

## READING STRATEGIES FOR ELEMENTARY DYSLEXIC LEARNERS OF ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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**Abstract:** *This study aims to discover different reading strategies used in a classroom where there are dyslexic learners. In order to overcome "the fear of learners" on this challenge and enhance self-efficacy and self-confidence, teachers try different strategies (previewing, predicting, thinking aloud, monitoring, clarifying), activities (listening to audiobooks as an alternative to reading, flashcards, letter art, building words with magnet) and online reading games (draw something, anagram scramble, dictionary) to familiarize the readers with the text and to facilitate the process of reading.*

*Reading strategies are seen as a means of helping elementary dyslexic learners to understand the text, interact with it, to organize prior knowledge in the function of text comprehension. Reading strategies help these learners to move forward, read without having the fear of being judged, and read with confidence. Activities combined with reading activities create a peaceful, colorful and motivating environment. The paper will focus on outlining available reading strategies that can be applied in classrooms to help dyslexic learners succeed. The purpose is not only to identify these strategies but also to analyze the effectiveness of these strategies in facilitating the reading of EFL for elementary learners with special needs.*

**Keywords:** *special needs, dyslexia, summarizing, previewing, building words, reading comprehension*

### STRATEGJITË E TË LEXUARIT TË GJUHËS ANGLEZE SI GJUHË E HUAJ PËR NXËNËS DISLEKSIKË NË NIVELIN FILLESTAR

**Abstrakt:** *Ky studim ka për qëllim të paraqesë mundësitë e integritit të strategji të leximit të teksteve në gjuhën angleze për nxënës disleksikë që mësojnë anglishten si gjuhë të huaj. Për të kapërcyer "frikën" e kësaj sfide*

*dhe për të rritur efikasitetin e të nxënësve dhe vetëbesimin, mësuesit provojnë strategji të ndryshme (parashikim, të menduarit paraprakisht, të menduarit me zë, monitorim, sqarim), aktivitete (dëgjimi i librave audio si një alternativë ndaj leximit, letra me ngjyra, ndërtimi i fjalëve me magnet) dhe lojëra online (plotësimi i fjalëkryqeve) për të njohur lexuesit me tekstin dhe për të lehtësuar procesin e leximit për këta nxënës.*

*Strategjitë e leximit shihen si një mjet te cilat ndihmojnë nxënësit elementarë me disleksi për të kuptuar tekstin, për të bashkëpunuar me të, për të organizuar në mendjet e tyre atë që tashmë është lexuar dhe çfarë të presin gjatë leximit. Strategjitë e leximit i ndihmojnë këta nxënës të përparojnë në lexim dhe të krijojnë një mjedis motivues, shumëngjyrësh, por mbi të gjitha të qetë për ta.*

*Punimi do të fokusohet në përshkrimin e strategjive të disponueshme të leximit që mund të zbatohen në klasa për të ndihmuar nxënësit disleksikë të kenë sukses. Qëllimi nuk është vetëm identifikimi i këtyre strategjive, por edhe analizimi i efektivitetit të këtyre strategjive në lehtësimin e leximit të anglishtes si gjuhë e huaj për nxënësit fillor me nevoja të veçanta, nisur nga gjetjet e një studimi të realizuar në kontekstin e një shkollë në qytetin e Korçës.*

***Fjalët kyçe:*** *nevoja të veçanta, disleksia, përmbledhje, shqyrtim paraprak, ndërtimi i fjalëve, të kuptuarit e tekstit.*

## **Introduction**

Given its novelty in the Albanian context of English as a Foreign Language, this topic required extended careful research of various international literary resources on dyslexia and reading strategies of a foreign language. The material helped design the theoretical approach to the topic, as well as organize its practical aspect, which was enriched by the case study.

To measure the context of the application of the theoretical assumptions in the concrete acquisition context, a process of careful design and analysis of the questionnaire and the interview was also carried out. Through an analytical method, the types of reading strategies were discovered and their usage advantages for English as a Foreign Language elementary learners with dyslexia were outlined. The purpose was not only to identify these strategies but also to analyze their respective usage in the lesson plan. The main purpose of this paper has been to fill a gap in previous studies and to demonstrate the theoretical part with concrete examples related to dyslexia in Albanian classes. The research revealed the need for a deeper insight into

strategy transfer from the mother tongue to foreign language acquisition, which can be carried out by further studies. Another study could be carried out on the frequency of the types of dyslexia in English foreign classrooms, which would reveal a better perspective of concrete interventions.

