But this one morning my wife asked me to buy some bread on the way home so I put a ten-dollar note in my back pocket.

10) _____ I was running through the park, another jogger bumped 11) _____ me. He apologised and continued running. I thought it 12) _____ a bit strange so I checked my pocket and found that the money 13) _____ missing. I immediately started to run 14) _____ the 15) _____ jogger. I finally caught 16) _____ and grabbed him 17) _____ the arm. I started shouting and demanding that he 18) _____ me the money. I'm not usually a hot-headed person but I really 19) _____ my temper. This seemed to frighten him and he quickly put his hand in his pocket and gave me the money. Then he ran away 20) _____ fast as he could.

I bought 21) _____ bread and went home. As soon as I got there I began to tell my wife my story. "You won't believe what happened to me", I started. She immediately interrupted, "I know, you 22) _____ the money for the bread on the kitchen table."

Exercise 10: Multisensory error correction

After the student submits the answers, it is advisable to ask them to read the completed text aloud or, if this exercise is being done on the computer, to switch on the facility of the Ivona reader. This would give the learner the chance to proofread and spot their own mistakes. Invariably, dyslexic learners are able to rectify their errors if they can listen to what they have written. Silent reading does not yield such satisfactory results.

However, if some errors still go unnoticed, the teacher should provide feedback in the form of neutral comments like: *'I can see a problem in gap 19. Can you identify it?'* Teachers should never be judgmental by saying: *'Here we go again. You have made a mistake. It's wrong.'* It is of paramount importance to provide constructive criticism to dyslexic learners as they are seldom praised at school or at home. The analytical approach to errors not only explores the techniques used above, but it also gives a boost to the student's critical

thinking, which, in turn, enables students with specific learning difficulties to perform up to their capability.

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