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WORK OF CROATIAN LANGUAGE TEACHERS WITH STUDENTS WITH SPECIFIC DIFFICULTIES IN READING AND WRITING

Abstract

Although teacher competencies are acquired during initial training in faculties of education, among which methodological competencies have a special place, many teachers are not trained to work with students with specific learning difficulties and do not know how to deal with them in the classroom. Research on specific learning difficulties has begun recently as the symptoms of such students have been gradually explored and efforts have been made to adapt teaching methods to each student. The purpose of this paper is to explain the specific learning difficulties - dyslexia and dysgraphia - and to describe the ways in which teachers can work with students who suffer from these difficulties. A survey was conducted to investigate how Croatian language teachers adapt their work to students with reading and writing difficulties. The teachers' awareness of the students' difficulties, the way they prepare teaching materials, the use of teaching methods when working with these students, the way they give work instructions, the way they check their knowledge, and effective examples of teaching students with specific reading and writing difficulties were investigated. The sample included 40 Croatian language teachers at primary and secondary level of education. The results

are generally satisfactory, and it can be said that teachers' handling of students with these difficulties in teaching language expression is good, although additional training could improve the quality.

Introduction

During the initial training at the faculties of education, teacher competences are acquired, among which methodological competence occupies a special place. It includes knowledge and skills of teaching content, but also enables teachers to recognise methodological possibilities and their application in teaching, to decide on the sequence or grouping of activities and tasks, to anticipate possible difficulties and to find ways to solve them. (Bjedov & Ivić, 2019, pp. 31-35) However, many teachers are not trained to work with students with specific learning difficulties and do not know how to deal with them in the classroom. Specific learning difficulties, their symptoms and methodological strategies for adapting teaching to each student have only recently begun to be studied. The purpose of this paper is to explain the specific learning difficulties - dyslexia and dysgraphia - and to describe the ways in which teachers can work with students who suffer from these difficulties. Many students with specific difficulties such as dyslexia and dysgraphia feel rejected, dislike school, and are demotivated because teachers take inappropriate action. Oral and written expression is predominant in the teaching of language expression, so these specific difficulties can be a major problem for students. A survey was conducted to investigate how Croatian language teachers adapt their work to students with reading and writing difficulties. The teachers' awareness of the students' difficulties, the way they prepare teaching materials, the use of teaching methods when working with these students, the way they give work instructions, the way they check their knowledge, as well as effective examples of teaching students with specific reading and writing difficulties were examined.

Specific learning difficulties

In their work, Croatian language teachers face many challenging tasks on a daily basis, and one of them is certainly the preparation and implementation of lessons adapted to students with specific learning difficulties. Among the group of students with learning difficulties, Zrilić (2011, p. 240) includes students with reduced intellectual abilities or autism, blind and visually impaired, deaf and hard of hearing, and students with behavioral disorders, but also gifted students. Among the group of students with specific learning difficulties, Zrilić includes those who have a severe disorder in understanding and mastering speech, language and writing. The attribute *specific* means that the causes of these difficulties are not among the typical causes of language disorders, such as the aforementioned reduced intellectual abilities, neurological impairments, educational neglect or severe hearing and vision impairments. Thus, they have arisen not as a result of deficits in students' cognitive, motor, sensory, emotional or social development, but as a result of the relationship between genetics and the child's specific neurological functioning (Galić-Jušić, 2004, p. 21). Namely, authors researching this problem (Davis & Eldon, 2011; Hallahan, Pullen & Ward, 2013; Kemp, Smith & Segal, 2017; Pavić-Cottiero, 2009, p. 232) explain that in such students, due to their less developed left hemisphere, information is sometimes not transmitted to the right part of the brain or changes along the way, affecting the processing of data, leading to difficulties in reading, writing and arithmetic. According to research, 5 to 10% of all students in Croatia show symptoms of specific learning difficulties, the most common difficulties being dyslexia (reading difficulties), dysgraphia (writing difficulties) and dyscalculia (arithmetic difficulties). Some researchers also include dyspraxia (motor difficulties) and ADHD (hyperactivity) among the specific learning difficulties.

