Malmö högskola
Lärande och samhälle
SOL

Examensarbete

15 högskolepoäng

Dyslexia and Foreign Language Learning

Lina Knudsen

Abstract

This essay looks at the language based disorder dyslexia and how it affects students' ability to learn a foreign language. It will look closer at the strategies and tools foreign language teachers use to tackle the problems a dyslexic student may have when learning a new language. This research draws upon the interviews of foreign language teachers as well as the existing research on dyslexia and language acquisition. The main research questions of this essay are: How do foreign language teachers describe the disorder dyslexia both from a theoretical perspective as well as from a practical perspective? What difficulties do foreign language teachers have when teaching dyslexic student? What strategies do foreign language teachers use when teaching a student with dyslexia? By using the qualitative research approach, interviews, it was found that while foreign language teachers are aware of dyslexia they need to be given more education about language based disorders so that they are more equipped to help their students. This research will highlight the importance of giving foreign language teachers the needed tools and strategies to better support dyslexic students as they learn a new language.

Key words: dyslexia, foreign language learning, second language acquisition, learning disabilities, multi-sensory learning approach

Table of Content

1. Introduction

As he stormed from the room, I came to recognize — for the first time —
the great irony of the teaching profession: Those of us who teach school
usually did well in school ourselves and enjoyed the experience —
why else would we return to the classroom to make our living?
Therefore, the kid whom we can best understand — to whom we can
relate most — is the one who does well in school and enjoys being there.
The school newspaper editor. The class treasurer. The soccer captain.
The honor student.
Conversely, the kids whom we understand the least are the kids who
need us the most. The struggler, the special-education student, the failure . . .

- Lavoie, R.

The above quote was taken from an article written by the special education teacher and lecturer, Richard Lavoie. In his article, "How Hard Can This Be?", Lavoie tells the story of Craig, a learning disabled student, who is angered by his teacher's statement that, "He knows how he feels" (Lavoie 1995), having the learning disability dyslexia. Lavoie explains how he, for the first time, truly came to realize the struggles a learning disabled student has to face every day in school.

Dyslexia is a language-based learning disability said to affect one out of every five people in the world, making it one of the most common learning disabilities. As dyslexia is a language-based disorder, it will affect a student's academic performance in most subject, but no more so than in language subjects such as their first language or a foreign language. Although dyslexia is not a disorder which can be cured, most dyslexic students will work with a special-education teacher in their first language to help them create strategies they can use to succeed in school.

Owing to this, I became interested in seeing if this same support was given to dyslexic students as they learn a foreign language. Having worked with special needs students, I had noticed that much of the focus was placed on helping the student do well in their first language while they continued to struggle in their foreign language classes. This made me wonder if there were particular foreign language teaching methods for dyslexic students and, if so, were foreign language teachers using them.

2. Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this essay is to take a closer look at foreign language teachers` experiences dealing with dyslexia in their classrooms as well as the strategies they use to best support their dyslexic students in order for successful foreign language learning to take place. I aim to answer the following research questions:

- How do foreign language teachers describe the disorder dyslexia both from a theoretical perspective as well as from a practical perspective?

- What difficulties do foreign language teachers have when teaching a dyslexic student?

- What strategies do foreign language teachers use when teaching a student with dyslexia?

To gain a better understanding of the experiences of foreign language teachers, six teachers were interviewed, using a qualitative research method approach. The interviewed teachers discuss their views on dyslexia and the strategies they use when teaching students with language-based learning disabilities. I hope, through my work on this essay, to gain a better understanding of dyslexia and foreign language learning which will later help, not only myself, but maybe also other foreign language as they work with dyslexic students.

3. Literature

It has been said that, "dyslexia has many faces" (Miles 1999, pg.15), making it difficult to give an exact definition that can encompass all that dyslexia embodies. One dyslexic person will most likely not have the same combination of symptoms as another and it has even been shown that the symptoms a dyslexic person displays one day will not be the same as the next. One is then left wondering what exactly constitutes the disorder dyslexia which one out of every five people in the world have?

Let us begin by simply looking at the term dyslexia as a way to gain a better understanding of the disability. Dyslexia comes from the Greek word *dys* meaning difficulty or malfunction and *lexis* meaning language (Foundation for Learning 2007). Simply put, dyslexia is difficulty with language. This is of course an overt simplification of a much more complex disorder, which actually leads to more questions than answers. How does one define language? What exactly constitutes a difficulty within language? Is language simply the system of phonemes and graphemes that work together to create our written language or does language, in this case, also include its communicative aspects and semantics? This essay will now take a closer look at commonly excepted definitions of dyslexia.

3.1 Finding a definition for dyslexia

One of the first working definitions of dyslexia came from the World Federation of Neurology in 1968. They defined dyslexia as, "a disorder in children who, despite conventional classroom experience, fail to attain the language skills of reading, writing and spelling commensurate with their intellectual ability" (Ott 1997, pg. 2). Since 1968, the research on dyslexia has grown immensely and we now have a better understanding of the disorder, its symptoms and its possible root causes.

The most common definition for dyslexia used today comes from The Research Group on Developmental Dyslexia of the World Federation of Neurology. Their definition, written in 1996,

states that dyslexia is, "a disorder manifested by difficulty in learning to read despite conventional instruction, adequate intelligence and sociocultural opportunity. It depends on fundamental cognitive disabilities, which are frequently constitutional in origin" (Ott 1997, pg. 3). In the same year as the above mentioned definition was published, the British Dyslexia Association released the following definition of dyslexia. It includes many of the main ideas mentioned in the earlier definition but has more specifically detailed the difficulties dyslexics may have. For the purposes of this study, dyslexia will be defined as:

> [A] complex neurological condition which is constitutional in origin. The symptoms may affect many areas of learning and function, and may be described as a specific difficulty in reading, spelling and written language. One or more of these areas may be affected. Numeracy, notational skills, motor function and organizational skills may also be involved. However, it is particularly related to mastering written language, although oral language may be affected to some degree.

> (Ott 1997, pg. 4)

This definition encompasses many aspects of the disorder. Despite it being written over ten years ago it still is valid in today's understanding of dyslexia and its wide range of symptoms. It states that, although being a disorder which affects language processing it also takes into account other symptoms such as notational and organizational skills. This aspect of the diagnosis, at times forgotten when dealing with young students, is important to this particular study as a student's ability to master study skills has a direct correlation to his/her ability to do well in the school environment.

3.2 Symptoms of Dyslexia

As stated earlier, dyslexia is a language based learning disability which encompasses a multitude of symptoms and characteristics, making it difficult to state the exact symptoms of dyslexia. It can, however, be argued that dyslexia has some common characteristics: it is congenital i.e., it is a disorder you are born with, it is genetic, and it is constitutional, that is to say it has a neurological basis, and that it is more commonly seen in males than in females (Ott 1997, pg. 5).

Dyslexia is a language processing disability. This means that the dyslexic will have problems processing one or more aspects of language. In order to understand what this means for the dyslexic person one must first understand what is the complex system known as language. Margaret J. Snowling explains language as the interaction between four subsystems, "*Phonology* is

the system that maps speech sounds on to meanings, and meanings are part of the *semantic system.* *Grammar* is concerned with syntax and morphology (the way in which words and word parts are combined to convey different meanings), and *pragmatics* is concerned with language use" (Snowling 2006, pg. 82).

In order to read, write, and speak, using ones language, these four subsystems must be working in unison. If they are not, for whatever reason, one's ability to write, read and speak will be affected; as seen in the case of dyslexic people.

This does not mean that dyslexics are weak in all areas of language (phonology, semantics, grammar and pragmatics) yet some areas are affected more than others. In the case of learning to read one can clearly see what areas of the language cause the most problems for a dyslexic person. Reading can be divided up into three parts; semantics, phonology and orthography or the meaning of words, the way the words and letters are pronounced and how words and letters are written. In order to learn how to read, one must master all three parts. This being based on the t*riangle model of reading* by Seidenberg and McClelland. It has been shown that dyslexics usually do not have difficulties with the semantic aspect of reading, as they are, "within normal range" (Snowling 2006, pg. 82), when compared to other children of the same age. Their problem, however, lies in the phonology and orthography aspects of reading as they have a lessened phonological awareness.

Phonological awareness is the understanding that graphemes, individual letters, are directly connected to a particular phoneme or letter sound. Due to this imbalance, reading becomes difficult for dyslexics especially when faced with non-words as they cannot use the context of the text to decipher the meaning.

The problems that dyslexics face when reading are also found within writing as this too requires an understanding of the phonological-orthographic relationship that exists in language. In order to spell a word correctly one must first be able to hear the distinct sounds or phonemes within the word and then be able to relate them to a given grapheme which is then to be written on the paper.

Other symptoms which are commonly seen in dyslexics also include: difficulties with word retrieval and verbal naming as it takes them longer to process language information, memorization issues due to problems with short-term memory, difficulties organizing and sequencing language, difficulties with auditory and/or visual perception, problems with motor-skills which lead to poor handwriting, clumsiness and difficulties with rhythm and time.