Young learners are a key factor of education as their acquisition boosts their approach to future learning skills and knowledge background. This is directly reflected in the development of society. The better the acquisition at this stage, the more professional the future graduates are likely to be. In this respect, teachers take the greatest responsibility for the acquisition in order, not only to facilitate but also to enhance the learning outcomes of their pupils. When it comes to foreign language acquisition, teachers need to be an even more “creative machine” for the learners. Reading remains one of the most important of the four language skills and it carries a number of challenges which may be related to orthography, writing symbols, topics and content, language fluency, attitude to foreign language, interference of the mother tongue, etc. Besides, there is also the issue of the learners with special needs, precisely those with dyslexia. Dyslexia is described as a learning disability that prevents learners to read and articulate properly. It is mainly connected with genes and the possibility to have dyslexia is higher when inherited by someone relative.

According to the Schenck School, dyslexic elementary learners have a problem recognizing some specific letters, especially consonants. They confuse the letter “b” with the letter “d”, the letter “p” with the letter “q”. Also, they have a tendency to repeat the same row several times or to skip it when they are not able to read it properly. Another problem displayed by dyslexic learners is the upturning of words, particularly words that have the same sounds such as *dog-god*. Although they have difficulties in reading, it does not mean that they are not capable of doing something else. Dyslexic students have hidden talents in different and specific fields.

Dr. Laurie Philipps (2019) classifies types of dyslexia into five main parts. According to her, dyslexia is divided into *phonological dyslexia*, *rapid naming dyslexia*, *double deficit dyslexia*, *surface dyslexia*, and *visual dyslexia*.

- **Phonological dyslexia** is considered to be the most common one. Dr. Philipps claims that “it deals with difficulties in matching

sounds to symbols and breaking down the sounds of language”. In this case, learners have trouble combining these sounds in order to create words or sentences. Moreover, learners are not able to write the sound properly because they cannot read it properly.

- **Rapid naming dyslexia** is considered to be not as serious as the other forms of dyslexia, but it can be very serious when it is required for learners to read rapidly in competitions or even in class. Dr. Philipps points out that “this type of dyslexia may be linked to both reading speed and the processing speed for reading and individuals with rapid naming dyslexia can say the names of the colors, numbers, and letters, but it often takes them much longer to come up with the correct word”. Furthermore, learners can be fast in reading certain words, but their reading can be incorrect.
- **Double deficit dyslexia** is considered to be the most serious type of dyslexia because even from the given name “double” it is understandable that has to do with two problems regarding reading. This type includes difficulties with understanding a specific word in the written form and reading them within the proper level of reading speed. Dr. Philipps mentions some symptoms of double deficit dyslexia which include:
  - Poor naming speed rate when asked to recall words
  - Weak phonological awareness
- **Surface dyslexia** as the name itself implies, is related to new words, which the learners find difficult to read because they are not familiar with them, how they sound, and how to pronounce them. This type of dyslexia is connected particularly with the brain because the brain fails to recognize the new word due to the old words that the learner knows. They are most familiar with the old words and deny to absorb the new ones. Dr. Philipps highlights that “this type of dyslexia affects words that need to be memorized because they do not sound how they are spelled, making it more difficult to sound them out”. In this instance, there happens a rejection from learners to deal with new words, no matter how easy they can seem to be.
- **Visual dyslexia** has to do with visual elements. It is connected with the big effort a learner makes by remembering the word he/she has seen on the previous page of the book. Dr. Philipps states that “this type affects the visual processing, making it so that the brain

doesn't get the complete picture of what the eyes see". Corresponding to this statement, visual learning is almost similar to surface dyslexia for the reason that both are related to the brain. Visual dyslexia requires the brain to focus on the right shape of the word. In this way, the ability to pronounce will be affected by visual dyslexia.

Unfortunately, even though dyslexia is a term known worldwide, in Albania, people are not very familiar neither with the term nor with the problem itself. This occurs due to limitations in various studies. As a result of these limitations, teachers face difficulties during foreign language classes, especially not only in the management of this problem but also in pushing and motivating these learners to move forward. For this reason, many researchers advise teachers to use a variety of reading strategies in order to be a helpful hand in the success of these pupils.

Reading strategies are described as strategies that help students to improve their reading skills, make them understand what is written, read fluently and without hesitation, or fear mistakes. Reading strategies are classified into different categories and include mostly pre-reading strategies while-reading strategies and after-reading strategies. Each of them consists of specific activities that facilitate the process of reading to dyslexic learners.

