

## REVIEW

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The dissertation, presented by Blagovesta Petkova Troeva-Chalakovska, explores the *Difficulties in reading and writing of adult learners of English with developmental dyslexia*. The research has been conducted under the academic supervision of Associate Professor Svetlana Georgieva Dimitrova-Guzeleva, PhD, from New Bulgarian University.

### **Significance of the research problem**

Dyslexia has been identified as one of the most common learning disabilities, affecting 1.5% to 11% of the population (IDA Assessment Guidelines, 2021). There are no accurate data from up-to-date and systematic research on the frequency of dyslexia in Bulgaria. Considering the percentage range of the general statistics, however, it can be concluded that this condition is typical of at least one or two learners in a class of 26–30 students. The topic of the dissertation directly resonates with an extremely pertinent issue in the educational environment (both in Bulgaria and on a global scale) – the development and application of relevant pedagogical tools and teaching methods adapted to the needs of students with dyslexia.

The significance of the topic is convincingly justified by Blagovesta Troeva-Chalakovska in the introduction of the dissertation. The author builds her argumentation within the framework of inclusive education (UNESCO, 2009) and emphasizes the need to actively involve each student in the educational process, as well as to provide support and conditions for developing the potential of each individual learner (p. 7). In this context, she notes that the research interest in teaching learners with dyslexia in the acquisition of English as a foreign language is relatively scarce and mainly oriented towards primary school learners. Empirical data verifying the feasibility and effectiveness of certain approaches and strategies for teaching English as a foreign language to adults with dyslexia are also insufficient.

In the introduction, the Candidate aptly comments that one of the present-day demands for foreign language teachers is to apply a variety of strategies for working with students with special educational needs (SEN). In practice, however, teachers do not feel sufficiently prepared to implement differentiation and individualization strategies for the education of students with SEN in the mainstream school. They fail or struggle to find ways to tailor learning activities to the needs of the “non-typical learners” in the classroom. This dissertation fills a research gap in the field of learning English as a foreign language by individuals with dyslexia and offers specific recommendations of high theoretical and applied value for the teaching and self-study of learners with learning difficulties.

### **Structure of the dissertation**

The dissertation is written in Bulgarian. It is presented in the impressive volume of 356 pages and consists of an introduction, five chapters, a conclusion, a bibliography and appendices. The dissertation includes 19 tables and 12 figures that illustrate the information in an excellent way. There are a total of 11 appendices (spanning over 39 pages). A 2-page glossary of terms is also provided.

The dissertation has a classic structure, conceptually developed in the logical sequence from the theoretical-analytical to the empirical part. In the introduction, the author competently clarifies the relevance and significance of the problem in the framework of theoretical and applied principles of inclusive education and the education of learners with dyslexia in the Bulgarian education system. In the first chapter of the dissertation, Blagovesta Petkova Troeva-Chalakova analyzes the main theoretical models for the development of reading and writing skills of learners with dyslexia and thoroughly reviews the academic literature on the nature and influence of dyslexia on learning English. The second chapter examines the nature and manifestations of dyslexia, the terminology, etiology and different levels of manifestations of this specific learning difficulty. The third chapter details the methodological rationale of the study, describing the overall aim, hypotheses, participants, data collection procedures, methods of analysis and ethical considerations. The fourth chapter presents and comments on quantitative and qualitative data collected through surveys, dictations, oral tests, written tests and semi-structured interviews. In the fifth chapter, based on the analysis of the research results, recommendations for teaching English to adults with dyslexia are proposed. In the conclusion, the main implications from the research are summarized; the answers to the research questions and hypotheses are commented; the

contributions of the research are outlined; some limitations and directions for future research are provided.

