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Special child learning difficulty or specific teacher difficulty?

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Abstract

During the pilot implementation of English as a foreign language to 6 years olds in Greek primary schools, a survey of teachers' attitudes reveals that the learners' difficulties were often ascribed to specific learning problems especially among non-native speakers of Greek. If this is correct then the response is alarming but reveals some dangerous misconceptions if the teachers are wrong. Foreign language teachers are rarely trained in teaching children of this age. The present study aims to investigate the accuracy of these reports. 75 questionnaires were administered and then 21 interviews with the teachers were conducted and the findings reveal the misconceptions the teachers were under. The results demonstrate the necessity for informing, updating and training teachers involved with foreign languages at this age. This is an innovative research study appearing for the first time in Greece on a subject that is in a real need of further research.

Keywords.

Context of the study

In a European context where early foreign language teaching has acquired a great significance and the introduction of EFL programmes for young learners in schools has become more and more frequent, Greece has also followed this tendency with the introduction of English as a compulsory subject in some schools at the age of 7 since 2010. The Greek EYL project, also known with the acronym PEAP (<http://rcel.enl.uoa.gr/peap/en>), has been designed and carried out by the University of Athens at the Research Centre for Language Teaching, Testing and Assessment (RCeL). Experts in the field of Early Language Learning from the University of Athens and the University of Thessaloniki have collaborated for the design and implementation of the programme.

The general aim of the PEAP programme is to develop young learners' social literacies through English and this is the foundation upon which the PEAP curriculum, its syllabuses and instructional materials have been based. The programme also aims at familiarizing young learners with English as well as helping them develop a positive attitude towards the language and foreign language learning in general. PEAP students are firstly introduced to spoken language through a data bank of creative activities at the teacher's disposal, which can be adjusted to student needs.

The present study deals with the issue of learning difficulties and their manifestation in very young learners as they learn English as a foreign language in Greek public schools. The aims of the study are:

- (a) to shed light on the teachers' perceptions and possible misconceptions regarding learning difficulties at a very young age and
- (b) to investigate whether (and which) young learners' characteristics tend to be misinterpreted as signs of a learning difficulty in early language teaching.

What motivated research in this particular area was an interesting finding of a questionnaire survey seeking to profile the teachers who taught English within the context of the programme in the first year of its implementation. One of the striking findings of this study was that half of the respondents (49%) claimed that several students in the PEAP classes seem to have some kind of learning difficulty. Therefore, we decided to further investigate the area of learning difficulties in young learners beginning with teachers' perceptions on the issue.

The idiosyncratic characteristics of young learners were an additional reason for proceeding to further research as they can cause confusion to teachers. Very young learners usually tend to learn quickly but forget easily, have a short attention span and absorb information only when motivated. They are kinaesthetic, they

learn by making and doing and they may go through a silent period at first. This unique profile can become extremely complicated, especially when combined with learning difficulties.

For the purposes of the study and in order to explore the above questions, a two-phase research was designed which is presented in detail below.

Exploring the existing literature in the Greek context

Before proceeding to the description of the methodology employed in the present study, it is worth exploring briefly the already existing studies in the field of learning difficulties in Greece.

The majority of studies concerning the issue of learning difficulties carried out in the Greek context deal with the learners' first language acquisition while few studies focus particularly on dyslexia in the EFL classroom (Lemperou, Chostelidou & Griva, 2011; Andreou & Baseki, 2012; Goudi, 2010). In the case of L1 acquisition, several research studies are concerned with the learner's family environment (Panteliadu, 2007), with the impact of learning difficulties on the student's overall school performance (Panteliadu & Patsiodimou, 2007; Sakkas, 1999) or with the learner's reading and writing skills (Protopapas & Skaloubakas, 2008). In some cases, such factors as student age are taken into account, thus separating students in different age groups subject to analysis (young learners, teenagers and adults with learning difficulties) (Papatheofilou, Chatzivasili, Poga, Kallinaki & Aliferi, 1993; Nousia, 1990).

