

A Survey of the Opinions of Primary English Language Teachers Concerning the Impact of Dyslexia in English Language Teaching

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Abstract: The present work collects the views of the English language teachers who work in primary education in four Regional Units of Greece, those of Kavala, Florina, Kastoria and Grevena, concerning the impact they believe dyslexia can have on the teaching of English as a Second/Foreign Language (ESOL). Based on the literature, a questionnaire was prepared and distributed to 103 primary teachers of English. The results show a lack of the teachers' knowledge regarding the nature of dyslexia, its diagnosis and the type of educational interventions that would allow students to equally integrate into the foreign language classroom. Finally, the teachers' needs for relevant, systematic and specialized training, which would comprise both theoretical knowledge and practical guidelines to teaching practice is expressed. Based on the survey results, a training program is proposed to be implemented, in order to cater for the teachers' expressed needs.

Key words: dyslexia, inclusive education, teacher training

1. Introduction

Dyslexia is a language-related learning disability and can be expressed in a set of symptoms, resulting in individuals having difficulty with specific language skills, especially reading. Students with dyslexia often have difficulty with other language skills, such as spelling, writing and pronunciation. Dyslexia affects people for life but its effects can change at different stages of a person's life. It is considered a learning disability because it can make it very difficult for a student to succeed academically in a typical learning environment. In its most severe forms there may be a need for special treatment, special accommodations or additional support (International Dyslexia Association, 2015).

Several definitions have been given for dyslexia over the years describing it, mainly, as a pathological condition (Koltsidas, 2013). The nature of modern definitions depends on the purpose for which they are used. Educational definitions (British Dyslexia Association, 2007) use different terminology and perceive dyslexia differently from medical ones (International Classification of Disorders, 2010). A common feature of these definitions is that they refer to the following four levels: biological level (brain and neurological function), cognitive level (mental processing), behavioral level (problems in writing and spelling) and environmental level

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(socio-economic and related factors in teaching).

However, nowadays, there has been a shift in the way dyslexia is perceived, from a pathological condition to that of “...a specific learning disability that is neurobiological in origin” (Lyon et al., 2003) which requires from educators to take specific measures in order to cater for the difficulties dyslexic students face. In the ESOL classroom, these difficulties can be phonological (recognition/distinction of speech sounds and symbol sounds), grammatical and syntactic (understanding and application of grammatical and syntactic concepts in the language system) and semantic (understanding meaning). Currently, the educational model proposed is the inclusion model which is defined as “providing to all students, including those with severe disabilities, equitable opportunities to receive effective educational services, with supplementary aids and support services as needed, in age-appropriate general education classes in their neighborhood schools, toward the outcome of preparing all students for productive lives as full members of the society” (Francisco, Hartman & Wang, 2020).

In the above context, most dyslexic students can be successfully included in the education system, provided that certain provisions are taken. However, inclusive education cannot remove all barriers for all students. This is because dyslexia has varying degrees of severity which are reflected in a continuum which ranges from mild to severe. Some dyslexic students with severe difficulties might need individual help, either in small groups or individually, to overcome their learning problems (Nijakowska et al., 2013).

In any case, there should be provision for special arrangements which would make both teaching and assessment for dyslexic students fairer. These should help students demonstrate their abilities, develop their potential and achieve their goals. The arrangements should be such that do not alter the expectations of dyslexic students or provide them with an unfair advantage but should enable them to demonstrate their knowledge and complete the same tasks as other students, despite the difficulties they encounter. They may relate to the areas of student performance at school (e.g., presentation and response, schedule, framework, assignments), curriculum (course organization, types of assignments), materials, instructions, feedback, classroom management (e.g., grouping, routines, rhythm), assessment and special conditions during exams (Dyslexia Assist, online). The type of arrangements available to dyslexic students varies by country, school, and/or teachers involved and may be regulated by national policy, school policy or depend entirely on available teachers.

