Inclusive practices in teaching students with dyslexia: Second language teachers' concerns, attitudes and self-efficacy beliefs on a massive open online learning course

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Massive open online learning course increases teachers' self-efficacy for inclusion.
- After the course language teachers' attitudes to inclusion were more positive.
- Active course participation was linked to increased self-efficacy beliefs.

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

In this study we investigated whether language teachers' self-confidence, self-efficacy and attitudes to using inclusive educational practices with dyslexic students differ before and after participation in a massive open online course (MOOC). An online questionnaire survey, before (n = 1187) and after the course (n = 752), showed that the participants' post-course attitudes were more positive, their self-efficacy beliefs higher and their concerns lower than at the beginning of the course. Participants who completed more tasks on the course demonstrated increased post-course self-efficacy beliefs and those who posted more comments reported lower levels of worry about the implementation of inclusive language teaching practices.

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1. Introduction

Principles of inclusive education are based on the premise that people differ in the ways they learn, but everyone should have equal access to high-quality education and a supportive learning environment, including the context of learning additional languages. Inclusive education is strongly supported by the principles of social justice such as UNESCO's (2015) most recent Education for All monitoring report and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations General Assembly, 2006). Many countries of the world have ratified this convention and have passed legislation that aims to establish inclusive educational environments, where the individual needs of all students are successfully met (e.g. Individuals with Disabilities Act (2004) in the USA, the Equality Act (2010) in the UK and Disability Discrimination Act, 1992, in Australia).

Well-trained, aware and effective teachers are key to the success of inclusion. Responding to diverse learner needs in heterogeneous classrooms, maximising the opportunities for participation in education for every student and restructuring mainstream schooling to include all children may, however, pose considerable challenges to teachers (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Jordan, Schwartz, & McGhie-Richmond, 2009; Sharma & Nuttal, 2016), especially language teachers, because they often lack appropriate training in inclusive practices (Nijakowska, 2014). Such questions as how to prepare teachers for working in inclusive classrooms, enhance their knowledge and skills, boost their self-efficacy beliefs and develop and sustain positive attitudes, as well as alleviate concerns, have been researched in multiple educational contexts. No previous studies, however, have focused on these issues as they relate to teachers of additional languages. Research in this area is required because a large number of studies provide evidence of the

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difficulties students with SpLDs experience in acquiring additional languages and the challenges of multilingual individuals with reading-related disabilities face in different levels of education (for a review see Kormos, 2017).

In this study we investigated language teachers' concerns, attitudes and self-efficacy beliefs regarding inclusive practices when teaching additional languages to students with dyslexia before and after participation in a MOOC on dyslexia and language teaching. In our research we also examined how previous training, self-reported level of knowledge about dyslexia, teaching context, level of education and teaching experience were related to pre- and post-course attitudes, self-efficacy beliefs and concerns about inclusion in language teaching. Finally, we explored how course participation, operationalised as the percentage of tasks and number of units completed as well as the number of comments and replies posted online, was related to post-course attitudes, self-efficacy beliefs and concerns about inclusive practices towards dyslexic language learners. This study contributes important new knowledge concerning the way these variables operate in the context of language teaching where pre- and in-service training in inclusive practices and specific learning difficulties is often unavailable (Nijakowska, 2014). The study is also novel in the field of teacher education as it took place in the previously under-researched context of a new mode of online learning, the MOOC.

2. Review of literature

Learners with specific learning difficulties (SpLDs), including those who have dyslexia, belong to a group of individuals with special educational needs (SEN). In addition to native language processing problems, students with SpLDs often experience difficulties in acquiring additional languages (see e.g. Kormos, 2017; Kormos & Smith, 2012; Nijakowska, 2010; Peer & Reid, 2016; Schneider & Crombie, 2003; Sparks, Ganschow, & Pohlman, 1989; Sparks, Patton, Ganschow, Humbach, & Javorsky, 2006). These difficulties, which mostly affect the development of second language literacy skills and vocabulary knowledge, relate to the learning of additional languages in classroom contexts, as well as manifest themselves in multilingual contexts where children receive education in a language other than the one they use at home (e.g. Kormos, 2017; Martin, 2013). Language learners and multilinguals with SpLDs need to be taught using inclusive teaching practices and be provided with individualized support. Language teacher education schemes, however, offer scant initial training and continuous professional development opportunities in this respect (DysTEFL project — Needs analysis report, http://dystefl.eu/uploads/media/DysTEFL-Needs_analysis_report_01.pdf). Language teachers themselves also report that they lack sufficient background knowledge and understanding of the nature of dyslexia and the difficulties it causes in language learning and are not familiar with the instructional practices they should employ to fully include these learners (Nijakowska, 2014).