However, learning a foreign language is a great challenge for learners with learning difficulties, especially if one considers the difficulty of those learners to cope with tasks while learning a foreign language (Crombie, 1995). What has hitherto been investigated in the Greek context concerning this issue, focuses mainly on student performance (particularly of dyslexic students) and on EFL teachers' perceptions and practices with regard to dealing with dyslexia in secondary education. For instance, Rontou (2012) focuses on the differentiation of teaching methods, and on the extra time needed in class for learners with dyslexia in secondary school. EFL teachers' perceptions as regards the issue of dyslexia in Greek state secondary schools have also been explored (Gouzkouri, 2012). Various other studies, which are beyond the scope of the present study and therefore will not be mentioned in detail, deal with the difficulties Greek students face in spelling English due to the opacity of the English language as opposed to the transparency of the Greek language (Spencer, 2000).

Although numerous studies conducted investigate students' performance or the EFL secondary school teachers' perceptions towards learning difficulties, other issues, such as the teacher's ability to recognize and distinguish difficulties in a primary school setting, have yet to be adequately examined. Lemperou (2009) has attempted to identify EFL primary school teachers' experience and views on the challenges of dyslexic children in the mainstream classroom. An investigation of the inclusion techniques employed by state primary school EFL teachers in Greece in order to promote the successful incorporation of students with dyslexia in the general classroom has also been made (Katrini, 2005).

However, and bearing in mind that the PEAP programme constitutes a special EFL context, where school literacy has not yet been introduced and children are exposed to a foreign language at a very young age, it seems as though the issue of learning difficulties in the particular context requires further research. Therefore, the present study is an attempt to investigate the EFL teachers' perceptions of learning difficulties in the PEAP classes and their experience with these learners in general.

It has to be clarified at this point that the term "learning difficulties" in this study is conceptualized as a broader term than the term "dyslexia" as the latter is used in most studies so far. The concept of the "learning difficulty" is hereafter used to refer to students who cannot cope efficiently with basic reading skills, written expression and reasoning in combination with memory and/or attention problems as well as several perceptual disorders, such as the inability to recognize, discriminate and interpret stimuli (Mercer, 1997). This conceptualization of learning difficulties has guided the development of the research tools of this study, used in two research phases, which are presented and explained below.

Methodology and data collection

First research phase: a questionnaire survey

In the first research phase, a questionnaire survey was conducted with a view to tracing PEAP teachers' perceptions concerning learning difficulties in young learners, as well as gathering information on possible misconceptions on this area, which would be further investigated in the second research phase (i.e. the teachers' interviews). The tool employed was an online questionnaire designed by the working team for the elicitation of

data on the PEAP teachers' profile, their views on what a learning difficulty is and its impact on foreign language learning at a very young age.

More specifically, the tool was divided into three sections; in the first section the respondents were asked to provide us with their demographic characteristics, including their years of teaching experience in the public sector in general and the PEAP programme in particular. The participants were also asked to evaluate their knowledge in the field of learning difficulties, as well as to specify on how they have gained it (e.g. their studies, seminars, etc.). The second part of the questionnaire aimed at investigating the teachers' perceptions on learning difficulties and thus, the participants were asked, among others, to describe those student behaviours which they consider a sign of a learning difficulty, to outline the profile of students with learning difficulties and provide their own definition of learning difficulties. In the third and final part of the questionnaire, the respondents commented on the teacher's role when realizing that a student might be facing a learning difficulty. Most items of the present tool were open-ended questions as the working team was aiming at a qualitative analysis of the teachers' views.

The participants were contacted by the School Advisors of English, who kindly accepted to administer the tool to the PEAP teachers in the area of their responsibility (snowball sampling). Although the questionnaire survey took place in the beginning of the school year when several English teachers have not yet been appointed to their schools, 75 PEAP teachers in state schools all over Greece responded to this call and completed the questionnaire.