In Greece, the specific arrangements needed are suggested by the Centres of Counseling and Support (abbreviated in Greek as KESY) after the diagnosis of dyslexia. The diagnosis is carried out by a five-member interdisciplinary team using the method of differential diagnosis (this method looks at the possible disorders that could be causing the symptoms. It often involves several tests which can rule out conditions and/or determine if the examinee requires more testing, Medline Plus, online). The procedure followed is described below:

At school: When a student appears to have some kind of learning difficulties, the School Advisor (a person who is responsible for providing guidance and counselling to teachers) is invited to prepare a special program of intervention. If the difficulties persist, the Special Education School Advisor is called. If there are signs of a serious disorder, then, provided that a consent is given by the parents, a referral is made to KESY for a more detailed evaluation.

At KESY: Student evaluation takes place at KESY upon parents' application. The school is asked to contribute by providing relevant information, mainly in the form of the student's sample writings. After the evaluation is finished, a report is written and a Special Personalized Program is prepared, which are both sent to the school (Gandidou, 2015). However, in the Greek context, the formal studies ESL teachers attend do not provide them with the appropriate knowledge about dyslexia and how it affects the effort of dyslexic students to

learn English (Lemperou et al., 2011). It is important, however, for such knowledge to be gained as it will allow them to adopt the appropriate teaching approaches which will allow their dyslexic students to become fully integrated in the foreign language classroom (Mitra, 2008).

2. The Research

2.1 Aims and Objectives

In view of the above, a survey was conducted in order to find out what are the views of English Primary teachers concerning the impact of dyslexia in the teaching of English.

2.2 The Research Questions

The questionnaire aimed to find answers to the following questions:

- 1) can teachers delineate the concept of dyslexia?
- 2) what training, if any, have they received on the specific subject?
- 3) to what extent do they know how to integrate students with dyslexia into the foreign language classroom?
- 4) to what extent are they aware of the legal framework for the diagnosis and treatment of dyslexia?
- 5) how do they think they will become more effective in teaching students with dyslexia?
- 6) Taking the results into consideration, a training program is planned to be implemented for that purpose, so that teachers become better equipped both theoretically and practically, in order to cope for their students' needs.

2.3 Participants and Method

The research was carried out in November 2015 in the Regional Units of Kavala, Florina, Kastoria and Grevena. As a tool of investigation, an anonymous questionnaire was created in Greek¹, which includes 16 closed-ended and one open-ended question, using google forms. A total of 103 teachers serving in the above areas were invited to participate. Of these, 54 teachers responded, a percentage of just over 50%. According to Kumar (1996, p. 114), the mailed questionnaires have a low response rate, ranging from 20–50%, but have the advantage of offering a higher degree of anonymity, which was considered particularly important in this case, as the respondents are associated with a hierarchical relationship to the researchers. As the answers to the first, preliminary questions show (questions 1-8), of the 54 participants in the survey, 49 were women and 5 were men. Of these, 9.2% were between 25-35 years old, 51.9% between 35–45 years old and 38.9% were over 45 years old. In terms of their years of service, 24% had 6–10 years of service, 28% 11–15 years, 13% 16–20 years, 26% 21–25 years and 5% over 25 years. Regarding their employment status, the vast majority (88%) were permanent teachers, placed in Primary Education, while the remaining 10% were appointed to Secondary Education but for the school year under consideration they were asked to work in primary schools. Finally, in terms of formal education, 28% of the survey participants stated that they hold a master's degree.

2.4 Data Analysis

Concerning the core questions of the questionnaire (questions 2–17), the data yielded from closed questions (questions 9-16) were analyzed quantitatively while the data obtained from the analysis of the last “open type”

¹ <http://bit.ly/3kSetNz>.

question (question 17) were analyzed qualitatively.

2.5 Results

The vast majority of respondents (72%) stated that they did not receive any training whatsoever to recognize cases of dyslexia in the classroom (Figure 1).

