

TEACHING READING IN ENGLISH TO STUDENTS  
WITH DYSLEXIA: A CASE STUDY OF A MALAYSIAN  
MAINSTREAM CLASSROOM TEACHER AND A  
SPECIAL NEEDS CLASSROOM TEACHER

BY

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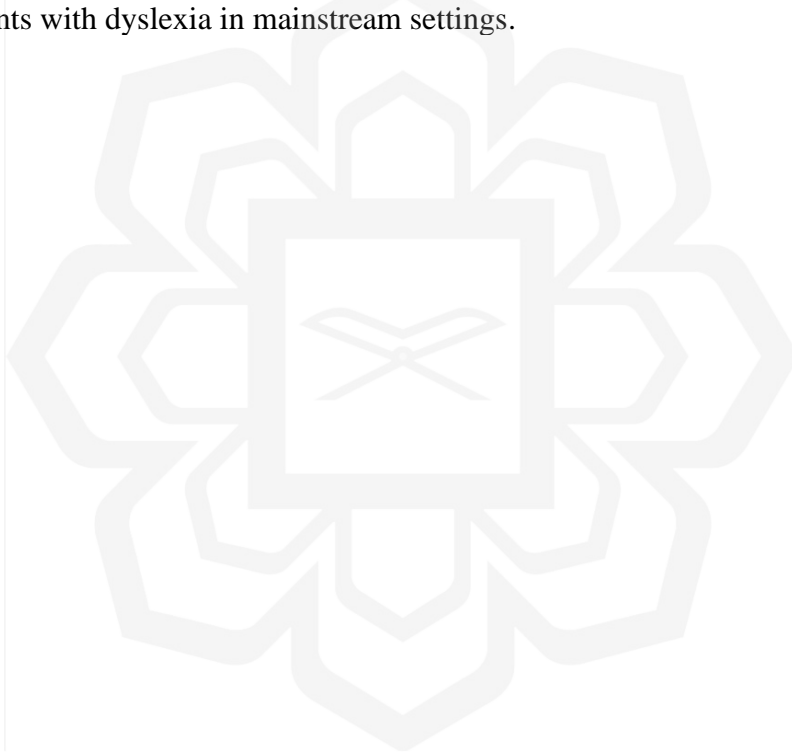
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the degree of Master of Education

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study aimed to explore the experience of Malaysian ESL mainstream classroom teacher and a special needs teacher in teaching English to students with Dyslexia, to provide an insight into how two teachers from different pedagogical backgrounds help dyslexic students overcome their challenges in learning the language. Specifically, it was aimed to investigate the teachers' understanding of dyslexia and their challenges in teaching reading in English to Dyslexic students. This qualitative study employed a multiple case studies approach. Data were collected through face-to-face and semi-structured interviews. Malaysian teachers from different pedagogical backgrounds were purposively selected as participants for this study. The findings indicate that there some obvious gaps between the teachers' understanding of dyslexia. Moreover, this study also identified that the teachers faced many challenges in teaching English to students with dyslexia in mainstream settings.



## خلاصة البحث

هدفت هذه الدراسة إلى استكشاف تجربة مدرسي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة ثانية ESL للطلاب العاديين ومعلمي الاحتياجات الخاصة في تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية للطلاب الذين يعانون من عسر في القراءة ، وذلك لتقديم نظرة ثاقبة حول كيفية قيام مدرسين اثنين من خلفيات تربوية مختلفة بمساعدة الطلاب الذين يعانون من عسر في القراءة للتغلب على تحدياتهم في تعلم اللغة. وخصوصا ، هدفت الدراسة إلى فهم المعلمين لعسر القراءة والتحديات التي يواجهونها في تدريس القراءة باللغة الإنجليزية للطلاب الذين يعانون من عسر في القراءة. واستخدمت هذه الدراسة المنهج النوعي دراسات حالة متعددة. تم جمع البيانات من خلال المقابلات شبه المنظمة وجها لوجه . تم اختيار معلمين ماليزيين من خلفيات تعليمية مختلفة بالطريقة القصصية كمشاركين في هذه الدراسة. وأشارت النتائج إلى وجود بعض الفجوات الواضحة بين فهم المعلمين لعسر القراءة. إضافة إلى أن هذه الدراسة أيضًا وجدت أن المعلمين يواجهون العديد من التحديات في تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية للطلاب الذين يعانون من عسر القراءة في الفصول الطبيعية.