## **1. The implementation of reading strategies for elementary learners with dyslexia**

### **1.1. Definition of reading strategies**

Reading is a process that requires the learner to be focused. While reading, the learner uses *the ability of thinking* (by rehashing the information and by recalling the old one and making a comparison between what is already known and what is new to him/her), *the ability of pronunciation* (by reading aloud and consulting with the teacher), *the ability to analyze* (by giving their opinion and argue about the text, the theme, the topic, the characters), *the ability to identify the relationship between words and sentences*.

Essentially, reading is comprehension and a learner reads for the purpose of comprehending. Reading is a procedure, in which the message that will be conveyed must be clear; therefore, the reader should be fluent. There are many reading strategies that help learners,

particularly those with dyslexia who face different difficulties, to overcome this type of fluency condition. Kamil et al. (2008) added that these strategies “are procedures that readers use to help them make sense of the text”. Close to this idea, El Koumy (2020) defined reading strategies as “conscious procedures that help readers comprehend what they read and repair comprehension breakdowns when they occur” (p.128). This implies that reading strategies are “invented” with the intention of being a helpful hand for learners with difficulties in reading. Above all, reading strategies are a variety of different tactics, suggested by researchers and used mostly by teachers at making the readers, particularly elementary learners with dyslexia, involve in the text and understand it. With the help of reading strategies, they find it easier to work with the text, get its main ideas, deal with the new words, ask questions about the text, and be focused on what is going to be read. Furthermore, reading strategies give elementary learners with dyslexia the possibility to work on their own, be creative, and expand their imagination. These strategies make them build their self-confidence and work on their own, improve their learning and overcome their reading difficulties. These strategies are not focusing on teaching elementary learners how to read letter by letter. Instead, these strategies are ways that assist them to read fluently, try not to skip words that are difficult, and increase reading self-confidence. There exist different reading strategy classifications. Pressley (2000), Paliscan and Brown (1984) classified these strategies based on *the logical order they take place* such as pre-reading activities (activities that occur before the learners start to read), while-reading activities (activities that occur during the reading stage) and post-reading activities (activities that occur after the reading part when the new information is provided to them). Whichever the type, reading strategies are very important tactics that enhance learners’ understanding of the text and even reading through lines. Reading strategies are helpful for them in preparing, organizing, and involving the text as it is being read. However, as mentioned at the beginning of the paper, those who “suffer” the most with the reading part, are learners with dyslexia. Reading strategies are favorable for dyslexic learners, especially elementary ones to struggle with “this deficiency”. Elementary learners with dyslexia often experience a lack of understanding and reading fluency. Reading strategies promote self-regulation, encourage independent reading and

help them in lifelong learning. Through reading strategies, elementary learners with dyslexia continue to encourage themselves and succeed in reading. Consequently, it is proven that something that is learned gradually and by using reading strategies has resulted to be stored in long-term memory. These strategies assist in overcoming their difficulties even though these difficulties may be present in the mother tongue. Reading strategies help elementary learners to overcome this language disability from the beginning when the problem is still “tiny” without letting it become a very serious one in the future.

Learning a foreign language may be difficult, especially when obstacles occur. It is possible that a dyslexic learner achieves better results at reading in a foreign language rather than reading in his/her mother tongue. No matter the language, elementary dyslexic learners need to move forward with the help of reading strategies.

## **1.2 Reading strategies as means of enhancing self-efficacy and self-confidence**

### **1.2.1 Letter art**

Elementary learners with dyslexia learn better with the help of *visual aids*. Hence, teachers need to try several ways to make learners learn easier from these aides. They can share sheets of paper with them and assign each of them to paint a certain letter. The teachers support and motivate them while presenting their ideas in front of the class by pronouncing or reading them. In order to make it more challenging, the teacher may ask from them to draw words that they find difficult to read or are confusing for them. (<https://www.waterford.org/education/activities-for-dyslexia/> )

### **1.2.2 Storytime rhymes**

*Rhyming* is a good way to expand learners’ imagination and gives them the possibility to read more. The teacher, while reading verses, can ask them to find other words which rhyme with the previous word. For example, the teacher reads aloud the verse “*The story of a mighty king*” from the poem “*The Littlest Christmas Tree*”. Afterward, the teacher asks the learners to find similar words that rhyme with the word “*king*”. Some possible answers can be: *thing/bring, ring/ spring, sing/wing*. (<https://www.familyfriendpoems.com/collection/poems-for-elementary-students/>)

### **1.2.3 Usage of letter/sound flashcards**

Through this activity, elementary learners with dyslexia learn better how to read and how pronounce the sounds properly. The teacher can come up with flashcards that have the word written on the back and presents a picture of the word. In this way, the teacher can ask the learners to read it aloud and if one of them makes mistakes by reading it, the teacher will keep the card until the word will be read as it should. Briefly, the teacher will play the role of a “buzzer”. The only condition will be that the teacher will not correct the learners in their first attempt. They should try several times to find the correct one. (<https://www.waterford.org/education/activities-for-dyslexia/>)