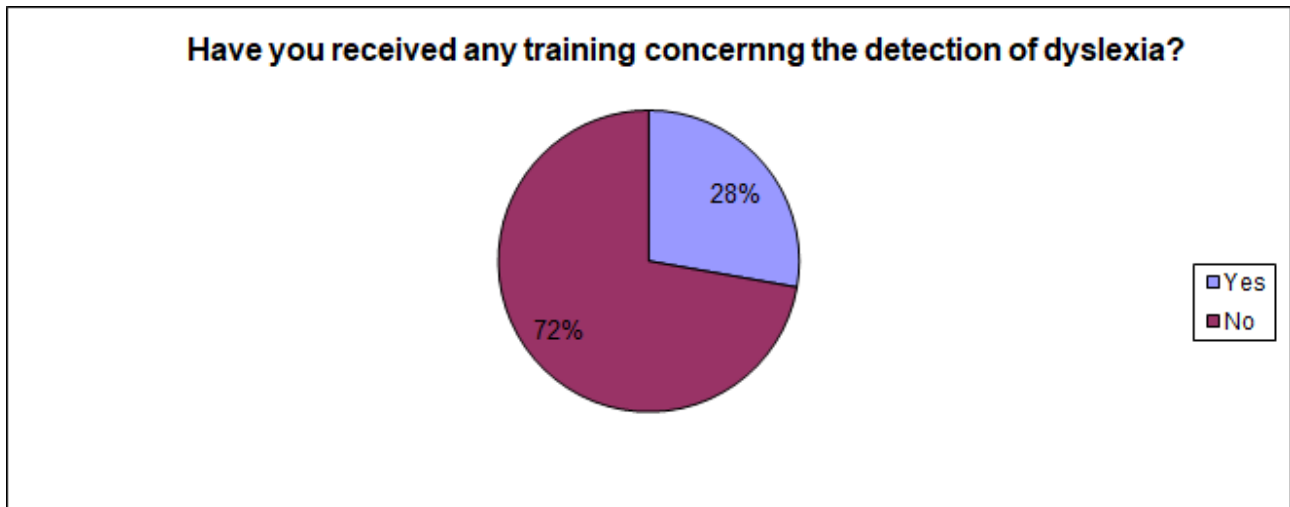


Figure 1 Training in Recognizing Cases of Dyslexia

Of the few who answered affirmatively, 86% stated that the training they received came either from workshops or short-term seminars, while the rest reported postgraduate courses (one answer) and long-term programs (one answer). When asked whether they had been trained in dealing with cases of dyslexia, 78% of participants said they had not received any such training. Those who answered affirmatively referred, in their entirety, again to workshops and short-term seminars. Regarding the frequency of students with dyslexia in the classroom, a large percentage (44%) reported that they meet dyslexic students “in every class” while an additional 40% reported that this happens “often” while “never” reported only 4% (Figure 2).