Dyslexia

The term *dyslexia* is composed of the Greek words *dys* (weak, inappropriate) and *lexis* (word, language). Dyslexia is a specific cognitive

functioning of the child due to which he or she has weaknesses in some elements of information reception and processing, such as visual-spatial processing of written symbols or phonological processing, simultaneous processing and voice automation, which are among the basic processes required to master reading and writing (Galić-Jušić, 2004, p. 21). Students with dyslexia have difficulty distinguishing similar-sounding and similar-looking voices, have difficulty following verbal sequences and have messy handwriting. All of these symptoms are the result of difficulties with short-term memory, information intake, processing and storage, perception and lateralization (Kemp et al., 2017, pp. 1-10). According to researchers, dyslexia can come in a variety of forms. Bouillet (2010) identifies five types of dyslexia: deep dyslexia, superficial dyslexia, alexia, dyslexia resulting from neglect and dyslexia related to attention and memory disorders. Deep dyslexia is characterized by semantic errors (students utter a familiar word with a similar meaning ignoring the written word), inability to pronounce meaningless words, and misunderstanding words that describe abstract concepts. In contrast, superficial dyslexia is defined by the inability to pronounce words that are pronounced differently than they are written. This problem is more likely to occur when learning a foreign language, as words pronounced differently than written are not characteristic of the Croatian language. Alexia is an inability to read caused by damage to the left hemisphere of the brain and is divided into agnostic (the student does not recognize letters, but reads and speaks without interference) and aphasic (the student's ability to speak, write and read is impaired). Some researchers also define it as slow, letter-by-letter reading, while others refer to it as the complete lack of reading skills (Kardaš, 2015, p. 7). Dyslexia associated with attention and memory disorders is characterized by deficits in short-term memory and comprehension of the same word in different sentence contexts, while dyslexia as a result of neglect is characterized by the inability to explicitly recognize the initial part of a letter sequence (Bouillet, 2010, p. 136). The symptoms of dyslexia are most visible in childhood, but do not disappear completely in adulthood - then the symptoms of dyslexia and their intensity are the result

of dealing with the problem in earlier years of life (Galić-Jušić, 2004, p. 24). In preschool age, dyslexia is manifested by mirror writing, forgetfulness, language difficulties, slow reactions, difficulty in locomotion and confusion of similar words. Signs such as refusal to read or attend school, difficulty learning letters and words, difficulty coloring, coordination and memory difficulties appear in early school age. Zrilić (2011, p. 240) cites late speech in infancy, low vocabulary, difficulty remembering places and events in retelling, as well as difficulty expressing and learning songs and counters as such signs. In the upper primary and secondary grades, these signs are repeated but are also accompanied by frustration and behavioral difficulties, slowness in completing tasks and poorer general knowledge (Reid, 2013, p. 280).

Dysgraphia

Dysgraphia is a specific learning difficulty often associated with dyslexia and refers to the inability of students to fully master writing. Dysgraphia is defined as the persistent and long-term inability of a child to master writing according to the spelling principles of their language. Research shows that school-age dysgraphia is a more common and longer-lasting disorder than dyslexia (Posokhova, 2009, p. 232). Students who suffer from dysgraphia have no impairment of the audiovisual senses, no intellectual or language difficulties and therefore attend regular classes. Their delay is usually reported as one to one and a half year, i.e. two grades behind their peers (Zrilić, 2011, p. 240). Dysgraphia is not related to ignorance of spelling principles, but may be caused by genetic predisposition, external unfavorable factors or a combination of both. It can occur in a milder or more pronounced form, and the most difficult form is called agraphia, which means a complete inability to write. Posokhova (2009, p. 232) explains that dysgraphia can be divided into phonological dysgraphia, dysgrammatical dysgraphia and dysgraphia of speech analysis and synthesis.

Phonological dysgraphia manifests itself in the student's inability to distinguish between similar letters and difficulty in pronouncing certain

sounds, thus transferring these difficulties to writing. The cause of this type of dysgraphia is an insufficiently developed phonemic hearing, in which neither clear representations of voices are formed, nor auditory memory well developed. This type of dysgraphia can be recognized by the lack of punctuation, incomplete spelling of words and sentences, spelling of words together, and is usually a barrier to dictation and independent written expression (Zrilić, 2011, p. 240).