### **Aims and objectives of the dissertation**

In the introductory part, the aims of the research are precisely and clearly articulated. The nature of the specific reading and writing problems of individuals with diagnosed dyslexia in the process of learning or using the English is explored. Detailed representative sample background is provided – Bulgarian learners between the ages of 17 and 46 who have attained a minimum level of B1.1. according to the Common European Language Framework (CEFR). This is undoubtedly one of the contributions of the proposed study, which focuses on adults with dyslexia and their challenges in reading and writing in English as a foreign language. Theoretical and practical objectives are systematically derived and defined, which manifest a consistent plan for achieving the main aim of the research. The main variables of the research are competently formulated – the difficulties in reading and writing in English, which are encountered by adult Bulgarians with dyslexia. These difficulties are explored based on empirical data from tests and surveys, supported by first-person accounts of participants. The research questions are clearly and logically articulated. They ask what difficulties dyslexic adults experience in reading and writing in English; what factors cause these difficulties and what strategies would be appropriate for pedagogical practice and for development of the reading and writing skills in English of adults with dyslexia. The Candidate has formulated a wide range of hypotheses that are adequately linked to the research objectives and research questions. Through these hypotheses, the dissertation tests a number of claims derived from previous research on the education of learners with dyslexia and, more specifically, on foreign language education of adults with dyslexia.

### **Familiarity with the topic and literature review**

In the first two chapters of the dissertation, the author demonstrates extensive knowledge of the research topic and the subject matter. She accurately outlines the theoretical parameters of the study and operationalizes the main variables. In the first chapter, Blagovesta Petkova Troeva-Chalakovska dwells on numerous influential theories and models about reading in the context of psycholinguistic, sociocultural and educational perspectives of literacy. These include Frith's (1985) three-stage model of reading development; the Dual-route model of reading; the Fundamentals of Reading (SVR) model; the Interactive Activation Model of McClelland & Rumelhart (1981) and the connectionist views. The theory *The Simple View of Reading* (Gough &

Tunmer, 1986; Hoover & Gough, 1990), applied as a framework for identifying and teaching children with dyslexia and literacy difficulties, is commented in detail (Rose, 2009). The PhD Candidate thoroughly discusses the *Dual-Route Model of Reading* (Coltheart et al., 1993; Coltheart et al., 2001; Coltheart, 2006), widely used as an analytical framework for reading errors that are observed in learners with dyslexia, and as a categorization tool for some dyslexia subtypes (“phonological”, “surface”, “mixed”).

The literature review discusses some of the major models of reading. Reading is not only a process of decoding. This ability also depends on lexical knowledge and context at the level of sentence and text. The author draws on the interactive-compensatory model to explain individual differences in the development of reading skills (Stanovich, 1980). According to this model, when one process (e.g., phonological decoding) is impaired, other processes (e.g., context processing) are activated to compensate for this deficit. This allows readers with reading difficulties (such as those with dyslexia) to use a variety of strategies to achieve text comprehension.

In reviewing the theoretical foundations of writing, the author draws on sources (Burt & Fury, 2000; Pollo et al., 2007) proving the dependence of writing skills on the development of reading skills. Clearly, the development of writing skills is directly linked to the mastery of spelling – a major difficulty for individuals with dyslexia. The specific features of learning spelling in one’s mother tongue is presented through the three approaches – phonological, constructivist, and statistical learning (cf. Pollo et al., 2007). In this chapter, Blagovesta Troeva-Chalakovska aptly refers to the so-called dual-route model of spelling (Houghton & Zorzi, 2003) and refers to Perfetti’s (1997) opinion that the modern view of the model suggests parallel functioning of the two routes, which compete or intersect (p. 55).

In a separate section, the Candidate dwells on aspects of mastering English spelling in foreign language education. Referring to Dewey (1971, cited in Helland & Kaasa, 2004), she explains that the complex nature of English spelling is determined by the possibility that the 44 phonemes in the English language can be spelled in 561 ways (p. 56). In English, there is no direct grapheme-phoneme correspondence. An illustrative example of this is the possibility that the letter combination “ough” can be pronounced in at least 8 different ways (pp. 56–57). Three methods for teaching English spelling are examined in detail (according to Yordanova and Kaneva, 2014): holistic, phonological and morphemic. The Candidate refers to them when interpreting the data in her empirical study.