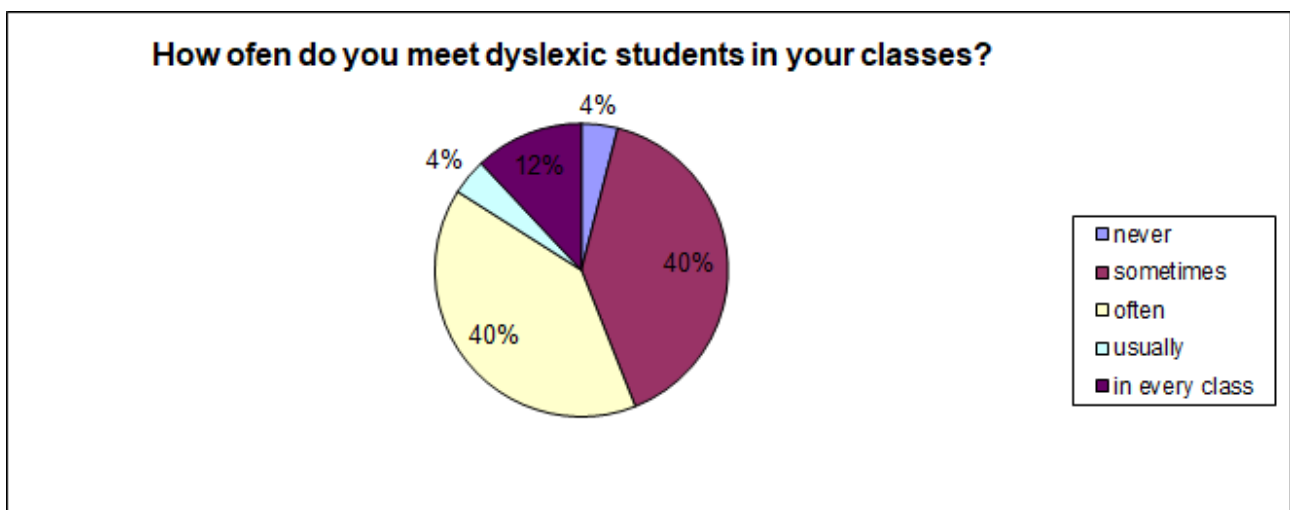


Figure 2 Frequency of Students With Dyslexia in the Classroom

Regarding the adequacy of their knowledge about the nature of dyslexia, a large percentage (61%) of teachers stated their inadequacy, with only 11% stating that their knowledge was “relatively adequate”. It is important to note that there is no one who stated that he/she had “absolutely adequate” knowledge (Figure 3).

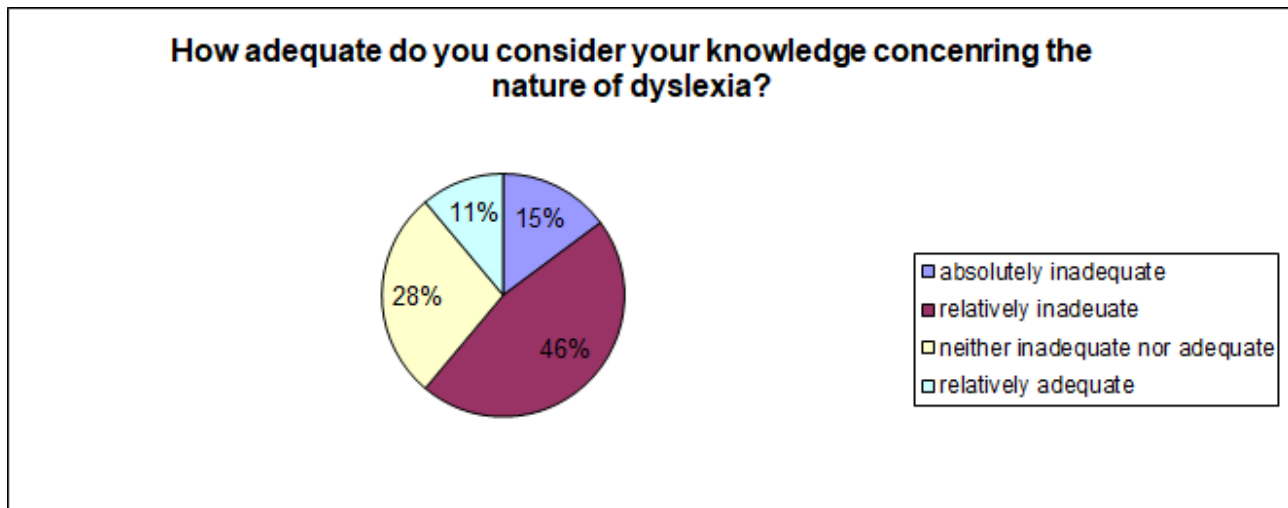


Figure 3 Teachers' Knowledge of the Nature of Dyslexia

The fact that teachers felt they were not properly informed about dyslexia is the reason why most of them gave a particular answer to the next question. When they were asked whether they could recognize signs of dyslexia with confidence, only 24% gave a positive answer, while two out of three answered that they were not sure (Figure 4).