## APPROVAL PAGE

I certify that I have supervised and read this study and that in my opinion; it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Master of Education.

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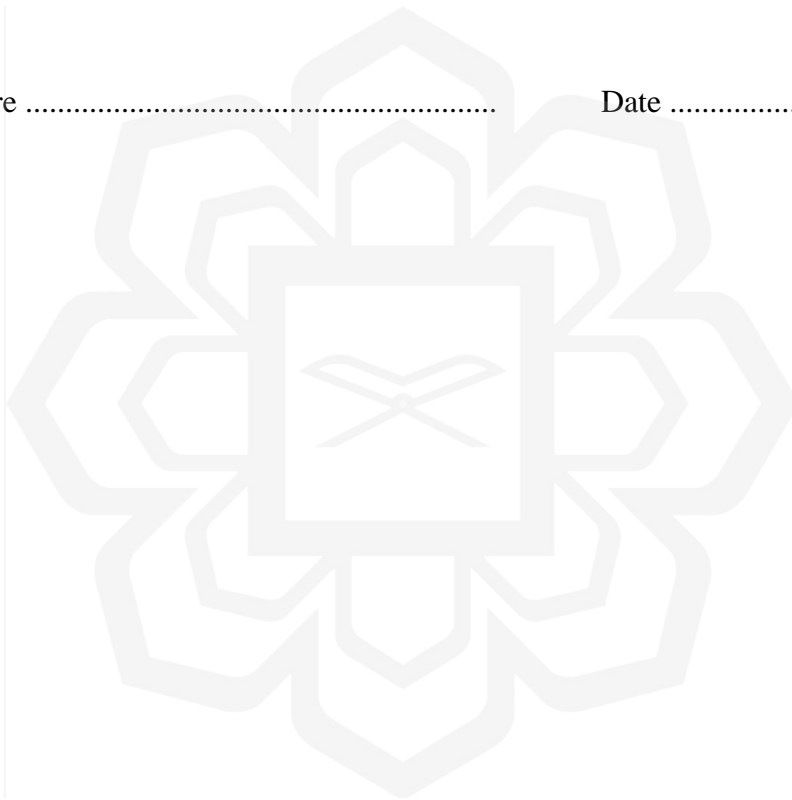
## DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted as a whole for any other degrees at IIUM or other institutions.

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*This dissertation is dedicated to my dearest parent Mak, Ayah,  
my loving husband,  
and my precious children.*

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

SEN	Students with Special Educational Needs
TESL	Teaching English as a Second Language



# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 BACKGROUND OF THE RESEARCH

Dyslexia is a language-based disability that affects children's ability to read and comprehend a written text. It involves difficulty in learning reading skills such as interpreting words, letters, and symbols, as well as spelling and writing (Ehri, 1989). The International Dyslexia Association (2019) has defined dyslexia as a neurobiological disorder that creates difficulty in word recognition, spelling and decoding words; and affects reading comprehension by reducing the growth of vocabulary and reading experience (as cited in Moats, & Carreker, Davis, Meisel, Spear-Swerling, & Wilson 2014). It is claimed that dyslexia has affected 10-15% of the world population (WHO, 2011), indicating that this type of learning disability has impacted a large number of children and adults around the world.

Dyslexia can affect individuals' lives in many different ways. The degree of difficulty *varies*, as they can be influenced by age, sex and educational background (Brunswick, 2011). The signs *can also* be detected as early as preschool age. Apparently, children who suffer from dyslexia *struggle* with poor spelling and decoding abilities (Snowing, 2006; Lodej, 2016). A short term memory problem causes difficulty for dyslexic children, not only to use *information*, but also to retain it in their brains efficiently. *They find* trouble in remembering a simple consequence, names, *directions* and even in multi-tasking (Lodej, 2016). Besides, dyslexic children also struggle with deficit phonemic awareness. Furthermore, Lodej (2016) added that their inability to recognize sounds in words and to link the sound to make words contributes to low reading accuracy and reading speed, poor spelling, as well as

difficulty in comprehending long words. These difficulties significantly lead to poor reading comprehension and reduced reading capability by slowing down the growth of the vocabulary of a language (Lyon & Weiser, 2009).