Second research phase: Interviews

Moving on to the second phase of the research, a structured interview scheme was designed and divided into two parts. The first part contained a number of statements of student behavior classified under four key categories (Reception of oral speech, Production of oral speech, Reading and writing, Reasoning and inclusion in the school environment). Several items have been adopted by Panteliadu & Sideridis' standardized test of tracing learning difficulties (Panteliadu & Sideridis, 2008). The participants were then asked to evaluate these statements as signs of learning difficulty, taking into account their experience in class. They could answer positively, negatively or state that they do not know whether a certain behaviour signifies the existence of a learning difficulty or not. Then, they were asked to contemplate on the frequency of encountering each of the stated behaviours in their classes. As the distinction between signs of a learning difficulty and typical young learner characteristics can be difficult to make, the research team deliberately included some statements in the interview scheme, which were descriptive of typical young learner characteristics and the participants' answers to these specific questions were separately evaluated.

The second part of the interview contained general questions about the teachers' experience with children with learning difficulties. The questions in this part revolved around the following three axes of teacher experience: a) their perceptions of whether bilingual children exhibit signs of learning difficulty in the PEAP classes, b) how the reactions of children with learning difficulties change as their school experience increases and c) the impact of the existence of children with learning difficulty in class on the rest of the children as well as on the teacher's role. Finally, teachers were encouraged to make general comments and express possible problems on the issue of dealing with very young learners with learning difficulties in the English language classroom.

In this research phase, the participants were 21 respondents in the questionnaire of the first phase, who have willingly agreed to participate in 20-minute telephone interviews, thus providing further detail on the issues touched upon in the questionnaire.

Results

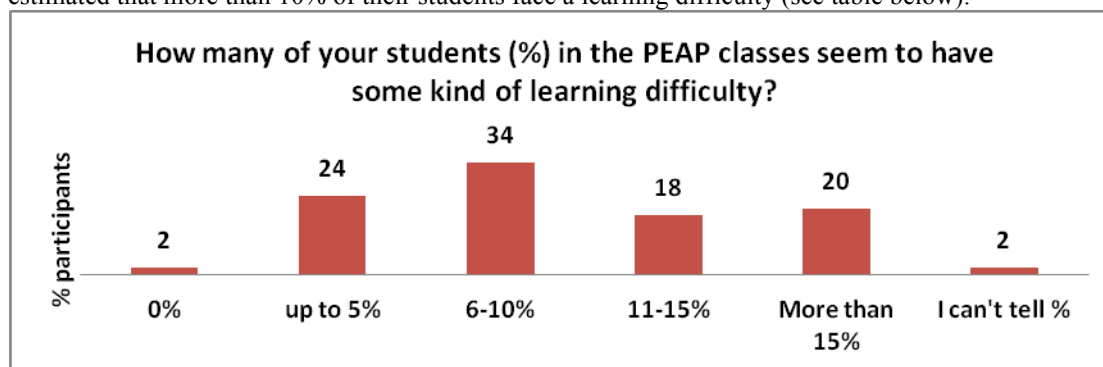
Major questionnaire findings

With regard to the respondents' profile it should be noted that all of them hold a BA in English Language and Literature. A significant number of the participant teachers hold an MA in TEFL (34%), a few of them (14%) hold a BA in a different field and only a small minority (6%) holds a PhD in TEFL. The vast majority of the PEAP teachers who responded to the questionnaire were women (96%). As regards their age, half of the participants (50%) belonged to the 36-45 age group, 18% aged up to 35 years, and 32% were older than 46 years old. Moreover, half of those teachers have more than 16 years of service in the public sector, 32% of them have 6-10 years, 14% have 11-15 years and only 4% have 1-5 years of service. It is also of great significance that 44% of the respondents have been teaching English in grades A and B since the PEAP launch, 16% have been

teaching in the programme for two school years, 24% for just one school year, while 16% of them have just been introduced to the programme. In addition, almost all the participants of the survey (98%) are currently teaching English within the context of PEAP.