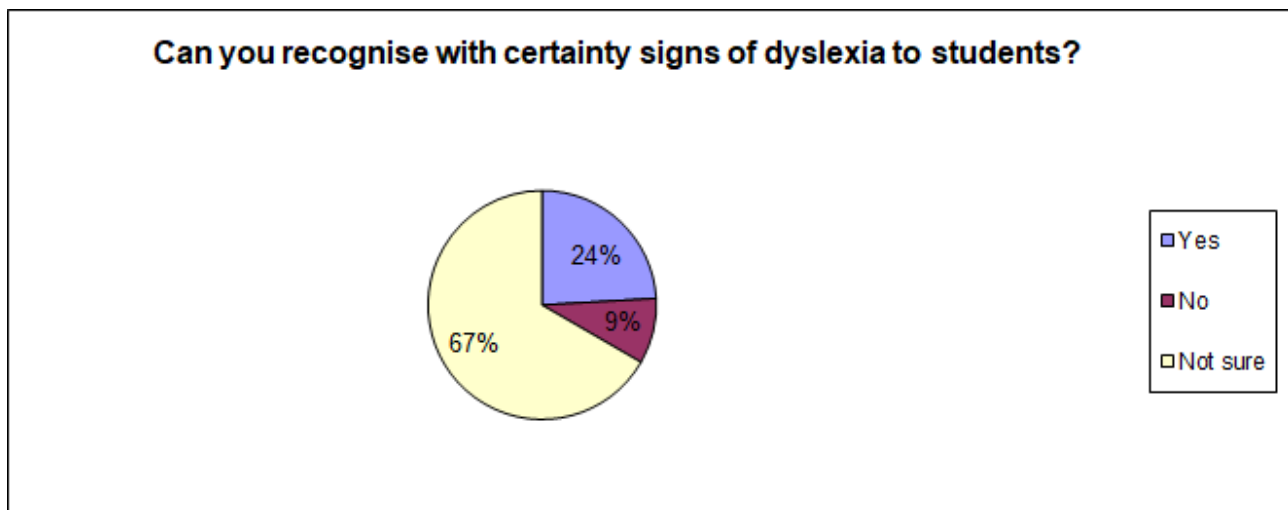


Figure 4 The Ability of Teachers to Recognize Signs of Dyslexia

Concerning knowledge of the legal framework which rules the teaching and assessment of dyslexic students, only 8% of the teachers said they know the legal framework “excellently” or “very well”, while 35% stated they were absolutely uninformed (Figure 5).