Consequently, learning a foreign language or a second language will be extremely difficult for them since the difficulties are grounded in language-based learning. As stated by Jufri, Yusri, and Mantasiah (2019), difficulties in first language acquisition will create interference in second language learning. Similarly, Kaperoni (2016) argues that dyslexic students *face* more difficulties in learning a foreign language compared to non-dyslexic students. This *argument* is supported by Gyarmathy, Mahlerbe, Pichel, Stoyanov, Tartari, and Torrisi (2009), who mention that dyslexic students have significant problems in learning a foreign language, such as trouble in remembering and pronouncing words. The same is maintained by Cimermanova (2015), who states that problems with working memory and short automacy in language *have profound* impact on their language learning and development. Therefore, it is argued that teachers teaching a foreign or a second language to students with dyslexia have to acknowledge both their difficulties and linguistic needs, as the traditional way of learning is no longer effective *in teaching* them (Lodej, 2016). As such, modification of curriculum and instruction by using a dyslexia-friendly teaching approach is required.

In many countries, the teaching of dyslexic children has become more challenging for many ESL teachers and Special Education teachers since the introduction of *the* Inclusive Education Programme. This is because it creates a challenge for teachers to find the most effective ways to teach the English language to dyslexic students alongside their non-dyslexic peers. A study by Tshililo (2016) found that the majority of ESL mainstream teachers struggled to deal with dyslexic students

in the mainstream classroom. ESL mainstream teachers are required to differentiate their instruction so that they can cater to all their students' needs in the classroom. Unfortunately, many ESL mainstream teachers were reported to have received “very little formal instruction in reading development and disorders during their undergraduate studies” (Lyon & Weiser, 2009, p. 476). Insufficient training has also created a major barrier in dealing with dyslexic students in the EFL mainstream classroom (Lemperou, Chostelidou and Griva, 2011).

In the next section, we discuss the concept of Inclusive Education and the challenges faced by teachers in teaching dyslexic students.

### **1.1.1 Inclusive Education and the Teaching of Students with Dyslexia**

Prior to the implementation of the Inclusive Education Programme, particularly in the 1960s, children with special educational needs (SEN) had limited access to education in comparison to normal children. This created a long-fought battle for the SEN parents to demand educational access for their children. By the early 1970s, they had successfully enrolled their children into public schools. This movement eventually resulted in the establishment of two separate school systems, known as the regular and special education systems (Kisanji, 1999). In the special education classroom, students with special needs were grouped and segregated from other pupils. However, this segregation resulted in SEN students' being isolated from their nondisabled peers. In addition, a self-contained classroom like this limits the participation of SEN students in their learning activities as well as in their social activities with their peers.

For that reason, inclusive education was introduced as a response to the demand for equal education access to all children regardless of their backgrounds and disabilities. The Salamanca Conference 1994 has been marked as an international

breakthrough for promoting inclusive education by opening doors to children with disabilities to enter mainstream education. The conference adopted the UNESCO Salamanca Statement as the Framework for Action to provide an inclusion policy in education. This framework urged governments to stop segregating children with special needs from mainstream education and that education should accommodate all children regardless of their disabilities (Salamanca Framework for Action, 1994). In response to this, many countries have initiated inclusive education as a new practice in the provision of education for students with special needs as it acknowledges every learner's fundamental right to learn and recognizes that every child has unique abilities and needs. For instance, in India, inclusive education was initiated to provide a wider educational opportunity to all learners. Its welcoming all learners with or without disability without discrimination to be included in schools and other educational settings and given the appropriate support (Revathi, 2015)

Moreover, the implementation of inclusive education also aims to promote the participation of SEN students with their non-disabled peers in the mainstream settings. In inclusive education, children from different backgrounds and abilities are put together under the same learning environment in the hope of promoting mutual respect and cooperation among them. Earlier research has shown that interactions between disabled and non-disabled students have brought a positive impact on their learning progress (Holahan & Costenbader, 2000; Strain, Bovey Wilson, & Roybal, 2009; Harmon 2017). Handicapped students *were found* to display a positive learning attitude when they were placed in the mainstream classroom compared to their attitudes when in a special needs classroom. They were also more positive and socially passionate than those in the SEN programs. Generally, it indicates that an inclusive classroom is able to provide a better learning environment for SEN students

to perform well in academic skills as well as social skills compared to the segregated SEN classroom.