It is not likely that a dyslexic person will have all of these symptoms but may instead have a cluster of them. The way in which these symptoms manifest themselves and to what degree is what makes dyslexia so hard to define. The reason one person with dyslexia may have very different

symptoms than another is much due to the individual's, "strengths and weaknesses, on the individual learning strategies, on the degree of dyslexia, on when the diagnosis was made and on appropriate tuition" (Ott 1997, pg. 5), which is something that must be taken into consideration when discussing dyslexia. The degree to which a person's dyslexia shows itself in, for example, the school environment is much based on the student's personality as well as the support they receive from school.

3.3 Dyslexia in other languages

Since dyslexia affects one's ability to process language, it will inevitably manifest itself differently depending on the language being spoken. For example, the issue of phonological awareness may not be a problem for those who speak a transparent language such as Spanish while it is one of the most common problems in less transparent languages such as English. Transparent languages are those that have a direct correlation between the grapheme and the phoneme i.e. there are very few digraphs and diphthongs. Dyslexics speaking these languages may, however, still have word retrieval difficulties, motor-skills problems or difficulties with their short-term memory. Other transparent languages include; Italian, Czech, German and Welsh, while less-transparent languages include; English and French (Miles 1999, pg. 45)

Most research on dyslexia is based on how dyslexia exhibits itself in English native speakers. This is due to the fact that most of the research pertaining to dyslexia comes from English speaking countries such as America, Great Britain and Australia. The overall understanding of dyslexia will be affected by the fact that research is based on the English language as it is a transparent language (Miles 1999, pg. 44). This study will focus mainly on dyslexic students with English as their native language learning a foreign language.

4. Theory

Starting middle school can be particularly exciting time for most students, yet also bring with it new challenges that each student must overcome. Students in middle school must face the ever increasing demands placed upon them to independently take notes in class, perfect their study skills, organize classroom paper and assignments they receive from diverse subject teachers and make sure they make it on time to each lesson as they move from classroom to classroom. This can be a difficult adjustment for any student, but even more so for the dyslexic child who may find that the demands placed on them in middle school enhances their weaknesses such as the; higher demands on their note-taking skills, their time- management abilities, their organizational skills and their study skills. The expectations on the dyslexic student in the area of academics must also be taken into consideration as they are expected to read and write at a more advanced level as well take on new subjects that they may not have had in elementary school (grades 1-6). One such subject being, foreign language (FL).

4.1 Foreign Language and Schools' Governing Documents

A FL is any language which is not the language spoken within a person's given country. In Swedish middle schools, grades 7th, 8th and 9th, it is mandatory for students to learn a third language, a FL, not including Swedish[1]. This is a great way for students to be introduced to a new culture through its language; giving them a better understanding of the world they live it. The need to learn a third language is of great importance, in today's world, as we become increasingly globalized.

The most common languages students are asked to choose from are Spanish, German or French, although some schools may also offer other FLs such as Italian or Chinese. In a recent study by Lärarens Rikförbund and Svenska Näringsliv, they found that 37,721 middle school children chose Spanish, 21, 004 chose German and 16, 176 chose French as their FL (Lärarens

---

[1]   Since the school in this particular study is an international school where English is the language of instruction, all languages besides English are categorized as a second language i.e a FL.

Riksförbund and Svenska Näringslivet 2001). For the purposes of this essay, we will mainly focus on these three FLs as they are the most common within the Swedish compulsory school.

According to the 2011 Läroplan students who study a FL are given the opportunity to develop their ability to:

• understand and interpret the content of spoken language and the different types of texts,

• formulate and communicate orally and in writing;

• use linguistic strategies to understand and make themselves understood;

• adapt language for different purposes, receiver and context, and

• reflect on living conditions, social and cultural phenomena in various context and in the parts of the world where the language is used.

(Lgr11 2011)

These goals are then broken down into specific areas of language: listening, reading, speaking, and writing. The goals, depending of course on the way they are taught, may be demanding on the dyslexic student since the disability is language based.

4.2 Why is learning a FL particularly difficult for dyslexic students?

It is of course problematic to know exactly why a particular subject may be more demanding on one dyslexic student than another since every dyslexic has varied strengths and weaknesses but it can generally be said that dyslexics have problems with learning a FL because of two main reasons; 1) the nature of the disability 2) the manner in which FL are commonly taught in schools (Schneider 2009, pg.297).

4.2.1 The Nature of the Disability

As discussed earlier dyslexia is a language processing disability, that is to say those who have dyslexia have a weakness is one or more area of language such as decoding, encoding, phonological awareness, word retrieval and syntax. To be successful within a FL it, "require[s] the use of precisely those language skills in which [dyslexics] are weak in [their first language]" (Arries 1999,

pg.1). Dr. Kenneth Dinklage, researcher within the field of learning disabilities and second language learning, believes that dyslexics, due to their disability can only, "make stumbling attempts at gaining proficiency with a second language" (Ott 1997, pg.187). This being much due to the language processing problems they had within their first or native language. Professor Peter Skehan and Dr. Bernard Spolsky, along with studies by Dinklage, have found that there is a connection between foreign language difficulties and difficulties within ones native language. "Skehan believes that second or foreign language learning is the equivalent for the first language learning faculty and children who develop faster in their first language also score higher on foreign language aptitude tests" (Nijakowska 2010, pg.67). It can then be said that those children who develop slower within their first language, as found with dyslexic students, will have problems when learning a foreign language.

Other studies within the field of foreign language learning and learning disabilities have shown that if one has language problems in their native language, these problems will be carried over to the FL leading to an inability to learn a new language fully. This phenomenon is called the Linguistic Coding Differences Hypothesis (LCDH) by Sparks and Ganschow. LCDH has also shown that poor phonological awareness or phonological-orthographic processing, the ability to see the connection between how letters sound and how they are written, is often times the reason behind a dyslexic's inability to learn a FL. According to the hypothesis, even subtle language processing difficulties will, "resurface when learning a foreign language". This can explain why even students who have "overcome" (Schneider 2009, pg.299), their dyslexia through the use of learning strategies may have to re-learn these skills as they embark on learning a FL.

4.2.2 Foreign language curricula

The way in which foreign language is generally taught in middle schools today is the second reason dyslexic students find FL courses challenging. This is to say they are based on and created for the, "ideal foreign language learner" (Schneider 2009, pg.298), one who has a good grasp of universal grammar as well as an almost natural ability to comprehend and learn new languages. This is, unfortunately, not commonly found in dyslexic students who do not have a natural understanding of language and its structure.

The foreign language curricula is often built on the believe that in order to learn a language one must be immersed within it, much based on Krashen's Natural Approach and Curran's Communication Approach. Both of these teaching methods are based on how one first learns their

native language; by listening to others around them speak the language in order to then imitate and use the language. This may be a very effective way in which to learn a FL for those students who have a natural understanding of language, yet can be confusing and defeating for a dyslexic child (Schneider 2009, pg. 298). This combined with the anxiety many dyslexic student already feel when faced with reading and writing tasks within their native language can lead to many students feeling that FL is a task too difficult to conquer. The FL curriculum simply does not seem to fit the dyslexic student's needs as will be discussed in the following section.

4.3 Foreign language challenges

To learn a FL requires an understanding of how one's own native language works to then be able to transfer that over to the new language. As stated earlier, many times dyslexic students lack the understanding of their own language and therefore experience difficulties when learning a FL. Let us now look at what specific problems may arise when a dyslexic student is learning a FL and how this is much due to the difficulties they first encountered when learning their native language.

According to Philomena Ott in *How to Detect and Manage Dyslexia: A Reference and Research Manual*, a primary school child with dyslexia often shows problems understanding the syntax and spelling of a language, remembering the names of common known objects or people, have difficulties understanding figure of speech such as idioms and proverbs and also have difficulties with reading comprehension due to their struggle to simply read each individual word.

Most school children who are diagnosed with dyslexia at an early age will receive added support in school in order to overcome the above mentions problems. This will usually be in the form of additional help by parents, classroom teacher as well as from the special education department of a given school. There the child will learn how to best manage their dyslexia by learning particular reading and writing techniques, making it easier to deal with the problems they may have. It has, however, been found that as a dyslexic child gets older new sets of problems may arise, especially when entering their adolescence (Ott 1997, pg.172). One particular time when these problems may arise is when learning a FL.

As the adolescent learns a new language they must again learn and master many of the skills they struggled with as they were taught their native language. Following are some aspects of the FL that have been found to be particularly challenging for the dyslexic student:

- the learning of phonemes, graphemes and digraphs that are different from their native language and understanding the connection between them

- comprehending a new syntax (learning past/present/future tense, ordering of words in a sentence etc.)
- remembering vocabulary words and being able to quickly retrieve them from their long term memory
- spelling new words that may not follow the rules they have learned in their native language
- being able to hear the differences between similar phonemes
- pronounce words that contain silent letters unlike those they have already learned in their native language
- intonation and use of accents that vary from their native language
- comprehension of a written text since most effort is placed on reading each individual word

If we briefly look at the three most commonly taught FLs in Swedish middle schools, Spanish, French, and German, we can see how each language presents diverse problems for the dyslexic students. For example in Spanish the student may find it difficult to understand the grapheme [j] is now to be pronounced more as an English [h] while two Ls do not at all sound like [l] but instead more like a [y]. French students are introduced to unfamiliar vowel sounds that call for a more nasal pronunciation as well as intonation placed on completely different parts of words than what they have been taught earlier in their native language.