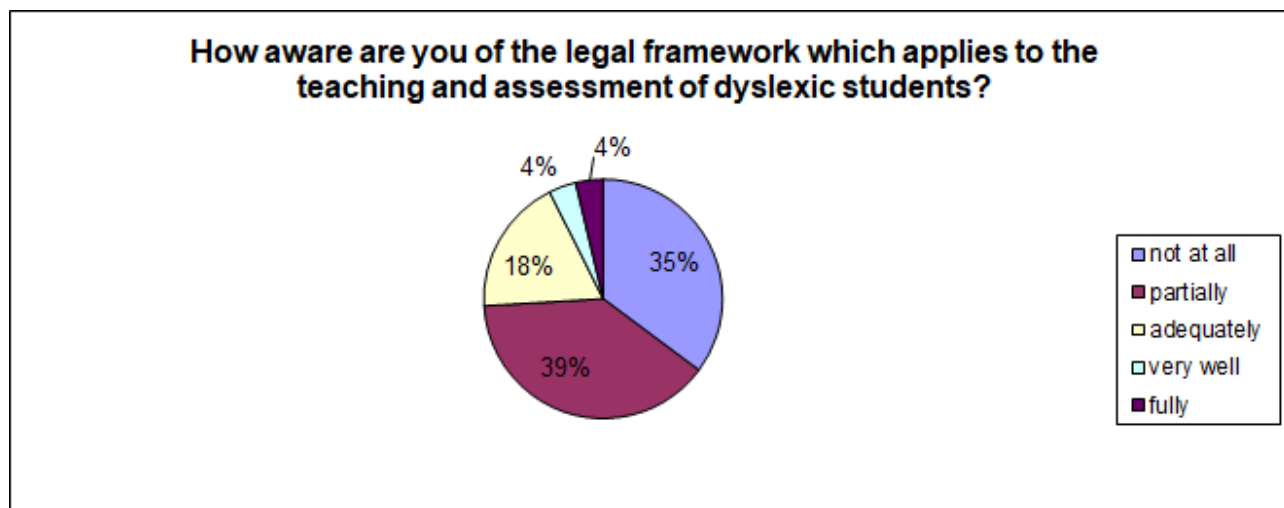


Figure 5 Teachers' Knowledge of the Legal Framework

Teachers also seemed to be unfamiliar with the difficulties faced by students with dyslexia in the foreign language classroom. As shown in Figure 6, only 35% gave a positive answer, while over 50% answered that they have a partial knowledge.

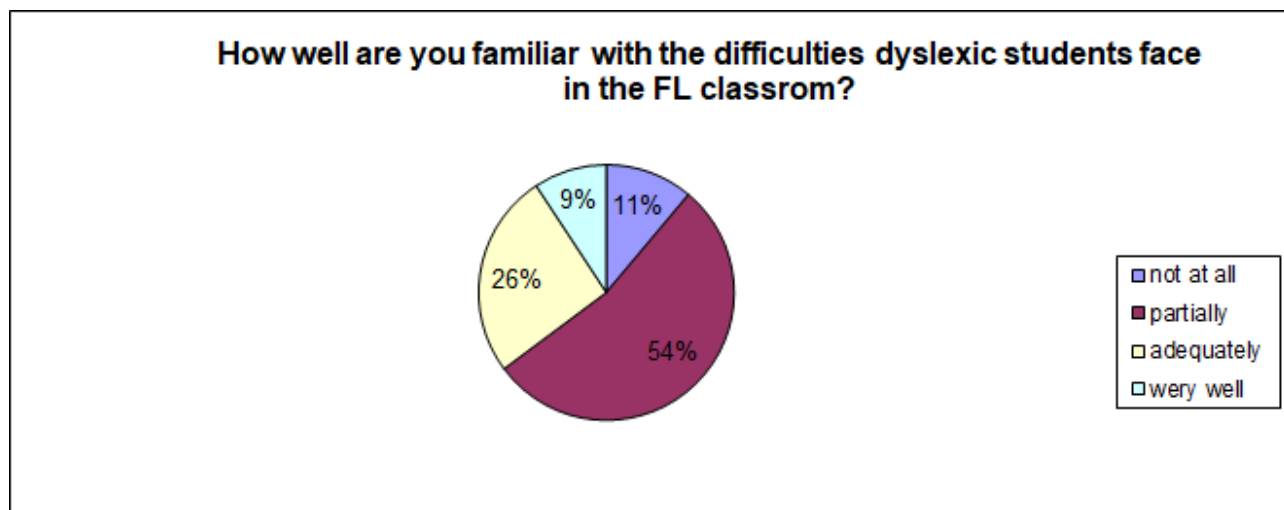


Figure 6 Knowledge of the Difficulties Faced by Students With Dyslexia in the Foreign Language Classroom

The percentage of teachers who stated that they know the teaching methods and techniques required so that they can meet the needs of dyslexic students seems to be very small. Only 17% say they know them “adequately”, while no one seems to know them “very well” (Figure 7).