Indeed, the inclusion concept has changed most of the teaching and learning practices as well as theoretical and practical experiences in many schools around the world. The implementation of inclusive education has undoubtedly benefited many children from different backgrounds by providing a better learning experience. However, research reveals that the implementation of inclusive education has faced many barriers such as lack of awareness among mainstream teachers, lack of training to teach in inclusive settings, lack of a child-centered and relevant curriculum, lack of proper infrastructure, and lack of participatory activities (Mathew and Jha, 2015). Neena (2018) also claims that the lack of optimistic attitudes toward children with special needs and the scarcity of resources such as learning materials, insufficient classrooms and teachers, and inadequate facilities have become the constraints for many inclusive education programmes.

The next section will discuss the implementation of Inclusive Education in Malaysia and its implications.

### **1.1.2 Inclusive Education practice in Malaysia**

Inclusive Education has been a globally accepted best practice for special education in many countries, leading the Malaysian government to adopt the same inclusion approach in its national educational system. Jelas & Mohd Ali (2012) state that Malaysia moved towards inclusive education after being involved workshops and conferences organised under the patronage of the United Nations. As a result, Inclusive Education was introduced in the Malaysian Education Act 1996 (1998, p.34-35) as an initiative by the Malaysian government to provide “equal educational

opportunity and access to all children, including children with special needs”, enabling them to attend the mainstream education classes in government schools and government aided schools (Salleh & Omar 2018). This is in line with Article 28 of Malaysia’s Person with Disabilities Act (2008), which affirms that children with disabilities “are to be given the necessary support to facilitate their full and equal participation in education” (Malaysian Education Blue- Print 2013-2025, p.5-12).

The Malaysian government is very committed towards increasing the number of SEN students in mainstream education. In a series of initiatives carried out by the Ministry of Education to achieve this objective, a few government schools were selected to take part in the Inclusive Education Program as “pioneers”. These selected schools were responsible to provide classrooms that are specifically designed with the relevant curriculum and infrastructure to facilitate learning among SEN students. Students who suffer from learning disabilities, including dyslexia, would be placed in either the “full inclusion, partial inclusion, or integration setting (Special Education Integration Program-SEIP) depending on their severity” (Ahmad, Mohd Ali, Salehuddin, 2018, p-7). SEN students are also given full and equal participation in mainstream education as stated in the National Education Blueprint 2013-2025 (MOE, 2013). In addition, the “Guidelines for the Inclusive Education Program for Special Needs Students” was released by the Ministry of Education in 2013 to provide for the implementation of the inclusive classroom in Malaysian schools (Teng, Kee Jiar & Jaffri, 2014). For the early phase of its implementation, the progress of inclusive classrooms was to be monitored by the school administrators (Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025).

Since Inclusive Education is relatively new in Malaysia, this program is found to be facing many challenges. While teachers are expected to have the competence to

teach students with a wide range of educational needs, they did not seem to be ready to do so. For instance, a study conducted by Ahmad et al. (2018, p.2176) found that mainstream teachers struggled to teach students with different educational needs due “to their lack of exposure to inclusive settings, insufficient pre-service training, and limited resources provided by the school”. Abdul Rahim, Rodger, and Zviani (2012 as cited in Saad, Ibrahim, and Nayyan (2013). The authors also point out that insufficient training has created limited awareness and low acceptance among teachers teaching students with disabilities in inclusive settings. The limited knowledge about learning disabilities among the teachers have impacted the progress of the implementation of Inclusive Education in Malaysia

Teaching ESL to dyslexic students and their non-dyslexic peers is very challenging for mainstream teachers. Benny & John (2016), reveal that teachers tend to ignore the difficulties faced by dyslexic students when they also have to fulfill the many responsibilities towards the other students. In addition, the lack of knowledge and confidence in teaching reading and spelling to SEN students restrict them from supporting students with dyslexia (Benny & John, 2016). The same is asserted by Lyon & Weiser (2009), who point out that mainstream teachers are not provided with the essential knowledge and skills to help dyslexic students become proficient in reading; resulting in their inability to incorporate effective dyslexia-friendly instructional strategies.