The respondents were also asked to comment on the extent to which they consider themselves informed about learning difficulties. Only a small minority (6%) of the respondents declare that they consider themselves very informed, 36% of them consider themselves more or less informed, the majority (58%) claim they are a little informed on learning difficulties, while none of the participants stated that they are not informed whatsoever. What is really interesting though, is their source of information about learning difficulties. The vast majority of the teachers (76%) said that they have been informed in training seminars, 60% that their source is the Internet, 50% that they study bibliography on the field on their own, 42% that they get informed at academic conferences and seminars, 34% stated that their knowledge derives from their BA degree and only 4% that it derives from their MA degree. It becomes obvious that state school English teachers rely on their own initiatives to get informed about learning difficulties, as it is an issue they have to deal with on a daily basis in their classes.

Furthermore, almost all participants (98%) confirmed that they have encountered learners with learning difficulties in their PEAP classes. It is also worth mentioning that a great number of the respondents have estimated that more than 10% of their students face a learning difficulty (see table below).



Graph 1: Teachers' perceptions on the percentage of learners with learning difficulties in their classrooms

When the participants were asked to describe the learner behaviours that they consider a sign of learning difficulty, they have mostly referred to:

- hyperactivity
- poor concentration
- hostility
- inability to cooperate and adjust in the school environment

Many teachers also point out that the students' inability to remember words or sounds, a negative attitude towards writing, difficulties in articulating oral speech, shyness, lack of self-confidence, emotional instability, omission or reversals of letters/syllables, difficulty in holding the pencil or scissors and the inability to understand and follow the teacher's instructions may also indicate a learning difficulty.

All the above problematic behaviours according to the respondents tend to be signs of several learning difficulties such as Dyslexia, Dysgraphia, the Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), the Asperger Syndrome or Autism. Most of the teachers asked also claim that students having a learning difficulty in acquiring their mother tongue, do so in English language acquisition as well.

With regard to this special student group profile, the participants highlight that they often tend to have a generally poor performance at school (i.e. not solely in the language classes). They also have a tendency to adopt problematic behaviour which could be a result of domestic violence, a poor academic and social background of their family or their personal low self-esteem. The respondents stress that these tendencies are often witnessed in immigrant children and their families and thus, teachers should not always conclude that they indicate a learning difficulty. Moreover, they declare that learners with learning difficulties usually find it demanding to cooperate with other students and adjust to the school environment.

In the definitions of learning difficulties, the participants articulated themselves, they referred to learning difficulties as a factor that makes the acquisition of new knowledge difficult for some students. They also stressed that students with learning difficulties are intelligent in their own unique way and that they need a different teaching approach. Below are some of the most interesting definitions provided by the respondents:

(a) Having a learning difficulty usually means that the student finds no joy in learning something new, instead the learning process becomes an exhausting procedure often accompanied by the feeling of disappointment.

(b) Trying to avoid writing, illegible handwriting, difficulty in concentrating.

(c) A student who has a learning difficulty needs more time than other students when working on an activity, while s/he needs to discover his/her own way to memorize and recall information.

(d) Students with learning difficulties need reward and love, not rejection.

(e) Students with learning difficulties are intelligent students who are imaginative and artistic; they find it difficult to adjust to the rules and pace of others mostly because they are too slow for them. They seek for action, creative expression, release of the tension. They often fail to follow and understand linear stream of thought, reading or writing because their own boundaries are broader.

As regards the teacher's role when s/he has an indication that a student has a learning difficulty, the participants stressed that it is their duty to:

cooperate with the class teacher and the school principal

inform, advise and support the students' parents

seek for advice from experts in the field

differentiate his/her instruction adjusting it to the student's needs

support, protect and encourage the student highlighting his/her strengths

keep himself/herself informed so that they are able to detect and face potential problems.

Finally, the majority of the state school teachers of this survey claimed that their experience in the programme did not change their perception of learning difficulties. Those who said that they gained some knowledge on the field, suggest that it derives from their newly-developed insight into teaching young learners.