Dysgrammatical dysgraphia is caused by an unadopted coding system (Zrilić, 2011, p. 240) and manifests itself in students' inaccurate grammatical formation of words and sentences in all cases, genders, numbers and tenses.

Dysgraphia of language analysis and synthesis is most common in students and leads to difficulties and misunderstandings regarding the relationship between the parts of a sentence. The student finds it difficult to break a sentence into words or a word into syllables, and also has difficulty in morphologically breaking words into roots, prefixes and suffixes (Posohkova, 2009, p. 232). The vocabulary of such a student is deficient, the application of spelling rules is weak and syntax is disturbed, which is especially evident in independent written expression (Zrilić, 2011, p. 240). Lack of motor functions is the cause of motor dysgraphia, which manifests itself in illegible handwriting and inability to automate writing (inability to adopt writing strokes). Students add unnecessary elements to graphemes, tire quickly when writing and frequently change the slant of the letter when writing. Both cramping and lack of fluency in writing are observed. The number of errors in writing increases proportionally to the duration of writing, as these students easily lose concentration and become tired, resulting in most errors occurring at the end of the text.

The last form of dysgraphia is *visual dysgraphia*, which is manifested by difficulties in describing and understanding spatial (*up, down, left, right*) and temporal (*before, after*) relationships, as well as difficulties in mastering lateralization. Students suffering from this type of dyslexia generally do not have language difficulties, but never use prepositions in speech (HUD, 2007). The causes of this type of dyslexia are altered

visual perception, memory discrimination and impaired spatial orientation (Zrilić, 2011, p. 240). Very often, these students also confuse the meanings of antonymous adjectives, e.g., *thin* and *thick*. Students suffering from this form of dysgraphia most often twist and mix up letters and have difficulty adopting the shape of individual graphemes (Posokhova, 2009, p. 232).

The most common symptoms of dysgraphia are illegible handwriting, writing letters of different sizes, the usual crossing of lines in a notebook, omitting or changing syllables or words in written text and incorrect pencil grip (Leneček, Blaži, & Ivšac 2007, pp. 107-121). In writing, students add or subtract elements from graphemes, substitute graphemes that are written similarly and write slowly and often of poor quality (Posokhova, 2009, p. 232), write each graphic element separately, make long and unnecessary pauses, and make many unnecessary movements (Krampač-Grljušič & Marinić, 2007, p. 97). Symptoms of mirror writing and difficulty following the direction of writing are common (Bjelica, 2009, p. 232), as well as skipping words and unnecessary reversals in a sentence.

Approach to students with specific learning difficulties

In the past, students with learning difficulties were stigmatized and separated from their peers by being labeled lazy, incompetent, uninterested or unintelligent. Difficulties in reading and writing were also considered one of the indicators of a child's delayed intellectual development (Zrilić, 2011, p. 240). As a result, teachers were not sufficiently informed about the meaning of and approaches to solving problems such as specific language difficulties and students often lost motivation to work, accepting the untrue fact that they were not capable enough to learn. Over time, teachers and parents became frustrated by students' failures and expected less and less from them. Low expectations and negative attitudes from parents and teachers made it even more difficult to meet students' needs for communication, identification and acceptance among peers (Zrilić, 2011, p. 240). The change in approach to

these students began about thirty years ago with studying this problem in more detail. Parents and teachers became aware of the definition of specific learning difficulties related not only to academic performance, but also to communication skills and social relationships (Hallahan et al., 2013, pp. 15-32). Although more and more facts about such difficulties are becoming known, the environment often continues to stigmatize students who suffer from these difficulties. The influence of the environment is extremely important for such students. Positive influences can be stimulating and encouraging, helping the student to overcome their limitations. The role of teachers, therefore, is to approach these students with special patience and understanding, to adapt teaching methods to the students' abilities, to individualize teaching and to do their best to highlight the virtues and abilities of these students while integrating them into daily activities and trying to avoid stigmatization.