### **1.2.4 Online reading activities**

With the evolution of technology, the possibility to access the technological world while teaching, is much more available than the previous years. Teachers and learners themselves can use the internet as a means which provides them with many facilities. These facilities include even activities that help elementary learners to improve themselves and teachers manage the whole class. Through the internet, the teacher can discover many applications which can be used in the classroom such as:

*Draw something* is an online application that can be freely downloaded by both, teachers and learners. The first step is to choose the level that will be played and with whom. It functions as a quick match, which means that the game chooses automatically the outline word difficulty. After that, a word appears on the right side and the task of the learner is to draw and send it to the online “friend”. Meanwhile, if the learner chooses to make the game more challenging, a drawing appears on the screen with several letters below it. Based on what the learner sees, she/he has to put in the right order the letters to form the word. (<https://www.speedreadinglounge.com/dyslexia-games>)

*Hanging out with friends* can be played either in pairs or in groups. This kind of game is similar to *Hangmen*, but the learner creates a word for the opponent with the given letter. There are two cartoons hanging in their balloons and pupils try several guesses at the given word. If the learner fails to complete the word correctly and spends the lives offered by the application, then the balloons start to impale and the cartoon flies away. (<http://dyslexiahelp.umich.edu/tools/fun-games-for-dyslexics>)



## **2. Case study: Practicing reading learning strategies with dyslexic pupils of EFL**

### **2.1 The purpose of the study**

The purpose of this study is not to analyze the gathered information through statistics or to measure the level of dyslexia in elementary classes in the Albanian Context of learning English as a Foreign Language. The only purpose of this case study is to recognize some strategies, activities, or games that can be used in classrooms to make learners with dyslexia succeed. Also, its aim was to notice how the teachers behave with these learners, how they support their pupils, and how they manage to deal with reading difficulties.

### **2.2 The instrument of the study**

The case study consists of one questionnaire with three teachers of dyslexic learners and one interview with three dyslexic pupils. The questionnaire with teachers included nineteen questions and its aim was to gather different information about their training related to this disability, strategies that are used by teachers in order to facilitate the reading part of learners, activities used for motivating these learners, and suggestions for a better solution at improving the reading skill of elementary dyslexic learners. The interview with elementary dyslexic learners, on the other hand, consisted of twelve questions. The purpose of the interview with dyslexic learners was to discover the games or activities that they found attractive to count on.

### **3.4 The findings of the study**

Based on the findings of the questionnaire:

- Teachers of dyslexic learners mainly have a clear idea about dyslexia, but they accept not having had any special training on this issue.
- Two of them were able to identify a dyslexic learner based on their experience and by being attentive to the learner's reaction to reading activities.
- Teachers also believe that dyslexia has a greater impact on foreign language learning rather than the mother tongue because learning a foreign language requires more commitment, it has different spelling and pronunciation patterns.

- Teachers were aware of the difficulties that a dyslexic learner faced such as the fluency, accuracy, and comprehension of reading material.
- Teachers accepted using very few reading strategies of the above during the class, especially the *top-down strategy* which guided the learner with the context and facilitates comprehension even when the learner faces with difficulties in reading a passage. In a word, teachers approved that motivating these learners is very important in improving their reading skills because it increases the level of understanding and confidence. The three teachers use activities such as *paper cards*, *word/picture guesses*, and *flashcards*.
- Teachers believe that being extroverted increases the possibility of improving reading skills through socialization and conversation with one another. On the other hand, teachers believed that introverted learners may be good language readers and writers, but poor speakers. They listed some ways for better development of this process, such as *patience with the learners*, *coordination with the parents about every activity inside or outside the classroom*, *special treatment*, and *lesson plans based on the independence a dyslexic learner should have regarding the reading part*.

To conclude, teachers are able to notice a case with dyslexia even though they do not possess the right instruction of dealing with specific cases. The experience of working with many learners creates the possibility to be more precise when a disability occurs. However, it requires a lot of patience and knowledge because the wrong information may lead to the wrong way of treating it.

The analysis of the answers of the dyslexic pupils resulted in two facts:

- The teachers use mostly the Albanian language during the explanation, which creates a transitional difficult phase for them to manage effectively in the foreign language.
- Pupils, also believe that the class is more interesting and they find it easier to learn when activities and games are included.