The author attributes the specific features of punctuation of learners with dyslexia to cross-linguistic transfer (e.g. mistakes when spelling the English possessive marker /' /), which is also observed in normolexics (persons without dyslexia). Other features are seen as manifestations typical of dyslexia – e.g. lack of periods at the end of a sentence; absence of capital letters at the beginning of a sentence.

The sound theoretical mastery of the Candidate is also evident in the second chapter of the dissertation, in which Blagovesta Troeva-Chalakova examines prominent theories and models in order to shed light on the nature and manifestations of dyslexia. For the purposes of her research, the author adopts Matanova's (2001) term "specific learning disabilities" (SLD), specifying that by the term "dyslexia" she means developmental dyslexia, without including acquired dyslexia. The etiology of dyslexia is presented by the author through the proposal of several hypotheses, including the phonological deficit hypothesis (Snowling & Hulme, 2011) and the arguments of its opponents (Castles et al., 2006; Todorova, 2016), as well as the double-deficit hypothesis (Wolf & Bowers, 1999). The manifestations of dyslexia are further diligently discussed. In the discussion on the features of dyslexia in adults, Blagovesta Troeva-Chalakova refers to Nergård-Nilssen & Hulme (2014), who identify difficulties with spelling, reading fluency and decoding as key for adults with dyslexia. They found that the factors that differentiate the spelling skills of adults with dyslexia from the skills of normolexic writers are primarily working memory and phonological awareness (p.153). Therefore, the author examines the cognitive factors that influence reading ability. These include phonological awareness, working memory, and rapid automatized naming. Additionally, the author raises the question "Does dyslexia in one language automatically imply its presence in the second language?" (p. 91). Based on the reviewed research, she rightly concludes that although the majority of authors believe that we can accept such transferability, it should only lead to informed decision-making and the selection of appropriate teaching techniques. She adds that Miller-Guron & Lundberg (2000) warn of the risk of inappropriate decisions in foreign language teaching when reading activities are neglected and learning resources are reduced to the detriment of learners diagnosed with dyslexia in their mother tongue (pp. 91-92).

The Candidate very well summarizes previous research documenting the difficulties of dyslexic learners in learning English as a foreign language and presents in detail recommendations relevant to the education of learners with dyslexia. These recommendations are summarized on the basis of studies on the development of reading and writing skills in English as a mother tongue.

The review of literature in the first and the second chapter of the dissertation, reveals the Candidate's ability to select, integrate and evaluate a diverse array of theoretical perspectives, research models and findings. In doing so, she also defines and elucidates the essential terminology of the study and established the theoretical foundation for her research.

### **Accuracy in referencing and citing a representative number of authors**

For the purposes of her research, Blagovesta Petkova Troeva-Chalakovska accurately cites and refers to an impressively large number of authors. The reference list (17 pages) consists of a total of 287 sources in English, Bulgarian, and Russian. The most significant studies in the field, published over a wide time range, are covered.

### **Research methodology**

The Candidate explains convincingly and in detail the chosen research methodology. The criteria for the selection of participants are strictly defined: "1. Dyslexia confirmed by a specialist (psychologist or speech therapist), 2. English language level at least B1.1. according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), 3. Minimum age – 17 years" (p. 107).

There were a total of 15 participants (8 women and 7 men), with a mean age of 27 years (ranging from 17 to 46 years). The levels of English language proficiency are different – 1 has attained the language at level B1.2; 9 – at level B2; 4 – at level C1; 1 – at level C2. Due to the non-homogeneous nature of the sample, the Candidate appropriately adopts a qualitative approach to the analysis of the data. She notes that quantitative comparisons are made where the comparison would highlight the specific effects of dyslexia among the cases as a group and where a comparison between control groups of different levels shows no dependence of the task on the level of language proficiency (p. 108). Blagovesta Troeva-Chalakovska classifies her research as a so-called *multiple case study analysis*, referring to Stake (2006). With a shared feature or "phenomenon" (*quintain*) – the manifestation of dyslexia in learners of English as a foreign language in the selection of various cases or case studies.