Even reading, which the student may have mastered in their native language, again becomes a challenge as they must decipher which letters are to be pronounced and which are silent. When learning German, students may find the multiple consonant combinations a struggle as well as the long polysyllabic words commonly found in the language. For dyslexic students studying German, who have understood the main syntax of their native language, will find it extra difficult to learn that the verb must now be placed at the end of a sentence (Ott 1997, pg. 187-190).

These differences in languages can of course be a challenge for anyone trying to master a new language but for the dyslexic student who has a lessened ability to process language; FL courses can be a great endeavor. The strategies and rules they have learned in their native language are suddenly of little or no use within the new language. For example, many dyslexics become proficient at using circumlocution or the use of other words in order to explain an unknown word, when they have difficulties retrieving words from their long term memory. This strategy cannot be used when learning a FL since their oral skills are not at a high enough level to do so (Snowling 2006, pg. 81). Dyslexics must, therefore, be taught new strategies that work for that particular

language in order to succeed. That being said, learning a new language in middle school is still a part of the school curricula and being so each student must be given the opportunity to take part in FL learning. The question then becomes how can a foreign language teacher facilitate for this learning to take place within the realm of the classroom.

Unfortunately it has been found that most foreign language teachers receive very little education within the field of special needs. They are, in other words, not equipped to help their dyslexic students since the methods they commonly use will often hinder the dyslexic child more than help them succeed within FL learning (Schneider 2009, pg.298). How does one, as a foreign language teacher, give the dyslexic student access to the FL curricula so they too can succeed? We will now take a closer look at some of the common methods used to help dyslexic students overcome their lack of language processing skills.

4.4 Methods used to help dyslexic students learn a Foreign Language

According to Läroplan11, in regards to students with learning disabilities, "[...] the special aid in primary education, compulsory school, special school and Sami schools should be given in the manner and to the extent necessary so that the student will be able to achieve and meet the minimum proficiency requirements". It goes on to explain that, "[t]he purpose of special assistance is to help these students reach the minimum proficiency goals. This means that it is the school's responsibility to provide special support continuously as long as the student is unable to meet the requirements without the help of special aid" (Lpr11).

Simply put these students are guaranteed by Swedish law to receive the help needed in order to reach the goals set for them by Läroplan11. Since the early 1920s, when Samuel Torrey Orton, one of the most influential researchers of dyslexia and the first to discuss dyslexia from an educational perspective, many methods and programs have been created to teaching dyslexic students. Some of the most well known programs are; Orton-Gillingham Approach, Alphabetic Phonics, Slingerland Approach, The Wilson Program, Hickey Program and Shelton Program. What approach to use and how to use it is highly debated question as one method may be the best option for some dyslexic student while of little use to another. The above mentioned programs are based on helping dyslexic students become more proficient in their native language. We will now look at methods that have been shown useful when teaching dyslexic students a FL.

Jonathan F. Arries from the Department of Modern Languages and Literatures College of William and Mary Williamsburg outlines in his article "Learning Disabilities and Foreign Languages: A Curriculum Approach to the Design of Inclusive Courses" some commonly known theories and methods used when working with dyslexic students. The theories are many and just which one is the most successful is difficult to say. Some believe that dyslexic student work best by combining language studies with physical movement, music or art as seen in the Suggestopedia approach or the Total Physical Response (TPR) Approach by Dr. James J. Asher. Others feel that by using a "whole language" approach with dyslexic students they are not given the needed instruction explaining the phonetics and grammar of the FL. A. Mabbott, professor within second language acquisition, felt it was imperative to *not* focus so much attention on the grammar of a language but to instead use a, "communicative approach" (Arries 1999, pg. 99), where the dyslexic student was asked to work on speaking more than writing or reading. This theory is based on Krashen and Terrell's earlier studies on language acquisition where it is believed that, "an ambitious grammar-based syllabus may actually impede acquisition" (Arries 1999, pg.101). Acquisition in this case being distinct from learning since it is based more on the subconscious acquiring of language than the conscious process of learning grammatical rules.

Others, however, view the communicative approach as having detrimental results on dyslexic students success in a FL as it puts too much focus on speaking and not enough on the other aspects of language, such as the before mentioned grammatical rules. Ganschow and Sparks, therefore, believe that the best way to help dyslexic students when learning a FL is the use of the Multi-sensory Learning Approach (MSL), which is based on the Orton-Gillingham approach, one of the first programs created for dyslexic students. The MSL approach uses a combination of senses to teach a FL. This essay will go into more detail regarding the MSL approach later on in this chapter.

Arries goes on to describe his experiences with dyslexic students and has come to believe that it is not just a matter of designing new methods and strategies for dyslexic student but that there is a need to reconstruct the FL curriculum as a whole. This he believes will lead to real inclusion of students with learning disabilities (LD). Although the article outlines his work with college students with all forms of LD, not just dyslexia, learning a FL, many of his findings can be related to the FL curriculum we find in middle schools today and are therefore relevant to this essay.

According to Arries, many schools are not equipped to give dyslexics and others with learning disabilities the support they need to succeed in a FL classroom. He feels that in order to give the best help possible to these students, FL teachers must first understand the particular strengths and weaknesses of the students in their class. This can be done by studying tests and quizzes taken by LD students to pinpoint where the, "gaps in knowledge" (Arries 2009, pg.103), are

most common. These finding can then give the teacher a better idea of where the student may need additional support and create the curriculum there after. This can also be combined with direct interviews with the LD students or questionnaires where they, themselves, describe their strengths and weaknesses. This information can again be used by the FL teacher to create appropriate activities. Arries stresses that it is important that identifying the needs of the LD student must come first when planning FL curriculum. It is only when the FL teacher understands the objective of the course that they can select suitable textbooks, films, computer programs, strategies and activities. Once the needs of the student are identified the teacher can also plan the appropriate approach for the dyslexic student; one such approach being the Multi-sensory learning (MSL) approach. (Arries 2009, pg.102-105)

4.5 Multi-sensory Teaching

The MSL approach is based on the early work of Orton who believed that the way to aid dyslexic students with their language processing difficulties is by, "systematic[ally] building up of associations between speech sounds and their representations in writing" (Miles 1999, pg.131). Orton believed that a teacher must find the, "smallest possible unit the child can handle and being a gradual reconstruction of the sequences or series of the smallest units" (Miles 1999, pg.131). It was, however, not until Orton`s assistant Gillingham collaborated with Stillman to create the Gillingham-Stillman Approach which is the basis for most MSL approaches. MSL is one of the most well-known methods used when working with dyslexic students in their native language but has also been shown affective when teaching dyslexic students a FL.

In MSL is based on the idea that dyslexic students have a greater chance of accessing the curriculum when they are taught using all senses simultaneously. This allows for the student to process the information using his/her strongest senses and at the same time strengthening his/her weaknesses.

In "Teaching a Foreign Language Using Multisensory Structured Language Techniques to At-Risk Learners: A Review", Richard L. Sparks and Karen S. Miller discuss how the MSL approach has been shown successful when used with at-risk students in FL classrooms. At-risk students are, in this article, students who; "showed a lower FL aptitude as measured by the Modern Language Aptitude Test (MLAT)" (Sparks and Miller 2000, pg. 124), as well as having difficulties

learning a foreign language due to weaker phonological-orthographic skills. Dyslexic students were identified as at-risk students along with others with language processing disabilities. Sparks and Miller`s article details the results of varied studies of at-risk high school students who were taught Spanish using the MSL approach. In all of the studies mentioned, the at-risk students made significant improvements in their phonological-orthographic skills and consequently scored higher on the MLAT then earlier. It was also shown that some students reached oral and written FL proficiency levels similar to that of not-at-risk students (Sparks and Miller 2000, pg.126). Although Sparks and Miller have not, themselves, studied the effects of MSL on other FL students, not studying Spanish, there have been accounts of similar studies on French and German FL students where MSL showed positive results for their at-risk students (Sparks and Miller 2000, s.127).

The strategies used within MSL are many and varied but all based on the understanding that the use of a combination of senses when learning a FL is essential. Specific strategies may include: breaking words into distinct graphemes that the students will first see, then write and say simultaneously, feeling where the tongue is placed in the mouth in order to pronounce a particular phoneme, break words into syllables by tapping their pencil for each, color coding each vowel in order to see the distinction, color coding conjugation changes, using flash cards to practice sound-letter relationships, placing vocabulary words into a context by including pictures and images, using metacognitive teaching by explaining similarities and differences between native and foreign languages, acting out vocabulary and commonly used phrases using movement, listening to audio-CDs during reading assignments (Sparks and Miller 2000, pg.127-130). These are just a few of the many ways to work with the MSL approach.