Adaptation of language expression teaching to students with disabilities in reading and writing

According to Ivančić and Stančić (2002, pp.133-179), there are four types of procedures for adapting teaching to students who have difficulties with reading and writing. These are perceptual adaptation, cognitive adaptation, linguistic adaptation and adaptation to work requirements.

Perceptual adaptation refers to the adaptation of the means of presentation and texts. In teaching language expression, students with specific learning difficulties should be given more time to read and write. When preparing texts that these students will later have to read, retell or summarize, the most important parts should be visually highlighted by a special color or pre-arranged marking and grouped at the end of the text. The font should be the same throughout the text, with fonts that do not have hyphens at the end of the letter preferred, such as *Arial* font, with a minimum font size of 12. Also, italicized or underlined words should be avoided, as this visually joins the letters and makes reading more difficult. Rather, use colors, a larger font, or capital letters to emphasize certain words or parts of the text. Left alignment is also

preferable when formatting text. Reading can be made easier for students with disabilities by formatting text so that each new paragraph is indented or separated by skipping a line, increasing the spacing between letters and lines and separating all sentences with a double space. Individualized text should be printed on non-glare, preferably cream-colored paper. Students with disabilities should sit closer to the blackboard so that they can more easily perceive and follow the teacher's instructions (Ivančić & Stančić, 2002, pp. 133-179; Lenček, 2009, pp. 107-121).

Cognitive adaptation refers to giving instructions, planning and summarizing the text, as well as simplifying and clearly presenting the content. Students with specific learning difficulties should be given step-by-step assistance in completing the task. The teacher or teaching assistant should encourage students to solve the tasks independently, but when necessary, they should be helped by asking partial questions or guiding them to the correct answer. When teaching language expression, for example, when students describe their summer or write an essay, the teacher can prompt with sub-questions or ask questions in the form of an introduction-elaboration-conclusion so that the result is a meaningful text with a beginning and an end. The instructions should be short and precise, they should contain terms that are familiar to the student. If the text template contains a form of bulleted list, the content should not be separated by a comma in a sentence, but each entry should be written in a separate sentence. In reading, writing, and speaking exercises, the student should be instructed to follow the sequence of actions and to organize the text so that there is a beginning, elaboration and conclusion. The content should be revised according to the student's ability. For example, if the rest of the class is reading a text that contains technical terms, the text should be simplified for students with special difficulties to understand. In addition, students with difficulties read harder and more slowly, so it would be desirable to reduce the scope of the task, which means that instead of a whole reading piece, for example, the student should retell only one chapter of it (Ivančić & Stančić, 2002, pp. 133-179).

Linguistic adaptation involves speaking clearly, giving loud and concise verbal instructions and emphasizing anything important in the task. Since students with specific difficulties have a problem with short-term memory, the teacher should repeat the instructions several times during the task and check that the student really understood what was asked of him or her. It is also desirable to accompany verbal instructions with gestures so that the student with specific difficulties can better understand what is being said. Any new concept taught in class should be explained and, if possible, illustrated in the most appropriate way (visual, auditory, tactile, etc.). When asking questions, attention should also be paid to whether the student really understands what is being asked and, if necessary, rephrase the question or ask a sub-question to make it easier for them to follow the flow of their thoughts and express themselves orally in a meaningful way (Ivančić & Stančić, 2002, pp. 133-179).

When it comes to *adaptation to work requirements*, the most important thing is cooperation with the student, their parents and professionals in order to individualize methodological procedures and approaches and to adapt learning strategies to the maximum. The teacher should adapt the teaching material to the student's predominant learning strategy and teach them how to reach their full potential. It is also important to educate the student's parents on how they can help with homework. For example, if teaching language expression involves observation-based description as a stylistic-compositional exercise, a student with learning difficulties may be asked to provide details of the object, person or design being described in the form of a mind map, hierarchical map or other visual representation. Mental maps or mind maps are also useful in compressing and simplifying text. In addition, a student with disabilities should be supported in completing tasks independently, with support gradually phased out as the student makes progress. For example, the student should be praised for any success or progress, and any ridicule by classmates should be avoided while the student is presenting to the class. Therefore, a positive class climate should be encouraged and the right to diversity should be emphasized. When the student's progress is evident, the student's independence should be strengthened and