The last, closed, question asked teachers to give their opinion on whether students with severe dyslexia should have the choice to be exempted from the foreign language lesson. Once again, their answers show lack of knowledge on this topic as only one out of three (33%) answered “no”, as shown in Figure 8, which follows.

How aware are you of the teaching methods which would allow you to cope with the specific learning needs of dyslexic students?



Figure 7 Knowledge of Teaching Techniques and Methods

Do you believe that students with severe dyslexia should be able to be exempted from ESOL lessons?



Figure 8 Teachers' View of the Participation of Students With Severe Dyslexia to ESL Lessons

Finally, as mentioned above, the questionnaire included an open-ended question, in which teachers were asked to report freely what, in their opinion, would help them become more effective in teaching students with dyslexia. The results of a content analysis revealed that, as a whole, teachers express their willingness to be trained on how to recognize and deal with cases of dyslexia. A classification of their answers into categories, revealed their desire to participate “systematically” in “experiential”, as they report, seminars, with “realistic examples...” which would be conducted by “experts”. Also, to a lesser extent, they raised the issue of the adaptation of the teaching materials and the reduction of the number of students in the classroom.

3. Discussion and Suggestions

The research results show that, for the most part, teachers lack knowledge both of the nature of dyslexia and how students should be accommodated in the classroom, as well as of the legal framework which caters for the above students. However, according to The National Center for Improving Literacy (online) such knowledge is of seminal importance as “it’s much better to intervene earlier than to wait until the child actually fails because

remediation is demonstrably less effective”. Nijakowska et al. (2013) stress the fact that the inability to meet the requirements of the school can lead a child to low self-esteem. Therefore, early detection can function as an early intervention to prevent more serious complications in the subsequent smooth integration of children into society (Koliadis, Koumbias & Fustana, 2000).

It is also very important that the majority of teachers consider their knowledge of the use of teaching methods and techniques that will allow them to successfully include students with dyslexia in the learning process in the foreign language classroom, inadequate. Nijakowska et al. (2013) make reference to a number of ways which they consider they can help students with dyslexia in a foreign language classroom:

- The use of technology.
- The clarification or simplification of written instructions.
- The assignment of a small volume of work.
- The exclusion of external stimuli.
- The highlighting of important information in the written word.
- The extra practice.
- The provision of dictionaries or glossaries.
- The development of reading guidelines.
- Clear teaching.
- The provision of graphic organizers (e.g. blueprints) to students.
- The simultaneous combination of verbal and visual information.
- Maintaining a daily routine.
- The provision of notes.
- The use of step-by-step instructions.
- Writing the key points on the board.
- The use of mnemonic strategies (e.g., acronyms).
- Frequent repetition.
- Change in response mode.
- Positioning students close to the teacher.
- Giving students access to sample assignments.
- A flexible schedule
- The replacement or adaptation of the tasks assigned

Taking the above suggestions into consideration, in combination with the needs of the teachers, as they were expressed in the questionnaire, a training program will be organized, which will offer a realistic approach to dyslexia. This will provide both theoretical knowledge and practical guidelines with reference to teaching practice in such a way as to help teachers respond effectively to the needs of their dyslexic students (Clark & Uhry, 2004; Lemperou et al., 2011; Levine, 1994) so that they can overcome their weaknesses and take advantage of their strengths (Ranaldi, 2003).

4. Implications for Further Study

After the training program is completed, it would be quite interesting for the whole project to be evaluated for its effectiveness. To achieve this, further research is planned to be carried out, as follows. The same

questionnaire will be given to the teachers who will participate in the training program, after its completion. This will give researchers the chance to compare the answers between the two questionnaires, in order to find out whether the teachers' knowledge concerning the issues raised has been improved. In addition, a number of classroom observations of a sample of teachers who will participate in the training seminar will be juxtaposed with another sample of teachers who will not. This will give researchers a clearer view of whether the teaching practice has been really affected by the training seminar.

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