4.6 Study Skills and Dyslexia

Although the MSL approach has been found beneficial for many dyslexic students it is important to point out that students may need added support in not just aspects of the class work pertaining to the specific FL. As discussed earlier, dyslexia can affect not only a student's ability to process language but also their ability to organize school work as well as using appropriate study skills. It is therefore important that the FL teacher keeps this in mind when teaching a student with dyslexia.

Jonathan F. Arries outlines in his article "Learning Disabilities and Foreign Languages: A Curriculum Approach to the Design of Inclusive Courses" some of these strategies when it comes to dyslexics students study and organizational skills. They may need, for example, to be given more

explicit instructions especially when it is given to them in written form, be it in their native language or the FL. Longer assignments may need to be divided up into smaller steps in order to help the student organize his/her time as well as to plan efficiently. Reading assignments should be given a day before the other students so that the dyslexic student will have adequate time to read and comprehend the text. This is especially important if the student must read aloud in class since the dyslexic students will need more time to prepare for what may be a very difficult task for him/her.

Test and quizzes should have a similar structure throughout the year since this lessens the dyslexic student's anxiety since they know what to expect. Knowing what to expect on a test will also make it easier to study. The tests should include examples for the students so that they can see how they are supposed to answer the questions. This may seem like one is giving the student the answers but this can be of great help to the dyslexic student who may have difficulties understanding the instructions. It might also be a good idea to give the dyslexic student more time on a test since it usually takes them a longer time to process the information. Tests can also be taken separate from the class as to not be distracted by others as well as to lessen the anxiety they may feel. (Arries 1999, pg.105-107)

5. Method

5.1 Qualitative vs. Quantitative

This study will use the qualitative method of interview in order to compare the existing theories on dyslexia and FL learning to the real life situation of FL teachers dealing with dyslexic students in their classrooms. It will look at the FL teachers` knowledge of dyslexia as well as their teaching strategies to see if they coincide with the today's theories on teaching dyslexic students.

In Steiner Kvale in *Interviews: An Introduction to Qualitative Research Interviewing,* Kvale discusses the benefits of using interviews as a research method that, "produce[s] systematized knowledge" (Kvale 2008, pg.60), that can be both qualitative and quantitative in nature. He goes on to say that the entire process of using interview as a method is a constant interplay between qualitative and quantitative approaches:

> An investigation starts with a qualitative analysis of the existing knowledge about a phenomenon and the development of qualitative concepts and hypotheses for the specific study. The phases of data collection and data analysis that follow can be mainly qualitative or quantitative, often with an interaction. The final phase, reporting the results, is predominantly qualitative; furthermore, tables and correlation coefficients require qualitative interpretations of their meanings.
>
> (Kvale 2008, pg.69)

As can be seen in the above citation, the interview approach can be interpreted as a mainly qualitative method, but one where quantitative practices play an important role to the final results of a study.

A qualitative research interview is an, "attempt to understand the world from the subjects' points of view, to unfold the meaning of their experiences" (Kvale 2008, pg. 1). Since this study

hopes to compare today's research on dyslexia and FL learning to that of the real-life situations and experiences of a FL teachers, interviews were found to be the best option. The main objective of this study is not to find out what specific strategies are being used in the classroom and how many times it is being used, which could be done through a solely quantitatively based study, but instead to see *how* teachers view dyslexia as it pertains to FL learning. By interviewing teachers it is hoped that it will show teachers thoughts on dyslexia, the struggles they may have when working with these students and what they have found to be most beneficial. This can best be shown through the use of the interview method.

5.2 Choice of interviewees

Those interviewed are six female FL teachers (Teacher A-F) consisting of one French teacher, two Spanish teachers, and three Swedish as a second language teachers. The teachers have worked within the educational field for different amounts of time. The French teacher (Teacher A) has worked for twelve years, one of the Spanish teachers (Teacher B) has worked for thirteen years, the other Spanish teacher (Teacher C) has worked for three years, one Swedish teacher (Teacher D) has worked for nine years, the other Swedish teacher (Teacher E) has worked for eight years, and the last Swedish teacher (Teacher F) has worked for one year. The varying amount of time that each teacher has worked is beneficial to the study as it encompasses a wide range of different teachers giving the study a wider range of opinions and views. The different lengths of time also affect the number of students that each teacher had taught with dyslexia. Some of the teachers estimated that they had worked with about ten dyslexic students while others had only taught one or two. This, of course, affects how a teacher is able to discuss the disorder. One may suggest that those FL teachers who have a long history of teaching would have more experience with dyslexic students and consequently know more about the disorder. The FL teachers who have only worked for a few years may have little experience dealing with dyslexic students and therefore know less about the disabilities as it pertains to the FL classroom. Although the lack of classroom experience may mean that the teacher has less personal knowledge of the disorder to base their opinion on, it does not mean that they do not have an opinion and views on dyslexia. This is why the length of time working as a teacher, although worth keeping in mind, will not affect the overall results of this study.

5.3 Choice of School

All six of the interviewed teachers work at the an international school located in one of Sweden`s largest cities. The school has 375 students ranging from five years of age to sixteen. The school is divided up into a Primary Years Program (PYP) for children 5-11 years old and a Middle Years Program (MYP) with children 11-16 years old. Although some of the teachers work with both the PYP children as well as the MYP children, the interview questions were based on only the teachers` experiences dealing with the MYP students.

As an international school the primary language of instruction is English also known as Language A. Swedish is therefore a second language followed by the choice of French or Spanish as a third language. Both the second language as well as the third language are considered Language B.

This particular school was chosen due to my personal connection to the school; having worked there two years. To choose a school where I already have a working relationship with the teachers was a conscious decision as it was hoped to create a more relaxed interview situation where the teachers would feel more comfortable sharing their own thoughts, opinions and personal experiences.

5.4 The Interview Method

The teachers were interviewed in smaller groups; one consisting of two Spanish teachers and one French teacher (Interview 1) and the other consisting of three Swedish teachers (Interview 2). This was a conscientious choice since it was hoped that by enabling a more open discussion about dyslexia and teaching the teachers would be more willing to share their own thoughts. It was also hoped that by opening up a discussion the teachers would help each other remember things that may not have been brought up were it not for the other two teachers bringing forth their own experiences and "jogging" the memory of the other. The groups were chosen in accordance with the foreign language each teacher teaches i.e. the Spanish and French teachers were placed in Group 1 while the Swedish teachers were placed in Group 2. This was a conscious choice as it was seen that each group followed their own distinct language goals and assessment criteria. By placing them into

specific groups, the teachers would find it easier to discuss dyslexia with the same goals and criteria in mind.

It was taken into consideration that both the choice of colleagues as interviewees and the choice of group interviews could make some teachers feel *less* willing to share their thoughts as to not show their ignorance. This may lead to them sharing less than they would have if it were only the interviewer and the interviewee or the interviewer had been a stranger. Despite this I felt it more likely that the group interview would create a more open interview than causing teachers to be less willing to discuss the topic at hand. In order to ensure the teachers willingness to participate they were asked if they had any objections to being interviewed together with their colleagues which, in all cases, they did not.

5.5 Ethical Aspects of Interviews

The teachers were informed both prior to consenting to the interview as well as right before the interview of the interview's; 1) purpose and procedure 2) that, even though, they were being recorded it was for my own use in order to better analyze their responses 3) that this study would be publicized on the school website for use by other students 4) that not their names nor the name of their school would be given in the final essay 5) that they would be interviewed together with other colleagues. All of the teachers agreed to the interview and were willing to participate.

All interviews were recorded using a computer in order to be able to transcribe and analyze the teachers' responses at a later time.

5.6 A Condensation and Categorization Approach to Analysis

Each interview group was interviewed one time for on average one hour. The questions were written before the actual interview consisting of 12 questions pertaining to the teachers` subject area, how many years they have been working as a teacher, their personal experience with dyslexic students, how they have chosen to work with them and why they chose to do so. In order to keep the flow of the conversation going the order of the questions were changed from one group the other as well as some new questions were asked during the actual interview.

The two interviews were then transcribed verbatim and later used as the basis of the analysis of the study. In order to analyze the teachers` responses a condensation and categorization approach was used. When using condensation one compresses the interview responses into shorter more concise answers where the main idea is expressed. These answers are then, whenever possible, categorized (Kvale 2008, pg.205). To categorize the answers, the condensed answers of each interviewee were placed into a created group or category.

This particular approach to analyzing the results was chosen due to the nature of the interview. Since many of the responses detailed the personal experiences of the teachers they often times went off on tangents which may or may not have pertained to subject at hand. It was, therefore, essential to first condense the answer in order to see the main idea. This answer can then more accurately be placed into a category in order to get a better understanding of what the teachers have experienced. These categories can then more easily be used to see patterns existing in the interviewee's answers. The results of the interviews will be shown in the following Results chapter.

6. Results

1. **About how many students have you taught that have been diagnosed with dyslexia that you know of?**

The number of dyslexic students each teacher had worked with as FL teachers varied greatly from one teacher to the other. Most of the teachers, however, had worked with two or three dyslexic students during their career. One teacher said she only knew of one student who had been diagnosed with dyslexia while another had, on average, one student per school year.