self-confidence encouraged. Situations where the student feels humiliated or unsuccessful should be avoided, spontaneous expression should be encouraged, students should not be forced to read aloud, and tests that are acceptable and adapted to the student should be used (Zrilić, 2011, p. 240). Students with specific learning difficulties should not be underestimated, but should be given tasks with varying degrees of difficulty, but in proportion to their abilities. In oral expression, especially in retelling a text, the student can be involved by retelling one chapter in one lesson and another chapter in another lesson (Ivančić & Stančić, 2002, pp. 133-179). In the case of written expression, the teacher can adjust and change the topic, the length and the time needed to complete the written task. This means, for example, that instead of a 250-word task, a student should write a 100-word text in one school lesson. Such a student must be allowed to use writing aids and simpler expression. In correcting errors, consistency and understanding of the error caused by the student's specific difficulty are important. Such errors should be indicated but not taken into account when grading the work (Zrilić, 2011, p. 240). In contrast, the teacher should pay attention to creativity and the meaning of the student's overall work.

Description of the research methodology

An anonymous survey was used to conduct the research, which included eight mandatory questions and one optional question, with the seventh question containing 24 statements and the eighth question containing 31 statements. This paper analyzes the first, second, eighth and ninth question. The first and second question asked participants to indicate their gender and the school where they are employed. In the eighth question, 31 statements were offered and participants were asked to rate the extent to which they related with their work with students with literacy difficulties, with responses of *always*, *often*, *rarely* and *never*. The ninth question was an open-ended question that asked respondents to provide examples of teaching students with reading and writing difficulties in language expression classes that have been effective.

The survey was administered in September 2020 via the *Google Forms* platform. The participants in the survey were primary and secondary school teachers of Croatian language. Since the questionnaire was set up in *Facebook* groups, this type of survey allowed participation of the Croatian language teachers throughout the Republic of Croatia. The research sample included 40 primary and secondary school Croatian language teachers. The obtained results are presented in numerical and percentage ratios and are analyzed and interpreted for the entire sample. Participants' responses to the ninth question were written entirely in their original form, without revision or linguistic editing.

Gender of participants

Out of 40 survey participants, 39 participants (97.5%) were female and one participant (2.5%) was male.

Type of school in which participants work

Regarding the type of school in which participants work, 32 (80%) indicated that they work in an elementary school, while 9 (22.5%) indicated that they work in a secondary school. One participant works in both an elementary and secondary school at the same time. None of the participants reported currently working in any other type of educational institution.

Results and discussion

Informing themselves about the difficulties of the students

When it comes to informing about students' difficulties, none of the participants indicated that they have *never* been in contact with the homeroom teacher and parents of students with reading and writing difficulties, and 7 (17.5%) indicated that they are *rarely* in contact. As many as 18 (45%) participants selected the answer *often*, and 15 (37.5%) selected the answer *always*. Regarding the statement of additionally

informing themselves about the student's difficulties, 18 participants (45%) chose the answer *always* and 19 (47.5%) answered *often*. Only 3 (7.5%) participants indicated that they *rarely* do so, and none indicated that they *never* do so (Figure 1). Thus, the vast majority of participants are in regular contact with the homeroom teacher and parents of students with disabilities (over 82%) and are additionally informed of the student's difficulties (over 92%).
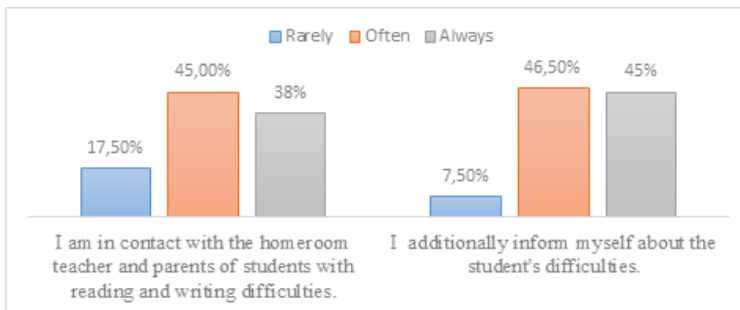