During the practical approach of the study, a comparison between two dyslexic girls showed that both of them:

- confused the letter *b* with *d*, *p* with *q*
- repeated the same verse while reading or skipped one just to finish the reading part
- confused the indefinite article *a* while writing it (e *house*, instead of *a house*)
- tried to skip many words, especially words that included the letters *b*, *d*. They skipped the letter *d* if it occurred in the body of the word.
- upturned several words displaying similar letter patterns such as *saw* and *was*.
- confused the *wh*-questions, such as *how* instead of *who*.
- had difficulties in reading and memorizing the new word; they had difficulty recalling previously read words, or hesitated reading unknown words.
- Reflected more eagerness to speak rather than read or write.

#### **4. Application of reading strategies**

Following the above observation, some activities were improvised and used at “Stavri Themeli” School, city of Korce, with elementary learners in order to see if they would enhance their reading skills.

1-The first activity was “Run”. This game consisted of a blackboard and flashcards. At the time both learners saw the letter written on the flashcard, they had to run to the blackboard and write a word corresponding to the letter given by the teacher. This is an effective activity because it makes the learners work in groups. Moreover, this activity makes them respond faster and correctly.

2- The following activity was “Poems”. The learners were free to create poems with the given new words from the Unit. They had to memorize it and perform it in front of the class. This activity was not effective because both learners had problems memorizing the whole passage. The first learner found it easier to write it rather than say it aloud. The second one started to say the poem aloud but most of the time repeated the same verse.

3- Another activity used was called “The fastest”. This game included a bell and some flashcards. When the flashcard appeared, the fastest of

them had to press the bell in order to answer the flashcard. The answer would not be right if the bell would not be pressed. To make it more challenging, flashcards were replaced by spoken words. The pupils had to translate the word from Albanian to English language. For example, the Albanian word is *kuzhinë* and one of them has to press the bell and says *kitchen*. It is an effective activity because it is being tested the vocabulary, it makes the dyslexic learners find the right word by focusing on the flashcard at the same time. Meanwhile, the first pupil appeared to be smarter in the way how quickly she absorbed the new words. Compared with the other learner, she had a higher level of memorizing words, sentences, and even short passages. She was not very systematic but when she was asked about something, she reacted more quickly. During the writing phase, she was not concentrated and mostly confused the indefinite article “a”, by writing it “e”. She found it easy to write the words as she read them, even though the reading might not be correct. On the other hand, the second one was very systematic and careful in how she structured the sentences. But, the problem was that she needed some time to respond when a question was made. Moreover, she was slower in writing by being more careful in what was being written.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, dyslexia is not considered “a disease” that cannot be cured. It is seen more as an obstacle that does not allow the learners to reach reading fluency. Being an obstacle, it irritates the learners, makes them unwilling to read or most of the time creates a lack of motivation. In order to avoid these, the teacher uses reading strategies, not only to facilitate the reading phase but also to create an opportunity for the learners to give their best. By using reading strategies, the teacher gives space to the learner to correct himself, focus on reading, and be prepared for what the text will contain. Activities and games, on the other hand, create an opportunity for students to be more active, cooperate with their classmates, and enjoy the class. In this way, it improves the ability to read better and transforms it in an automatic smooth process. A dyslexic learner firstly needs the support of parents, the patience of teachers, and a variety of activities. Teachers and parents must be ready to cooperate with each other for the benefit of the child.

It should be noted that not every case of difficulty in reading can be considered as dyslexia. A learner cannot read in the proper way even because he may have emotions while reading, he may not be interested in that part or subject, he may feel tired or the given part is not appropriate to his level. It would be better that after identifying the case, the teacher discusses the problem with the Albanian language teacher or other teachers to see if the problem occurs only in her subject or if it is an overall problem. A good suggestion for the teachers would be to undertake specific training to distinguish dyslexic learners. Moreover, reading as many articles or journals, and watching documentaries or interviews about dyslexic learners would make the teachers more careful, more creative, and more patient while working with these learners. The more knowledge, the better the opportunity to help these learners to overcome dyslexia.

Through the questionnaire and the interview organized in this case study, it resulted that few activities and reading strategies were included in the Albanian classes where English is learned as a foreign language. Even though technology has made a huge development, most of the teachers still keep treating these pupils as individuals with a learning issue and do very little to treat their reading problems with a different approach from the rest of the class. Besides the usage of a reward system, creation of a warm reading space in the classroom, involvement of their parents, and choice of their favorite book, teachers may also involve dyslexic learners in activities that apparently do not distinguish them from the rest of the class, but which, in fact, facilitate their reading and word recognition in an early stage. Reading strategies like the ones mentioned in this paper, increase learners' involvement in the reading processes and facilitate their understanding of simple texts at the elementary level.

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