2. **How would you define dyslexia?**

The majority of the teachers found it difficult to give a definition of dyslexia and were unsure of what exactly constituted the disorder. The interviewed teachers' answers could be divided up into two main answer groups; *symptoms* and *consequences*. Symptoms including those who defined dyslexia by using specific symptoms they associated with dyslexia and consequences being those who defined the disorder by the academic results of the student. The first group (Teachers C, D, E, and F) said that dyslexic students had; difficulties reading and writing, learning new words and spelling. They also said that those students took a longer time completing tasks, easily mixed up similar letters such as [b] and |[d], and did not understand the relationship between graphemes and phonemes.

The second answer group (Teachers A and B) said that dyslexia was a disorder affecting many aspects of language but usually not all. *Teacher B said,*

> *[...] sometimes it`s reading, sometimes it`s the spelling, sometimes it`s that they can`t organize [...] and you talk to the student and the student says, "I`ve dedicated so much time at this", and it's not consequent so I try to look at why are they having problems.*
>
> *- Interview 1*

They focused more on the results or consequences of the disorder. The teachers believed that the main aspect of the disorder was that despite dyslexics efforts to do well in school they usually did

not meet the goals of the given course; *"there is no progress"*, as Teacher A described it. Both groups did, however, agree that there were many different types and degrees of dyslexia.

3. What are some of the common problems your dyslexic students have had when learning a foreign language? Verbal language? Written language? Thinking skills (memory, organization, handwriting etc.)?

The teachers had many examples of what the problem areas were for their dyslexic students. When asked to discuss dyslexic students writing difficulties the teachers all said that their students had an inability to structure sentences correctly. The dyslexic student would, for example, have difficulties knowing how to begin a sentence as well how or when to end a sentence and often ordered words in sentences incorrectly. Teachers also saw a tendency of dyslexic students to spell words incorrectly by either not including silent letters or writing the letters in the wrong order.

When asked to discuss the dyslexic students study skills, the teachers (Teachers A, C and E and F) had either not noticed a difference between a dyslexic student and a non-dyslexic student while others (Teachers B and D) believed dyslexic students were less organized. They had found that dyslexic students often forgot to bring appropriate material to class, forgot to hand in homework on time and would often lose papers. They also noticed a tendency for dyslexic students to have messier handwriting. Teacher D described dyslexia and poor study skills as follows:

> *They go hand in hand. They forget things. You feel that the chaos that you see in their writing exists somewhere else as well, in their mind maybe, and [the chaos] shows itself in other ways like forgetting to bring their books.*
>
> *- Interview 2*

All of the teachers agreed that their dyslexic students generally had better verbal skills than oral skills but that this was, at times, difficult to hear when they were speaking in the FL. They also noticed that their dyslexic student's needed more time to process what they were going to say in the FL and that their improvisational skills were often times weaker than non-dyslexic students. Teacher B described how dyslexic students who usually did well on the written assignments would not be able to say one word in the FL when asked in class. She describes:

> *You could see very good students having difficulties in improvising within language because what they were doing was that they were spending a huge amount of time*

and energy on the written tasks.

4. **Do these problems vary from one dyslexic student to the next or have you found that particular symptoms exist in all dyslexic students when learning a foreign language?**

Yes. All of the teachers agreed that their dyslexic students varied so greatly in number of symptoms as well as the degree to which they showed themselves in school that they could not find one dyslexic student like another., Teacher B, Teacher C and Teacher D believed that all of the dyslexics they had worked with seemed to be more engaged during speaking activities. All of the teachers saw a tendency in their dyslexic students to be more, *"responsive"* (Interview 2, Teacher D) during listening activities such as when asked to listen to music, listen to audio books or listen to the teacher present in front of the class.

5. **Do you work differently with dyslexic students compared to students who do not have dyslexia?**

All of the teachers believed that they needed to work differently with dyslexic students than with non-dyslexic students. All of the teachers except one found it difficult, however, to figure out how to find the best way to consistently help these students and often wondered, *"what to work on first"* (Interview 2, Teacher F), to help the student develop better language skills.

6. **Do you use specific strategies with your dyslexic students? What are they?**

The teachers' strategies can be divided up into three categories: *didactics, tools and assessment.* The majority of the strategies given by the teachers were based on the category assessment. These are the strategies used by the interviewed teachers. They are ordered from most common answer to less common. The strategies were: shorten the assignment, give the student more time, change a writing assignment to an oral assignment, orally retell what they have written to the teacher so they can explain what they have written, take tests or do presentations away from the rest of the class, read exam instructions to student during test.

From the tools category, the most common strategies used were: listen to audiobooks during reading comprehension activities and let them use a computer, use the textbook to complete assignments.

Didactic strategies include: make eye contact with dyslexic student during class to see if they have not understood something, use videos, images and music to teach new vocabulary words and verb conjugations, let dyslexic student work with a non-dyslexic student so that they can

contribute but do not need to write, practice vocabulary words by writing the word a number of times, copy information and words directly from the textbook, make power-point presentations that students can see in class and look at home so that they do not need to take notes in class. Teacher B and Teacher F said they used the same class work strategy as another teacher (using videos, images and music), while the Teacher A, C, D, E and F used strategies that no other teacher used.

7. **What do you base your strategies on? Own experience? Pedagogical theories? Other teachers?**

The teachers either created their own strategies based on their dyslexic students needs, talked to the school's special education teacher or had been given examples of strategies at different courses. Teacher B and Teacher F had talked to a special education teacher, Teachers D and E had been to courses where dyslexia was discussed and Teachers A, C and F of them based their strategies on their own experiences. All of the teachers, except Teacher B, felt they needed more help to know how to work with dyslexic students.

8. **Do you change your curriculum or your goals for a dyslexic student? Would you, for example take away writing or spelling assignments if you find this to be too difficult for the student?**

Yes. All of the teachers felt they had the freedom to change their assignments and tests so as to better fit the strengths and weaknesses of their dyslexic students. They all, however, did not know how to assess these students according to the schools assessment criteria. Teachers A, D, E and F would not assess the students work in the same manner as they assess the other students. They would for example not grade the student's spelling but exclusively look at the content of his/her work. Teacher D explained:

> [T]he diagnosis should not be a hindrance for them to complete their schooling. So if they have a hard time spelling, it shouldn`t stop them from passing the course.
>
> - Interview 2

Others (Teachers B and C) felt they were able to assess the students in the same manner as they assess non-dyslexic students since the dyslexic student used tools such as audio books or a computer which allow them to complete the assignments at, more or less, the same level as the other non-dyslexic students.

9. **Have you ever worked with special needs teachers to create strategies for your dyslexic students in order to help them learn a foreign language?**

Teachers B and F had worked with the special education teacher at their school to create a FL strategies for their dyslexic students.

10. **Is it realistic to think that these strategies can be implemented in a regular classroom of 20 or more students?**

All of the teachers believed that it is possible but it depends on factors such as; time, the other students and the age of the children. All of the teachers felt they, *"simply had too short a time"* (Interview 2, Teacher E), with the students to help their dyslexic students on a one-to-one basis but that they could still do some things to make it easier for these students. The Swedish teachers felt that it was harder to do so with the older students since the gap between the stronger students and the weaker ones was bigger than with the younger children. They also believed that it has a lot to do with how the other students are and what other problems may exist in a given class.

11. **What may be some of the difficulties in implementing particular strategies for your dyslexic students in a classroom of 20 or more students?**

Teachers D, E and F felt that they needed more time in order to implement more strategies to help their dyslexic students since they only meet their students two times a week. Teachers A, B and C found assessment to be the most frustrating part as they were unsure of how to grade dyslexic students without being unfair to the other students. Teacher A voiced her frustration about assessing dyslexic students differently than the non-dyslexic students by saying:

> *[…] you have to think of the other students too, who are weak, they are struggling and you need to think of them as well.*

> - Interview 1

12. **Do you believe that with the right strategies, students with dyslexia will be able to learn a foreign language at the same level as a student without dyslexia?**

The teachers either believed that dyslexic students, without a doubt, could reach the same goals as non-dyslexic students or they believed they could learn to speak the language but not learn to write it. All of the teacher, however, agreed that it had a lot to do with the individual students attitude towards the subject. If the student was committed to learning the FL, the teachers believed that the

dyslexia would not hinder them from achieving the same level of language proficiency as a non-dyslexic student. Teacher C, who believed dyslexia should not be seen as a hinder, explained:

I don't think it's a disadvantage as such. It may be one if you are portraying it as such but if you don't treat the student like, "Oh no he's got this or this", it will not be a problem. It's something you need to deal with. As long as you are aware of it, not as an issue but as another way of learning.

- Interview 1

Teacher A felt that her dyslexic students may not have the same possibilities to learn a FL as a non-dyslexic student but still saw the subject as beneficial for all students. She said:

I still think that language learning does broaden your mind and that also goes for a dyslexic person. It gives them much more general knowledge to learn about another culture and the fact that they can't spell the words; it's not the end of the world. It has been enriching for their general knowledge.