Figure 1. Informing themselves about the difficulties of the students

Teaching materials for working with students with reading and writing difficulties

Regarding the statement that they prepare individualized teaching materials for students with reading and writing difficulties, most respondents indicated that they prepare them *often* (23) or *always* (11), showing that 85% of teachers regularly prepare adapted materials for students with reading and writing difficulties. The remaining 15% of teachers surveyed *rarely* prepare such materials, which may indicate that they need additional support and training. The results are shown in Figure 2. Regarding the indication that they turn to experts (e.g., speech therapists, psychologists) for help in preparing appropriate teaching materials for students with reading and writing difficulties, a large number of teachers do this *often* (20) or *always* (11), while 7 participants do so *rarely* and one *never*. The fact that 80% of participants seek help from experts may indicate adequate support for students and teachers through professional

services, as well as good collaboration with teachers. However, it may also indicate a lack of teacher autonomy and uncertainty in adapting teaching materials, suggesting the need for additional support for teachers. When asked if they create individual text templates for students with learning difficulties that are tailored to their difficulties, i.e., text templates with appropriate font, text alignment and formatting, most teachers responded that they *always* (13) or *often* (23) do so, i.e., 90% of teachers do so regularly and only four *rarely* or *never* do so. These data indicate that this form of support for students with reading and writing difficulties is strongly represented among teachers. A slightly smaller percentage of teachers surveyed, 82.5%, *always* or *often* visually highlight the most important parts of the text intended for a student with disabilities, while only 7 teachers *rarely* or *never* do so.

When it comes to the claim that materials adapted to the student with difficulties are printed on non-glare paper, the results are slightly lower, with 55% of teachers indicating that they *always* or *often* use this adaptation, while 30% *rarely* do so and one teacher *never* does. 70% of teachers responded *always* or *often* to the statement that they are creative in creating teaching materials and that students with disabilities respond well to them, while the rest responded *rarely* or *never*. Finally, 57.5% of the participants responded *always* or *often*, 32.5% *rarely* and 10% *never* to the statement that they are familiar with assistive technologies in teaching and use them in teaching language expression.

In light of the above results, on the one hand, it can be concluded that adaptations for students with reading and writing difficulties are strong in terms of text formatting with appropriate fonts and visual adaptations, but somewhat less so in terms of contrast. On the other hand, adaptations are less represented in terms of other creative solutions and the use of assistive technologies, which can be explained at least in part by financial barriers (at least in terms of assistive technologies), but also by the overload of teachers who have little time and space for creativity.
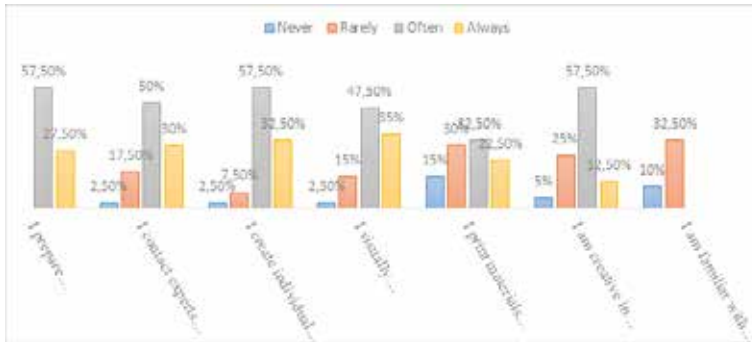
Figure 2. Teaching materials for working with students with reading and writing difficulties

Methods and approaches for teaching a student with reading and writing difficulties

Regarding the use of teaching methods and approaches for students with reading and writing difficulties, the results (Figure 3) indicate a high sensitivity of teachers to the needs of students with reading and writing difficulties, a positive and stimulating approach and an adaptation of working methods. For example, 75% of teachers *always* or *often* use different methods for teaching students with reading and writing difficulties than for teaching other students, and 90% of teachers indicated that a student with difficulties in the Croatian language class *always* or *often* sits near the blackboard. In addition, almost all teachers (97.5%) indicated that they *never* or *rarely* lose patience when working with a student with difficulties; 82.5% indicated that they know how to identify students' strengths and dominant styles and learning strategies; 87.5% of respondents indicated that a student with difficulties makes progress since they teach them the Croatian language *always* or *often*.