Previous studies have also revealed that a frequent cause of limited knowledge about inclusive practices and effective intervention programmes is insufficient and/or inadequate initial teacher training (e.g. Joshi et al., 2009; Goldfus, 2012). Relevant background knowledge and an appropriate understanding of the nature of learning difficulties are necessary in order to offer effective instruction to struggling readers (Bos, Mather, Dickson, Podhajski, & Chard, 2001; Goldfus, 2012; Moats & Foorman, 2003; Moats, 1994, 2009; Washburn, Joshi, & Binks-Cantrell, 2011b, 2011a). Knowledge of successful reading intervention programmes and their underlying theoretical principles has been shown to serve as an important foundation for teachers' self-confidence (e.g. Brady et al., 2009; McCutchen & Berninger, 1999;

McCutchen et al., 2002a, b; McCutchen, Green, Abbott, & Sanders, 2009; Podhajski, Mather, Nathan, & Sammons, 2009). Previous studies have also highlighted the importance of professional training in upgrading teacher knowledge (e.g. Brady et al., 2009; Podhajski Mather, Nathan & Sammons, 2009). Language teachers' lack of background knowledge, the unavailability of appropriate initial and continuing professional development and growing social and educational pressures relating to the implementation of inclusive practices may decrease teachers' self-efficacy beliefs, enhance their concerns and potentially lead to negative attitudes towards inclusion.

In their review of teacher attitudes towards inclusive education, Avramidis and Norwich (2002) suggest that teachers' attitudes towards inclusion are shaped by three factors: 1. Child-related factors connected with the nature and severity of a disability; 2: teacher-related factors (e.g. gender, age, years of teaching experience, grade level, contact with disabled persons and personality factors); and 3. Educational environment-related (context) factors, such as the availability of physical and human support. As regards child-related factors, teachers were found to be more willing to accept students with less severe disabilities for full-time placement in their mainstream classrooms and held more positive attitudes to the inclusion of children with physical and sensory impairments than students with learning and emotional-behavioural difficulties (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). At the level of teacher-related factors, Forlin, Hattie and Douglas's (1996) study indicates that school principals who had minimal contact with students with SEN underestimated the stress for inclusion compared to experienced classroom teachers who held more realistic beliefs of the demands of successful inclusion. In a more recent study conducted in the context of primary education in Bangladesh, Ahmmed, Sharma, and Deppeler (2012) found that perceived school support for inclusive teaching practices (operationalised as cooperation with other teachers, school administrators, parents of the students and the supply of teaching resources) as well as teacher-related variables such as contact and previous success in teaching students with SEN had a significant impact on teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education.

Both pre- and in-service teachers tend to have concerns about inclusion. They are worried about the lack of time to appropriately plan, prepare and conduct lessons in inclusive classrooms, manage student behaviour in heterogeneous groups and the availability of resources (Forlin & Chambers, 2011; Forlin & Cooper, 2013; Horne & Timmons, 2009). Teachers' concerns regarding their ability to implement inclusive practices are mitigated when classroom and school support services, such as resources, teaching materials, IT equipment, a restructured physical environment, learning support assistants, special teachers and speech therapists, are available (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). Research evidence also suggests that concerns tend to diminish when teacher attitudes become more positive and self-efficacy beliefs increase (Forlin, Sharma, & Loreman, 2014; Sharma, Forlin, Loreman, & Earle, 2006). Teachers' concerns about inclusion can also be considerably reduced by gaining knowledge and skills on teacher training courses (Sharma, Forlin, & Loreman, 2008).

Teachers' self-efficacy beliefs are based on teachers' self-perceptions of their competence rather than their actual level of competence (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2007) and are defined as "(…) a judgment of his or her capabilities to bring about desired outcomes of student engagement and learning, even among those students who may be difficult or unmotivated" (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001, p. 783). Self-efficacy beliefs can have a powerful effect on both teachers' and students' actions and thoughts (Bandura, 1977; Forlin, Sharma, et al., 2014; Malinen, Savolainen, & Xu, 2012; Ozder, 2011; Sharma, Loreman, & Forlin,