- Interview 1

7. Analysis

The following chapter will focus on the major themes and ideas that were discussed in each of the interviews with the FL teachers. It will look at the FL teachers` views on dyslexia as pertaining to FL learning and attempt to see a pattern to the teachers' answers and opinions. To gain a better understanding of the main themes running throughout the interviews, this chapter will be divided into three parts, each one focusing on a given research questions. The three sections of the chapter are as follows: (1) How do foreign language teachers describe the disorder dyslexia both from a theoretical perspective as well as from a practical perspective? (2) What difficulties do foreign language teachers have when teaching a dyslexic student? and (3) What strategies do foreign language teachers use when teaching a student with dyslexia? The research questions are ordered in this manner as to first analyze how FL teachers describe dyslexia in general, to then look more specifically at the distinct aspects of dyslexia as it pertains to FL learning, followed by a more specific look at how dyslexia is handled in the FL classroom.

7.1 How do foreign language teachers describe dyslexia, both from a theoretical perspective as well as from a practical perspective?

In this section the teachers` descriptions of dyslexia will be analyzed in more depth to gain a better understanding of what they view as dyslexia. Their descriptions have been divided up into two categories, theoretical descriptions and practical descriptions. This was done so as to see the different perspectives of a person's description and to gain a more complete view of the teachers` comprehension of dyslexia. Therefore, descriptions from a theoretical perspective were focused on a person's knowledge or awareness of dyslexia in regards to existing theories on the disorder. Theory, in this case, being tested propositions, commonly regarded as correct. The teachers' descriptions, as seen from a practical perspective, focused on what the teachers felt were the actions or symptoms that they commonly associated with dyslexia. By looking at the teachers` descriptions

of dyslexia from both a theoretical perspective as well as from a practical perspective, gives a more holistic view on the FL teachers understanding of dyslexia.

As stated in the results chapter, the definitions given by the interviewed teachers are divided up into two categories; symptoms and consequences. That is to say one category of teachers chose to define dyslexia by naming symptoms they associated with dyslexia while the other category of teachers defined dyslexia by the consequences the LD had on the student's academic work. The first category defined dyslexia as a person who, for example, has difficulties reading, misspells words, writes letters in the wrong manner and lacks structure in their writing. The second category defined dyslexia as person who, despite the efforts of the person, is unable to progress within language development due to a learning disability affecting their language processing skills.

When looking at the two categories from a practical and theoretical perspective it can be argued that the first category is a practical description while the second category is a theoretical description. The first category is based on the teachers` understanding of dyslexia through a number of commonly associated symptoms often occurring in people with dyslexia. They did not, in their definitions; deal with the theories surrounding why spelling mistakes occur in dyslexic students or how poor reading skills can be a lack of phonetic awareness.

The second category, in contrast, focused less on the symptoms, and more on the theories behind the disorder and what the consequences of this may be for a student with dyslexia. In other words, they discussed the student's efforts not being consistent with the students results i.e. a student studies his/her spelling words for three hours yet still give the wrong answer on the test. These teachers also defined dyslexia as a disorder associated with the brain, affecting a person's ability to comprehend language. The teachers in this category were able to define dyslexia both theoretically and practically.

The majority of the teachers were well aware of the distinct symptoms found when dealing with dyslexia. They could name many characteristics and what they often saw when working with these students. It can, however, be said that there is a lack of knowledge about dyslexia on more of a theoretical level which can in turn affect the how a teacher chooses to deal with a dyslexic student.

Even though many of the teachers agreed that dyslexic students often had difficulties reading, they were unable to explain why it was more difficult for dyslexic students to read than for non-dyslexic students. They, as seen in the earlier mentioned studies by Schneider, lacked the theory behind the disorder. This then begs the question; Is this needed? Is it important that, in this case, FL teachers are aware of the underlying reasons for the student's inability to remember the

spelling of a word? Is it not enough that the teacher is able to recognize the signs of dyslexia when they see a student consistently writing [b] when it should be a [d]?

To some extent, yes. By being able to recognize the symptoms of the disorder the student has a better chance of receiving the extra support he/she needs, be it from the FL teacher or by simply bringing up the issue with the school's special education department.

It is, however, also important that a teacher not only be able to recognize the symptoms but to also know how to deal with them. As stated by Arries in his earlier cited article, the FL teacher must first identify the dyslexic student's strengths and weaknesses in order to discover what teaching method to use. This becomes increasingly difficult if the teacher is unaware of the reason why a student, for example, has great difficulties reading non-words in the textbook. If they do not know that this problem, commonly associated with dyslexia, is most likely caused by a lack of phonetic awareness, they may not know that this student needs extra help hearing, saying and writing the letters of the particular FL. By being aware of what dyslexia is, not just by the symptoms associated with it but also the theories surrounding the disorder, FL teachers will be more equipped to deal with these students.

7.2 What difficulties do FL teachers have when teaching a dyslexic student?

Dyslexia is a disorder affecting a person language processing skills. Consequently, dyslexia affects most areas of a student's academic career as language processing skills make up a part of every subject in today's school. FL learning is, for obvious reasons, included as a difficult area for dyslexic students as it is based on a person's ability to understand and use a language. It is, therefore, not surprising that the teachers interviewed found that dyslexic students often had problems when learning a FL. This, in turn, affects the FL teacher's ability to teach the student.

The problems that the teachers interviewed had when teaching dyslexic students can be divided into two themes; didactic and administrative. The first theme, didactic, deals with the actual classroom work. In other words, the problems teachers had when teaching dyslexic students a FL. The second theme, administrative, deals with lack of administrative help concerning LD students.

7.2.1 Didactic problems

It can be interpreted from the teachers` responses that many of the FL teachers feel a sense of frustration when dealing with dyslexic students. This frustration does not seem to stem from the teachers unwillingness to teach a dyslexic student but more from their lack of knowledge about dyslexia and how to deal with it.

The teachers stated that they did not know where to start when teaching a dyslexic child. Should the focus be more on the oral aspect of a FL or is it best to start with the written language? What does one do if the student does not seem to understand a concept even though they have done it many times before? Many teachers were simply confused on how to help the dyslexic student since the strategies they use and have been shown effective with their non-dyslexic student seem to do little or nothing to develop the dyslexic student's knowledge of the language. Their dyslexic students, in other words, are not progressing in the same manner as the other students.

On the other hand, some of the teachers interviewed, seemed to feel less frustration and were more comfortable dealing with their dyslexic students. They felt that, even though there were many aspects of dyslexia that they did not understand, they still had a number of tools and methods specifically designed for their dyslexic students. Many of these methods had come about from contact they had had with special education teachers who had given them tips on strategies to use with dyslexic students.

Do these teachers feel more comfortable and less frustrated when dealing with dyslexic students because they had the tools needed to help their students? Although it is impossible to definitively say that this is true, there does seem to be a correlation between the teachers` view on teaching dyslexic students and their knowledge on how to help these students.

As discussed in the Theory chapter, one of the reasons dyslexic students struggle in the FL classroom is due to the curriculum not being designed after their needs. By creating distinct methods for their dyslexic students, the FL teacher makes FL learning possible. It seems as though the teachers who had implemented alternative teaching methods for their dyslexic students felt more comfortable and less frustrated when dealing with the disorder. If so, does this mean that their students are making progress in their class and this was the reason the teachers felt less frustrated? This could be the case since the teachers who did not know what methods to use with their dyslexic students consequently felt frustrated due to their students` lack of progress in class. Of course this difference can be based on each individual teacher's teaching style personality and view on what progress entails. A more detailed study would need to be conducted to make a clear connection between teachers` feelings of frustration and their students` progression in class. However, there

does seem to be a connection between teachers who are given alternative tools to help dyslexic students and consequently the teachers` overall feelings towards the disorder.

7.1.2 Administrative Problems

Many of the interviewed teachers felt that the reason behind the uncertainty on how to deal with dyslexic students was due to their lack of education within the subject Learning Disabilities. This, the teachers felt, was something they needed but were not always given by the school administration. As the number of students with learning disabilities such as dyslexia seem to increase for each year, according to the teachers, they felt they were not given the adequate tools, in the form of education, to be able to deal with it appropriately.

It can be argued that the frustration that FL teachers feel when dealing with dyslexic students is much due to their want for more courses pertaining to FL learning and dyslexia and the fact that they are not receiving it. Due to the lack of education about dyslexia, they feel unsure of what to in the classroom making it difficult for both the student and the teacher.

Despite this, FL teacher must assess the work of dyslexic students according the grading criteria set by the school and Skolverket all while keeping the student's disability in mind. This is a difficult task for many of the teachers spoken to, who feel it increasingly difficult to accurately assess dyslexic students and non-dyslexic students based on the same grading system. Many of the teachers were unsure of how to do this and if they were to include aspects such as spelling in the same manner with all students, despite apparent learning disabilities. As one teacher wondered: is it fair to grade a student with a diagnosed disorder on the same scale as a student who does not? Similarly, is it unfair to grade a diagnosed dyslexic differently from a student who does not have a diagnosis but may find FL learning difficult?