Major interview findings

Using their background knowledge and their experience in the PEAP classes, 21 teachers participated in the interview and proceeded to an evaluation of a series of statements of learner behaviour. Interestingly, in this first part of the interview, most statements of learner behavior were considered as possible signs of a learning difficulty by the interviewees. However, after responding positively to the evaluation of some statements, many of the participants tended to comment that certain behaviours could also be attributed to the learners' young age. Upon reflection, they identified several additional causes, rather than the mere existence of a learning difficulty, such as the lack of school experience and the lack of practice in English or in general world knowledge on the part of the young learners. Generally, only 10-30% of the respondents tended to state that they did not know whether a statement was a sign of a learning difficulty or not.

Out of the four categories of learner behavior included in the interview and already described above, the statements most frequently evaluated by the participants as signs of learning difficulty were under the headings "Reading and writing" as well as "Reasoning and inclusion in the school environment". This is especially interesting as at the age we are discussing, children **do not** possess **literacy skills**. Specifically, "Reordering, replacing, omitting or adding letters when writing" was considered a sign of difficulty by 85,7% of the respondents, "Negative attitude towards writing" was pointed out as a difficulty by 81% of the respondents, while other behaviours, such as "Easily giving up the effort to understand" was considered a difficulty by 76,2% of the respondents. Similar answers were given for the following statements: "Difficulty in understanding written English (at word level) but relative ease when they hear the oral representation" (61,9% of the respondents), "Being easily distracted when they perform an activity" (66,7%), "Difficulty in discerning phonemes" (57,1%) and "Inability to identify the gist" (57,1%).

Moreover, most of the participants classified many of the most typical young learner characteristics of the aforementioned two categories as signs of a learning difficulty. Specifically, the vast majority of the respondents (90,5%) categorized the learners' "Inability to concentrate for a long time" as a learning difficulty. Behaviours such as the "General difficulty in the initial steps of reading and writing skills development" and the "Signs of hyperactivity" were also characterized as learning difficulties by a percentage of 71,4% of the respondents respectively. More than half of the participants (61,9%) claimed that the "Difficulty to discipline and follow class rules" is a sign of a learning difficulty and almost half of them (47,6%) hold the same belief for the children's "Inability to consolidate and reproduce new knowledge effortlessly".

Apparently, the undoubted difficulty in differentiating between typical young learner behaviour and a possible learning difficulty accounts for the high percentage of respondents stating that these behaviours are signs of a learning difficulty. It should be noted at this point, however, that this is not always a misinterpretation on the part of the teacher as in many cases some of these behaviours might as well have been signs of learning difficulty.

On the other hand, some other statements were deemed as more of a natural and expected behavior by children at this age and at this level of school experience. These statements of learner behavior, which were classified as rather unlikely to be a learning difficulty, are presented below: a) "Difficulty in the comprehension of a quickly uttered phrase/relative ease upon slower repetition of the utterance" (71,4% of the respondents), b) "Misinterpretation of directions given in English" (61,9% of the respondents), c) "Recalling another word of the same semantic category in English (e.g. notebook instead of book)" (52,4% of the respondents), d) "Difficulty in the clear articulation of oral speech in English" (52,4% of the respondents), e) "Inability to recall and reproduce new knowledge easily" (42,9% of the respondents).

Therefore, the respondents appear to be more lenient when young learners show signs of confusion, misinterpretation or difficulty in English than in Greek. For instance, as regards the difficulty in the articulation of oral speech in Greek, almost half of the respondents (47,6%) consider it a sign of learning difficulty, as opposed to a much lower percentage (19%) who state the opposite. On the other hand, when it comes to the difficulty in the articulation of oral speech in English only some of the respondents (19%) answered positively while for half of them (52,4%) this is not a learning difficulty. It seems as though young learners' limited experience with English plays a determining role in their teachers' judgement.

Moving on to the second part of the interview, almost half of the respondents (47,6%) have had the experience of teaching a PEAP class for two consecutive years. In this case, all of them record increased school experience on the part of student as a key factor in alleviating possible learning difficulties and helping learners mature and improve their behaviour.