When asked if they usually try to help students reach their full potential, 94.5% of respondents indicated that they either *always* or *often* do so. The results also show that teachers recognize their role in developing a positive self-image in students with difficulties, as well as promoting acceptance of students with disabilities in the classroom. For example, 97.5% responded that they *always* or *often* try to develop a positive

image of themselves and their abilities in a student with difficulties, and 90% responded that they *always* or *often* help to ensure that students with difficulties are respected and not ridiculed by their peers.

Finally, responses to the last statement that they try to treat a student with difficulties subtly and individually so that they are not stigmatized indicate that teachers are highly sensitive because 97.5% of teachers chose answers *always* or *often*.
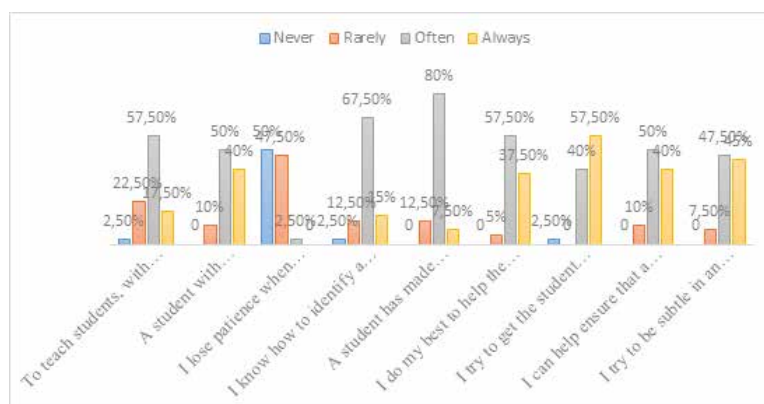

Figure 3. Methods and approaches for teaching a student with reading and writing difficulties

Giving instructions to a student with reading and writing difficulties

In terms of how they give instruction to a student who suffers from reading and writing difficulties, 15 (37.5%) participants indicated that they *always* give shorter and clearer instructions to a student with difficulties than other students, and more than half of the participants, 21 (52.5%) indicated that they do so *often* (Figure 4). Only 4 (10%) participants indicated that they *rarely* give shorter and clearer instructions to a student with difficulty, and none indicated that they *never* do so. In addition, 20 (50%) participants indicated that they *always* check several times to make sure the student with difficulty understood the task, 16 (40%) do so *often*, 4 respondents (10%) *rarely* do so, and none of the participants selected the response *never*. A quarter of the participants

(10 or 25%) indicated that whenever they explain something to a student with difficulty, they supplement verbal communication with nonverbal, while a convincing majority, 26 (65%), chose the answer *often*. The answer *rarely* was given by four participants, representing one tenth (10%), and the answer *never* was chosen by none. It is justified to conclude that teachers adapt their communication to students with reading and writing difficulties, primarily by giving clear work instructions for work and observing how they understand them.
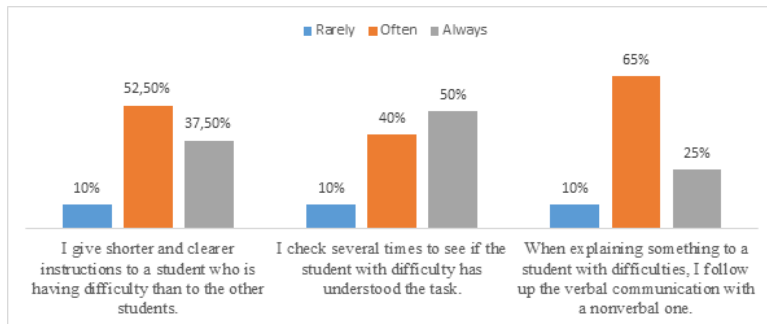