In contrast, Special Education teachers have the requisite knowledge and background to teach students with special needs. Due to their knowledge and expertise, they are more skilful in handling students with special needs and able to accommodate them better compared to mainstream teachers (Ruppar, Neeper, and Dalsen, 2016). Hence, it is crucial to provide ESL mainstream classroom teachers

with the same skills and knowledge as Special Education teachers in attending to the needs of SEN students.

For this reason, there was a need to conduct this study in order to compare the experience of an ESL mainstream teacher and a special needs teacher in teaching English to students with dyslexia to gain an insight into how the two teachers from two different pedagogical backgrounds help dyslexic students overcome their challenges in learning the language. Apart from that, it also helps researcher to find out the challenges faced by the teachers in teaching them, particularly in an inclusive classroom setting, where children with learning disabilities are taught together with their non-learning disabled peers. There was an urgent need to conduct this study, especially given the fact that while numerous studies have highlighted the challenges faced by teachers in teaching SEN students, only a few have investigated Malaysian teachers' perspectives and experience in teaching students with learning disabilities, particularly those with dyslexia, in inclusive settings (Balakrishnan, 2015).

## **1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

Since the Inclusive Education has been adopted in the Malaysian educational system, the implementation has carried with it several implications. This situation have present some challenges among ESL mainstream classroom teachers. As we know, students with Dyslexia have difficulties in acquiring and using a language. Hence, their learning abilities are different compared to normal students. As a result, the teachers will struggle to find enough of a balance to serve all the students' needs in the classroom.

Moreover, it will be more challenging if the teachers are lack competency in managing students with and without learning difficulties in an inclusion setting. Van

Zyl (2002; Twala, 2015)) states that there are various skills that are important for a teacher to teach in an inclusive school. Unfortunately, the majority of ESL mainstream classroom teachers are not trained and been exposed to teach in an inclusive classroom (Twala, 2015). Students with Dyslexia require extra care and attention compared to normal students. It is necessary for the ESL mainstream classroom teachers to understand the difficulties faced by Dyslexic students and how it affects their reading and other language skills. So, the teacher must be skilled in teaching and handling them so that their reading skills can be developed at the appropriate level.

Fewer studies have highlighted the issues related to teaching students with a learning disability like Dyslexia in inclusive settings. Thus, this study intends to explore the teachers' experience in teaching students with a learning disability like Dyslexia by highlighting the challenges, methods, and approaches they used in teaching ESL to Dyslexic students.

### **1.3 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

The aims of the current study are:

1. To investigate to what extent do the teachers understand Dyslexia.
2. To find out the challenges faced by the teachers when teaching reading in English to Dyslexic students and the way they overcome it.
3. To explore the experiences of the ESL mainstream classroom teacher and Special Needs classroom teacher in teaching reading in English to Dyslexic students.

#### **1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The following research questions have been formulated to achieve the purposes of the research:

1. To what extent do the teachers understand dyslexia?
2. What are the challenges faced by the teachers in teaching reading in English to students with dyslexia and how do they overcome it?
3. What are the teachers' experiences in teaching reading in English to students with dyslexia in mainstream settings or in special education classrooms?

#### **1.5 THE SCOPE AND LIMITATION OF THE STUDY**

This study is an effort to explore the experience of Malaysian ESL teachers in teaching English to students with dyslexia. The setting of the study was Malaysian schools where the English language is taught as a second language. It aimed to enhance the understanding of how teachers from two different settings and pedagogical backgrounds to deliver their teaching and knowledge to students with dyslexia. Since it was a qualitative study, the study was heavily dependent on the participants' personal experience and perspectives. Therefore, the data might include the participants' personal biases and judgements and it cannot be generalized to other settings or locality.

#### **1.6 SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY**

As been mentioned earlier, only a few types of research has been done to explore ESL Malaysian teacher's perspectives in teaching ESL students with Dyslexia. Thus, this study fills the gap of knowledge by adding a new finding to the fields. It will highlight