That FL teachers feel an uncertainty when it comes to assessing and grading dyslexic students which is a problem for both teacher and student. It seems important for teachers to know what they are and are not allowed to do so that they can create proper assessment for their students. This is also beneficial for the dyslexic student who has been shown to do better on tests and quizzes if they are aware of what to expect and are accustomed to the format. If the teacher knows how to assess their dyslexic student they can better plan the appropriate tests that will accurately assess the student's knowledge.

Lastly, the interviewed teachers felt that they many times were unable to implement the needed strategies and methods for their dyslexic students since they did not have enough time. They

felt that the administration did not give them adequate time with the students in order to fulfill the expectations students, parents and the administration themselves had on them.

More on how the didactic problems as well as the administrative problems can be changed in order to make teaching dyslexic students less frustrating and stressful for the FL teachers will be discussed in more depth in the following Discussion chapter.

7.3 What strategies do FL teachers use when teaching a dyslexic student?

The interviewed teachers were asked to discuss the strategies they used in class to help their dyslexic students. Strategies, in this essay, are seen as anything used to make the FL curriculum more accessible for students. This could be the way they teach these students, the tools they give their students to use to complete assignments with more ease or the way they helped students during assessment and testing. The teachers' strategies can therefore be categorized into these three main themes: *didactics, tools and assessment*. Didactics deals with how the teachers specifically changed their method of teaching to be more accessible to dyslexic students. This includes, for example, using songs and pictures to teach verb conjugations and the use of repetition to help the student transfer and retrieve information to and from his/her long-term memory. The category tools implies any instrument used to simplify the given activity for the student such as giving the student access to a computer for writing assignments and audio books for reading comprehension. Assessment applies to the manner in which the teacher tests the student's knowledge which includes tests, quizzes, graded papers and individual homework assignment. Examples of assessment strategies include; giving the student more time, shortening assignments, tests and quizzes, changing written assignments to oral assignments, to name a few.

By placing the teachers numerous strategies into one of the three categories it was shown that the majority of the strategies were categorized as assessment strategies while the least amount of strategies could be found in the didactics category. It is, of course, difficult to know exactly why the majority of the strategies were based on how to assess dyslexic students but it can be argued that assessment is an issue on the minds of many the teacher when dealing with these students. Has teaching become more about giving out appropriate grades causing teachers to feel a greater sense of urgency in knowing how to assess students with learning disabilities? Do the assessment tools given to the teachers not take into account those students with learning disabilities and consequently

leave the teachers unsure of exactly how to grade dyslexic students? This is difficult to say without analyzing the assessment criteria used by these teachers, but it can be said that when discussing strategies to use with dyslexic students, so that they learn a new language, the majority of the teachers automatically focused on the end result; the grade. This begs the question: Why? Why is the focus on the final grade and not on *how* to get the student to obtain that final grade? To better understand the reasons behind this let us discuss where the teachers' strategies came from.

When the teachers were asked why they started using these particular strategies, be it didactic, tools or assessment, they explained that either the strategies came from special education teachers they had been in contact with, from specific courses or from their own experiences having worked with dyslexic students. Since the majority of the strategies suggested by the teachers deal with assessment, followed by tools and lastly didactics, does this mean that the strategies being used by special education (or at least the information they give out to teachers) and the information given out at specific courses are also mainly assessment based? As discussed in earlier chapters, there exists numerous amounts of didactic strategies shown to be useful when working with dyslexic students but the teachers themselves are not using them.

One can only begin to hypothesize why teachers are not using more didactic based strategies to work with their dyslexic students. It can, however, be argued that, by looking at the difficulties teachers said they had when working with dyslexic students, teachers are not using didactic strategies as much because: (1) they do not have adequate time (2) they lack the knowledge about dyslexia to be able to use didactic strategies.

As stated earlier, teachers feel they do not have enough time to work in a different manner with their dyslexic students since they have 20 other students who may or may not be struggling with the FL as well. This may be the reason they have chosen to implement assessment strategies so that they could still help their dyslexic student yet not take additional time away from their other students. Another reason for teachers not using more didactic based strategies is because they simply do not know what these strategies are and/or how to implement them into their classroom.

This is not to say that the interviewed teachers were not aware of their dyslexic students problems with language and that they did not do their best to assure each of their students` success in class. The interviewed teachers were sensitive to the needs of their students and it could be seen that many of the teachers were using strategies commonly used with dyslexic students. Many times the strategies they used with all of their students were, in fact, similar to those shown to be effective with dyslexic students. For example, one teacher mentioned how she used a short YouTube clip about the morning routines in French where the students could see a cartoon figure get up in the morning, eat breakfast and get dressed. The pictures were shown together with clearly written

sentences at the bottom of the screen as a person read them aloud. The teachers did not herself use this YouTube clip specifically for her dyslexic student but the combination of written language, spoken language and visual images is in fact the use of the MSL approach which has been shown very effective with dyslexic students. This was also shown to be true for many of the interviewed teachers.

The teachers, themselves, were not aware of it and it may not have been a conscious decision, on the part of the teacher, but they were using strategies fitting for dyslexic students. This may be due to the fact that learning a language often calls for multi-sensory learning, as seen in Lpr11 where the main goals in FL learning are to hear, speak, write, and see the language to fully understand it. This may also mean that while many of the teachers said they only used assessment based strategies they may in fact be using more didactic strategies without their knowledge. It may simply be that the teachers, when asked to give examples of strategies they use with dyslexic students, they believed, "giving more time on a test" was a strategy used with dyslexic students while, "singing a song to remember how to conjugate a verb", was no more than a FL strategy. This again brings up the theory that FL teachers are not educated enough about learning disabilities such as dyslexia and do not know that the strategies they use are appropriate for dyslexic students. This, and the effects it has on the FL classroom will be discussed in more detail in the following Discussion chapter.

8. Discussion

As seen in the Analysis chapter of this essay, the teachers bring up many interesting aspects of dyslexia and its effects on FL teaching. Some of the main themes found in the interviews will be discussed here in more depth. These themes are; *education* about dyslexia, the role of the *special education department*, the issue of *time*, and *assessment*. These points will be discussed in this chapter to see what can be done to make the situation better for both the dyslexic student and the FL teacher.

8.1 Education

The teachers` lack of knowledge on *how* to help their dyslexic students and *what* methods are appropriate seem to be a general issue within FL learning and dyslexia. As stated earlier, one of the main reasons dyslexic students find FL courses a struggle is much due to the way in which FLs are taught. Most FL curricula is based on the ideal language student who has a natural ability to understand the structure of their own language and correctly transfer it to the FL. Since this is often times difficult for the dyslexic student they easily fall behind in FL classes and fail to learn the language.

As seen in the interviews, the teachers felt that the methods they usually use with their non-dyslexic students were ineffective when teaching dyslexic students. This means that FL teachers` views on their students need to change. Instead of viewing all of students as ideal language learning, who carry with them an understanding of languages, FL teachers need to broaden their view of their students and alter their curriculum thereafter.

This can be difficult for FL teachers as they were, most likely, the ideal language learner in school. The teacher, who has chosen a career within FL learning, enjoys languages and has a good understanding of how they work. This is why it is important for FL teachers to keep in mind that it is not be a given that all of their students will understand that sentences are structured according to specific grammatical rules, that we conjugate verbs automatically when speaking or that we can

"sound-out" unknown words by looking at each grapheme. This may be a given for many, yet for the dyslexic student, who has had difficulties understanding the structure of their native language, the new FL is many times a complete, unorganized mess.

A restructuring of how FLs are taught may be what is needed to give the dyslexic student access to the curriculum. This may mean that teachers need to explain the grammar in more depth than with the other students or break the language down into smaller parts to insure better understanding.

By giving them these extra tools and education, the teacher will also feel more secure in their teacher role, as they will feel equipped to not only deal with the non-dyslexic students but also the dyslexic students. If the FL teacher is taught how to work with dyslexic students as it pertains to FL learning, the teacher will most likely feel less frustrated and therefore give their dyslexic students a greater chance of succeeding in school.

8.2 Special Education Department

Many may argue that it is not just up to the FL teacher to restructure their curriculum so as to better help the dyslexic student but that it is also the responsibility of the special education department of a given school. Although most schools have a special education department or at least a special education teacher, it is not certain that this person or persons will be able to consult each teacher on how to best help the dyslexic student. Furthermore, the special education teacher is educated in learning disabilities *not* in each specific subject taught in a given middle school.

It is, therefore, difficult for the special education to give specific tools and methods to use with these students to help them within a FL as they, themselves, do not speak the language. If the FL teacher is educated within many different learning disabilities, including dyslexia, along with their, already existing, expertise within their subject area they will be able to create the appropriate curriculum for their dyslexic students. The FL teacher will be able to first recognize the problem to then see how they can help their student within the subject area based on their knowledge of the disorder. This will increase the chances of the student's success in the FL.

8.3 Time

Another advantage to giving FL teachers more knowledge about dyslexia would be to help them better manage their time. Time is often a problem facing teachers today as they are given more responsibilities yet not always the adequate time to do it in. One of the issues brought up by the FL teachers was the fact that they did not feel they had enough time to implement the needed strategies for their dyslexic students.