### **Data collection and analysis of the empirical data**

From the methodological framework of the study, discussed in the third chapter, and from the results, presented in the fourth chapter, a definite conclusion can be drawn that the Candidate has a sound knowledge of the research methodologies of the "pedagogical-psychological diagnostics" (cf. Bizkov, 1999) – a type of research that, according to the author, applies to her

own study. This is extremely important in order to ensure the quality of the research and to draw reliable conclusions when testing the formulated hypotheses. For the purposes of the study, the Candidate utilized several instruments: an oral test for reading aloud and a written test for reading and writing in English, a survey and a protocol for a semi-structured type of interview. The tests were created according to the *Manual for language test development and examining: For use with the CEFR* (Council of Europe, 2011) and were aligned with the expert opinion of researchers and specialists in dyslexia. The data were analyzed through the application of both qualitative and quantitative approaches: thematic and content analysis following Creswell's (2012) procedure; statistical methods (Kruskal-Wallis H test and Mann - Whitney U test); error analysis. The reliability and validity of the study are strictly controlled by piloting the tests, evaluating them according to a criterion framework and by a second examiner, expert evaluation and triangulation of the data elicitation tools (survey, tests and interview).

### **Contributions of the study**

The report on the contributions correctly reflects the actual academic achievements of the PhD Candidate. The dissertation explores an understudied area – English language learning of adults with dyslexia. Of contributing importance is the analysis of the types of spelling errors of the individuals with dyslexia and of the control groups according to Cook's (1997) classification, which has been modified and significantly expanded, enriching the existing knowledge base in the field. A comparison of reading speeds shows a slower pace for individuals with dyslexia despite their considerable knowledge of English. Convincing evidence for the need for an individualized approach, i.e. students with learning difficulties need “an individualized need assessment”. They should not be classified according to the “diagnosis” or label of the relevant difference or disorder (p. 290). Particularly significant is the finding highlighting the importance of the personal experiences and reflections of adults with dyslexia. It enriches the research base about their learning difficulties. The study also emphasizes the challenges in reading and writing in English, as well as the influence of the social and family environment. The issue of the double discrimination of learners with dyslexia (or another disorder) of Roma ethnic origin also stands out. An interesting and significant finding is that not all adults with dyslexia prefer electronic media for writing and reading, and their preferences depend on the type and purpose of the activity, not on age. Last but not least, the formulated recommendations for English language education

and self-study of learners with dyslexia serve as a basis for future research and for the development of a guide for working with the age group included in the study.

The extended summary of the dissertation (69 pages in all) accurately reflects the content of the study.

### **Publications on the topic of the dissertation and citations by other authors**

The candidate has submitted 7 publications on the topic of the dissertation in various academic publications: magazines, conference reports, and collections of papers. The presented documentation also includes 22 citations from Bulgarian and foreign authors, which is an indicator of the contributions of the research and the wide resonance of the results of the study among the academic and research community in Bulgaria and abroad.

### **Recommendations**

The present study makes a valuable contribution to the theory and practice of reading and writing in English as a foreign language of adults with dyslexia. It will prove highly valuable to anyone interested in the issue of specific learning disabilities and special educational needs associated with dyslexia. For this reason, I recommend that, after some editing, the study be published as a book to make it widely available to a broader audience.

### **Conclusion**

Considering all of the above, and especially the merits of the reviewed dissertation, which reveal the in-depth theoretical knowledge of the Candidate and her ability to carry out independent academic research, I recommend that **Blagovesta Petkova Troeva-Chalakova** be awarded doctoral degree in the professional area 1.3. *Pedagogy of teaching ...*, subject field *Methodology of Teaching Modern Languages*.

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