Regarding the issue of the combination of *bilingualism* and *learning difficulties*, some of the participants (38,1%) claimed they had witnessed learning difficulties in bilingual children. Few respondents (28,6%) stated that they had **not** spotted learning difficulties in bilinguals and a percentage of 33,3% of the respondents were not certain and refrained from providing a specific answer. In an effort to explore their views on this issue, most respondents (61,9%) stated that they do **not** consider bilingual learners as a group of learners more prone to learning difficulty as opposed to a percentage of 23,8% who report the opposite. Another interesting finding is that many teachers have described bilingual students as extreme cases (i.e. either as excellent students or as students of poor performance).

When it comes to the teacher's role in class, the majority of the respondents (71,4%) argued that learners with learning difficulties hinder their work in the PEAP classes. They further explain that by referring to the need for differentiated instruction and the extra planning involved in dealing with mixed ability classes (e.g. simplification of educational material, etc).

A categorization of the responses in the open questions (qualitative analysis) yields the following findings. The PEAP teachers participating in the survey almost unanimously ask for special training in the area of learning difficulties. With respect to the Greek EYL project, they comment on its idiosyncratic nature in general, emphasizing on the carefully designed educational material, which helps soothe learning difficulties, as it familiarizes young learners with oral production, games and songs before the introduction of school literacy. Reference is also made to several other stakeholders, as the participants stress the need for informing parents, children and society as a whole on the issue of learning difficulties. Each of these stakeholders should be informed to the extent that this is necessary and can have a positive impact on the teaching process. Finally, the participant teachers point at the importance of their cooperation with the class teacher or even the kindergarten teacher where this is possible.

When reflecting on how they go about "diagnosing" possible learning difficulties in their students, the participants appear to have developed their own perceptions and "rules", thus being more alert in certain cases. For instance, when they witness a persistent appearance of a "problematic behaviour" in a student even as s/he grows older, they tend to attribute it to the existence of a learning difficulty. This finding renders student age one of the most important factors in "diagnosing" and perceiving learning difficulties. Another factor of great importance for teachers is the combined realization of certain behaviours in a child (e.g. hyperactivity along with a shorter attention span). Finally, frequency and intensity in the manifestation of the "problematic behaviour" also appear to count.

Conclusions

Examining the results of the present survey, it becomes evident that the respondents have already formulated certain views on what constitutes a learning difficulty and how they can go about dealing with it. However, they stress the need for further training which will enable them to recognize and cope with learning difficulties. Moreover, one of the significant findings of the current study was that most of the participants seem to be aware

of young learners' characteristics and of the fact that PEAP students belong to a special group of learners who need time to adjust in the school environment and especially before being introduced to literacy.

Still, teachers appear to misinterpret behaviours that relate to adjustment in the new sector with learning difficulties (hyperactivity, poor concentration, discipline, inability to follow instructions). There appears to be confusion between a typical young behaviour and learning difficulty. Teachers also indicate specific language learning problems in learners who have not developed literacy skills (negative attitude to writing, dyslexia, shyness to read).

What is really encouraging is that the participants have confirmed that the educational material used in the context of the programme helps students with learning difficulties participate in the learning process and build their self-esteem, promotes differentiated learning and gives equal opportunities to all students.

The respondents also admit that bilinguals do encounter several difficulties in language learning but they stress that this is due to their poor linguistic environment and does not always indicate a learning difficulty.

Some additional questions that would be interesting to explore in more detail in the future are:

-How can a teacher best deal with mixed ability classes of young learners?

-How can a teacher handle the parents whose children exhibit a degree of learning difficulty?

-To what extent is knowledge about learning difficulty in one's mother tongue applicable to foreign language acquisition?

Finally, an important limitation needs to be considered. The current study has only examined a small sample of PEAP teachers and the results presented are tendencies concerning the teachers' perceptions on learning difficulties. In order to draw safer and more accurate conclusions which can be generalized for all PEAP teachers, a larger scale survey should be carried out. The current study, however, along with the emerged interesting results can be of use to English teachers, teacher trainers and policy makers especially because teachers strongly emphasise their need for further training on the issue of learning difficulties.

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