A solution to this would logically be to give the teachers more time with their dyslexic students. This may be difficult to change since giving more time to FL would mean less time in other subjects such a Math, English or Science, something that will most likely not be beneficial for the dyslexic student who may have similar learning difficulties in all of their subjects. It then becomes a question of using the time given in a more productive manner.

Again the teachers must be given the theoretical knowledge and education about dyslexia in order to create the most appropriate methods that will give the student the best results in the time allotted to them. If a student, for example, has problems retrieving vocabulary words the teacher could teach them how to make cue card or create mnemonic devices to study the words on their own. By understanding why the dyslexic student is unable to remember vocabulary words, that they have poor retrieval skills, the teacher can create the appropriate strategy that the student can use on their own and consequently not take time away from the other students. This will also lessen the stress teachers may feel when teaching a dyslexic student. If they know how to help the student help themselves, the teacher may feel less stressed and feel less frustrated.

8.4 Assessment

As seen in both the Results chapter and the Analysis chapter, one of the main aspects of focus for the interviewed teachers was assessment. They were unsure of how to assess their dyslexic students so that it would follow the schools criteria for grading and they were unsure of how to do it in a manner so as to be fair on both the dyslexic students *and* the non-dyslexic students. This uncertainty seemed to make the teachers frustrated and stressed since they were not sure of how to go about things. This is shown in their focus on mainly assessment based strategies more than the didactic based or tools based strategies.

This brings up an interesting query about today's schools: Is too much focus placed on assessments and grades? To some extent this seems to be the case as the majority of the teachers based their teaching and planning on the assessment of the student. This is not strange since, as a teacher, it is not simply a matter of teaching a student a given subject but also about finding out if they have learned what has been taught. In other words, students must be assessed. It seems, however, that too much focus is being placed on this assessment and those who are most affected by this focus are those who find school difficult, those with learning disabilities such as dyslexia.

Those with learning disabilities such as dyslexia may not be able to show their knowledge in the traditional way other students do but does this necessarily mean the information has not been comprehended? All of the teachers said they changed their assessment of the dyslexic student in one way or another, be it giving them more time, letting them use a computer or changing the actual assessment task. This seemed to work for the majority of them but they all seemed unsure of if this was actually possible and would sometimes have to write *not applicable* instead of actually grading the student.

Swedish schools say they want a school for all but if one is to look at the assessment system it does not seem to be so. The students are welcome to go to school but they are then assessed in the same manner as other students. Are we really giving these students the opportunity to show us, the teachers, what they have or have not learned? Do we need to maybe change the way we look at assessment in order to include the dyslexic child?

9. Conclusion

"I still think that language learning does broaden your mind and that also goes for a dyslexic person. It gives them much more general knowledge to learn about another culture and the fact that they can't spell the words; it's not the end of the world. It has been enriching for their general knowledge"

- Interview 1

Learning a foreign language is a challenge for most, asking us to rethink our understanding of our own language as we try to fit grammatical rules and syntactical structures into to the new language correctly. It is, therefore, not surprising that FL learning is often a challenge for most dyslexic students who have found reading and writing in their native language a constant struggle.

As a foreign language teacher, who finds languages an exciting gateway to discovering and learning about new cultures, it can be difficult to truly understand the challenges that a person with language-based disability like dyslexia faces as they walk into their FL classroom. Much like Lavoie states, it may be hard for teachers to understand how it feels to be a LD student since most teachers did well in school and found it an enjoyable time in their lives. This is, however, one of the reasons we as teachers need to be particularly sensitive to the needs of these students, specifically, in the case of FL learning, dyslexic students.

This study has shown the importance of FL teachers obtaining a better understanding of dyslexia as a language-based disorder. They need to not simply be able to recognize the symptoms of dyslexia but also the reasons behind the disorders. This will allow the FL teachers to identify their students` strengths and weaknesses so as to create the appropriate strategies to give the dyslexic students access to the FL curriculum. By doing so, they are better equipped to support these students as they learn a FL which will in turn lead to FL teachers feel less frustrated and more secure in their role as teachers.

As stated by one of the interviewed teachers, dyslexia should not be seen as an issue complicating the life of the FL teacher but instead as, "another way to learn" (Interview October 6, 2011). It is time for FL teachers to start viewing dyslexia, not as an issue, but as another way to learn; another way for teachers to teach.

9.1 Improving the Study

After completing my study on dyslexia and FL learning I have come to the conclusion that some changes need to be made to my study in order to give it more validity and consequently more accurate results. I feel that my study could have been improved if I had opted for individual interviews instead of group interviews. Although I felt my group interviews gave me some insight into how teachers deal with dyslexia in their classrooms, I now see that I would have gained a better understanding of each teacher's particular situation if I had given them the chance to be interviewed separately. By interviewing the teachers individually I would have been able to ask each teacher the questions pertaining exclusively to their distinct experiences dealing with dyslexic students. This added understanding of each individual teacher's thoughts on dyslexia would have made my study more reliable and my results more valid.

9.2 Suggestions for Further Work

This study, as with most, has left me wondering what more can be looked at when dealing with dyslexia and FL learning. My study has made me want to look at this particular dilemma from all perspectives and angles; not just from a teacher perspective. One way to further research this topic would be to look at dyslexia and FL learning from the perspective of the dyslexic student. This could be done by interviewing dyslexic students about their personal experiences learning a FL. One could also observe dyslexic students in their FL classes to see how the dyslexic student handles the tasks given.

Another way to study this topic would be to test different FL learning strategies designed for dyslexic students and to then track the student's academic results to see if one strategy has a better outcome than another. These results could then be analyzed to see what factors caused one strategy to be more successful than another. By looking at all angles of dyslexia and FL learning i.e. the teacher, the student, the classroom and the actual lesson, one can gain a more complete picture of the problems and consequently be able to improve the situation for both teachers and students in the FL classroom.

10. References

10.1 Primary Sources

Interview 1 with Teachers A, B, and C, October 6, 2011

Interview 2 with Teachers D, E, and F, October 5, 2011

10.2 Secondary Source

Arries, J.F. (1999). Learning Disabilities and Foreign Languages: A Curriculum Approach
to the Design of Inclusive Courses. *Modern Language Journal*, v83 n1 p98-110. Virginia:
Department of Modern Languages and Literatures.

Beaton, A.A. (2004). The Neurobiology of Dyslexia. *The Study of Dyslexia.* NY: Kluwer
Academics.

Everatt, J. and Reid, G. (2009). Dyslexia: an overview of recent research. *The Routledge
Companion to Dyslexia.* NY: Routledge.

Foundation for Learning. (2007). "Identifying and teaching students with dyslexia" Available
online: Gophonics.com (December 30, 2011)

Hatcher, P.J. (2006). Phonological awareness and reading intervention. *The Practitioner`s
Handbook: Dyslexia Speech and Language 2nd Edition.* West Sussex: Whurr Publishers.

Kvale, S. (2008). *Interviews: An Introduction of Qualitative Research Interviewing*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, Inc.

Lahey, M. (1988). *Language Disorders and Language Development.* NY: MacMillan Publishing Company.

Lavoie, R. (1995). "How hard can it be?" Available online: http://teacher.scholastic.com/professional/specialneeds/howhard.htm (10.24.2011).

Lärarnas Riksförbund och Svenska Näringsliv. (2001). Språk- en väg in i arbetslivet: en undersökning från Svenska Näringsliv och Lärarnas Riksförbund i samarbete med Demoskop. Available online. lr.se. (10.10.2011).

Läroplan 2011. Available on Internet: skolverket.se

Miles, T.R. (1999). *Dyslexia a hundred years on.* Philadelphia: Open University Press.

Nijakowska, J. (2010). Dyslexia in the foreign language classroom: Second Language Acquisition article: dyslexia and foreign language learning. *Multilingual Matters*. Available online: http://books.google.com/booksid=XP4AisbhYeoC&pg=PR10&dq=Dyslexia+in+the+foreign+language+classroom:+Second+Language+Acquisition+article:+dyslexia+and+foreign+language+learning&hl=en&ei=ormlTv7pMqj54QS8v7nQBA&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=1&ved=0CC0Q6AEwAA#v=onepage&q&f=falsebooks.google.com (15.10.2011).

Ott, Philomena. (1997). *How to Detect and Manage Dyslexia – A Reference and Resource Manual.* Portsmouth: Oxford Blantyre.

Schneider, E. (2009). Dyslexia and foreign language learning. *The Routledge Companion to Dyslexia.* NY: Routledge.

Snowling, M.J. (2006). Language skills and learning to read: the dyslexia spectrum. *The Practitioner`s Handbook: Dyslexia Speech and Language 2nd Edition.* West Sussex: Whurr Publishers.

Snowling, M.J. (2004). The Science of Dyslexia: A Review of Contemporary Approaches. *The Study of Dyslexia*. NY: Kluwer Academics.

Sparks, R. and Miller, S. (2000). Teaching a Foreign Language Using Multisensory Structured Language Techniques to At-Risk Learners: A Review. *Dyslexia: An International Journal of Research and Practice*. Mount St. Joseph: College of Mount St. Joseph.