

Understanding Dyslexia through the Perspective of Phonological Awareness Deficit Theory

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Abstract

Students, who find it difficult to read and spell, face stigmatization, discrimination and other forms of social problems from their peers, teachers, relatives and society at large. They are perceived as unintelligent, slow in learning, and, in some cases, mentally deranged. Many of such students have and are dropping out of school because they believe they are unsuitable for academic programmes. This study, however, argues that dyslexia is one of the major causes of reading and spelling challenges faced by such students. As a result, it anchors its theoretical perspective on the principles of Phonological Awareness Deficit Theory of Dyslexia to define the concept and identify its causes and effects on the victims. It finally proffers solutions to the problems, whereby it recommends that they should be adopted by teachers and guardians of such students in order to help them develop strategies they can use to read and spell correctly.

Keywords: Dyslexia, phonological awareness deficit theory, phonological awareness

Introduction

Every teacher wishes to have students that perform excellently in their academics. Actualizing this does not only make their jobs easier but also gives them job satisfaction. However, this wish is not always granted because cases of academically challenged students are faced by teachers at regular

intervals. This can be frustrating to teachers and the students as well.

Teaching students, who do not perform well in their tests irrespective of efforts made by teachers, does not only slow down the teaching pace of concerned teachers but also makes them feel they are underperforming at best and incompetent at worst (Chitsa & Mpofu, 2016). In some cases, teachers ignore

their academic, emotional and psychological needs of such students in their bid to focus on the brilliant ones (12). There are also cases of teachers meting out punishments on such students for failing to perform well on tests, academic tasks, assignments, and exams (2). Students facing this kind of academic challenge are also distressed for failing to perform as their peers. They found themselves as incompetent and unsuitable for academic pursuits (10). Some of them begin to experience negative emotions and psychological disorders, which include anxiety, fear, aggression, and depression (11). At the end, many of such students may drop out of school, especially at the secondary school level, because of the emotional and mental challenges they face.

One of the identified major causes of academic underperformance in young students is dyslexia. This is a neurobiological disorder that prevents the affected from developing reading and writing skills. Unfortunately, these two language skills are needed in contemporary formal education, meaning that their absence in the dyslexic leads to poor academic performance. However, there is a need to diagnose dyslexia before teachers can decide the appropriate

way to their students. This study, therefore, explores the meaning, causes, symptoms and solutions to dyslexia through the perspective of the Phonological Awareness Deficit Theory of Dyslexia.

Dyslexia: Meaning, Causes and Categories

Dyslexia is a neurological disorder that affects the acquisition development of secondary language skills – reading and writing/spelling. But it has been defined and perceived differently by different authors and scholars. (6), for instance, perceives dyslexia as a learning difficulty that impedes the acquisition of reading skills. If this perception is taken into consideration, it will be difficult to identify the primary cause of dyslexia. Some scholars, such as (15) and (10), state that dyslexia are a neurological issue and should be viewed from the medical perspective. (2) also disclose that even though dyslexia are a learning disability, its chief cause is the difference in the structural makeup of the brains of the affected. This means they also view the concept from the neurological point of view. (17) believes that dyslexia are an adverse health condition, which manifests in reading disorder as a result of the poor cognitive processing. Nevertheless, he fails to expound more on

this to show how the dyslexics have poor cognitive processing, especially how that affects the development of reading skills. This is most crucial because, as observed by scholars, such as (16), dyslexics are not known to be unintelligent.

The cause of dyslexia has been linked to the neurobiological makeup of the affected persons. It is discovered that there is a slight difference in the biological feature of the brains of the dyslexic (8; 4). The affected part is said to be that which is responsible for language processing. (4) explains that the way the brain of the dyslexic is formed prevents the lateralization of language to the left hemisphere of the brain for speech processing. He states that this further prevents affected language users from processing printed words. This difference in neurobiological structuring is the reason dyslexics face phonological awareness deficits.

Another aspect of dyslexia that is worth mentioning is its categories, which are linked to how its origin in the victim. According to (4), dyslexia can be categorized into trauma dyslexia (caused by traumatic injury on the brain), primary dyslexia (genetically acquired dyslexia as a result of hereditary),

secondary dyslexia (caused by hormonal development and can disappear or outgrow later in life), auditory dyslexia (difficulty with distinguishing between the sounds in a language), and visual dyslexia (caused by difficulties with merging letters into words). (17) classifies dyslexia into two, which are developmental dyslexia (genetically inherited dyslexia) and acquired dyslexia (resulted from brain injury). But (16) categorize the phenomenon as primary dyslexia (genetically inherited) and secondary dyslexia (resulting from brain injury). The connection between all these categorizations is that they disclose that dyslexia is a result of the physical changes or formation of the brain.

Except in the case of secondary dyslexia identified by (4), this language use disorder is a life-long problem (4; 11). This means that the problem persists throughout the life of the affected individuals. In essence, they will continue to encounter reading and spelling disorders unless they are able to find strategies that can help them read and write correctly. However, as (10) explain, they cannot discover reading strategies without the help of instructors or teachers. This means teachers need to diagnose dyslexia in

their academically challenged students in order to help them cope. The best recommended method for diagnosing dyslexia in this case is through reading and writing or spelling tasks (11). With this, the teacher can establish dyslexia by comparing the students' chronological age, academic level, and literacy skills (16).

Symptoms of Dyslexia

As mentioned earlier, the difference in the physical structure of the left hemisphere of the dyslexics' brains is the cause of this language-based disorder.

Since this brain section is responsible for processing language, the basic symptom of dyslexia is found in the language of language. However, this disorder is more prominent in reading and spelling challenges. (16) disclose that dyslexics can be identified when given reading and writing tasks because they omit letters in words when they spell and further skip words in texts when they read. (6) states that the major symptoms of this disorder include difficulties with learning new words, remembering learned words, and identifying or recognizing words in texts. In addition, (11) and (6) disclose that dyslexics are slow readers and make efforts to avoid reading and

writing tasks as a result of the difficulties they encounter while performing those tasks.

Other identified symptoms of dyslexia are poor memory capacity, low attention span, and lack of organizational skills in writing (9). Poor and low vocabulary stock (7), bad handwriting (9), self-consciousness while reading or writing (11) and struggles with a second language (9) are also identified as more symptoms of dyslexia.

In younger dyslexic school children, especially those in pre-elementary and early stages of elementary school, dyslexia manifests as difficulties with the chronological arrangement of letters of the alphabet, distinguishing between letters that look or sound similar, reading alphabets, identifying letters in words, distinguishing between words that same sounds, and recalling names of places or people they were taught (11). However, the presence of one or more of these symptoms does not necessarily indicate or signal dyslexia. Proper diagnosis should be conducted to establish the disorder.

Theoretical Perspective – The Phonological Awareness Deficit Theory of Dyslexia

The phonological awareness deficit theory of dyslexia captures the reasons dyslexics find it

difficult to read as a result of the neurobiological structure of their brains. Scholars use the theory to study dyslexics in order to identify how they (the dyslexics) can be helped. In other words, understanding the perspectives of this theory can, therefore, help in diagnosing and treating dyslexia.

Phonological awareness refers to language user's awareness and recognition of the speech sounds in words (3). (1) describe it as the degree of sensitivity language users have towards the sound structure of their language, which enables them to unconsciously identify and recognize the sounds that make up words. They explain that this sensitivity is a language use skill and that its development begins at the early stage of language learning. They disclose that language learners and users, who do not have hearing or oral impairments, can develop phonological awareness skill at their pre-school years.

The phonological awareness deficit theory of dyslexia postulates that some language users lack phonological awareness skills even though they do not have hearing, oral or visual impairments (5). (5) disclose that the dyslexics encounter this language skill deficiency and as a result, encounter challenges with processing printed words.

They state that when the dyslexics are faced with reading tasks, they have challenges with identifying and segmenting words into syllables in order to detect the sound combination and manipulation strategies used to form the words in the texts.

This explains why they (the dyslexics) find it difficult to substitute, delete, alternate, or manipulate words, especially while spelling. (13) reveals that when reading, the dyslexics also have problems because they are unable to acquire the phonological principles or the rules that govern the sound system of their language. In other words, to help the dyslexics develop reading, spelling and writing skills, there is a need to identify which of phonological principles they lack knowledge of in order to help them learn them (the principles). Most especially, to be able to read and spell accurately, they need to learn their language phonemes, syllable structures and allophones. According to (10), the phonological awareness deficit theory of dyslexia postulates that dyslexics encounter problems with reading and spelling because they are not able to link graphemes (letters of the alphabet) with phonemes (sounds of the language).

That is, they find it difficult to identify the sounds represented by the alphabetic letters of their language. This is because they encounter challenges with learning, storing, and retrieving speech sounds from their memories. This means that even after some dyslexics are taught the phonological principles of their language, especially when the activity is done with non-dyslexic students, they may continue to encounter reading and spelling challenges as a result of the non-lateralization of speech sounds in their brains caused by the neurobiological structure. (15) reveal that phonological awareness deficit causes more problems for dyslexics that are learning how to read and write in opaque languages, such as the English language.

This is because the letters of English do not truly represent the sounds. The dyslexics learning to read and write in the language will, therefore, experience challenges as a result of the inconsistencies in the English phonological system.

Conclusion

Dyslexia is a language-related learning disorder that cannot be corrected through punishments or the use of force. It is also a

problem that makes the victims totally dependent on their teachers before they can learn to read and spell. Since the problem is caused by the neurobiological structure of the brain, it should be understood that it is not the victims' fault for finding it difficult to read, spell and write. It is the duty of teachers, instructors, curriculum developers, textbook writers, parents/guardians, as well as the adults around affected students to help them develop a strategy they can adopt whenever they are faced with reading and writing tasks. That way, they will be able to overcome the challenges caused by dyslexia.

This study recommends that researchers, teachers, and curriculum developers of English Studies work together to identify strategic teaching methods and learning activities that can help dyslexics learn the phonological principles of the language. Textbook developers are also encouraged to produce books that can help the dyslexics learn new vocabularies every day. In addition, there is a need to understand that dyslexia are incurable, meaning that it is a lifelong problem the affected can only manage by discovering effective reading and spelling strategies. In other words, teachers, school administrators and parents or

guardians of the dyslexics should be patient while helping their students/wards to conquer their reading and spelling challenges.

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