Figure 4. Giving instructions to a student with reading and writing difficulties

Testing the knowledge of students with reading and writing difficulties

Figure 5 shows the results in terms of how to test the knowledge of students with reading and writing difficulties. Overall, the results indicate that teachers care about the specific needs of students and adapt the methods of knowledge testing to their characteristics. No less than 97.5% of teachers indicated that they *always* or *often* give a student with difficulty more time to complete an assignment or write a test. Teachers also adapt the form of the exam to students with reading and writing difficulties. For example, 85% of teachers reported that they *always* or *often* prepare an exam for a student with disabilities that contains fewer tasks than the exam for other students, and 90% of teachers always or often adapt the content of the exam to the abilities of students with difficulties.

In addition, 97.5% of teachers *always* or *often* ask a student with reading and writing difficulties a series of partial questions instead of a single long question, and 82.5% *always* or *often* give a student with difficulties several simple tasks instead of a single complex task. Furthermore, the majority of teachers, 87.5%, *always* or *often* ask subtle sub-questions to the student in order to formulate meaningful text, and 85% *always* or *often* give a student with difficulties small-scale oral tasks. Teachers are also careful not to negatively evaluate errors that are due to student's difficulties. On the one hand, 72.5% of participants indicated that they *never* negatively evaluate errors due to student difficulties in assessment, and 17.5% *rarely* do so. On the other hand, 50% of the teachers indicated that the student must *always* or *often* write a correction of the errors made in the exercise of written expression, while others insist on it *rarely* or *never*. When asked if students who have difficulty are made to read aloud or express themselves in writing frequently because they believe it will make them better, 65% of the teachers responded *never* or *rarely*, while the rest responded *often* (32.5%). These data suggest that many teachers still do not have enough insight into the fact that reading difficulties cannot be overcome by practice, but adjustments are needed to find the optimal way of reading and learning, as well as the emotional consequences of reading aloud to students with reading difficulties. However, it is not possible to infer from this question how teachers encourage students to practice (e.g., whether they use adapted texts, etc.), so this result should be interpreted with caution. The results described suggest that teachers are sensitive to the need to adjust the way they test the knowledge of students with reading and writing difficulties. It should be noted, however, that the manner in which exams are adapted is highly individualized and that different students require different adaptations. Choosing adaptations such as simpler tasks instead of less complex tasks may be an appropriate adaptation for some students, while it may not be appropriate for others to test their knowledge. When making such adaptations, care should be taken not to oversimplify the task, i.e., to make it unjustifiably easier, as this can have negative effects on motivation and learning.
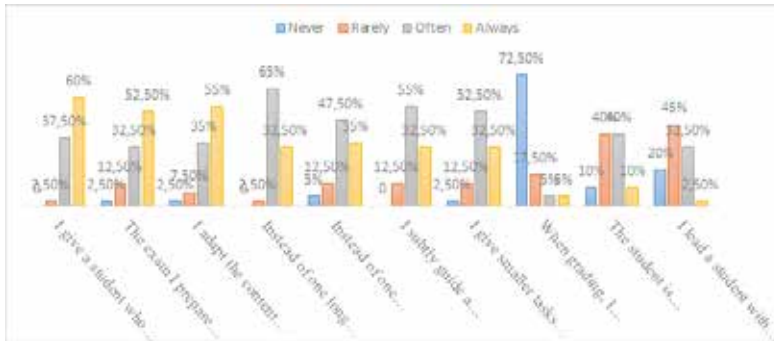
Figure 5. Testing the knowledge of students with reading and writing difficulties

Examples of teaching students with reading and writing difficulties in language expression teaching, which have proven to be effective

In the last, open-ended question of the questionnaire, participants were asked to provide examples of teaching students with reading and writing difficulties in language teaching, which proved to be effective. Out of the 40 Croatian language teachers who participated in this research, almost all answered this question, except for five who did not. Their responses are reproduced in full and in their original form in Example (1).

(1)
Using comics and digital tools. / It is effective to stand very close to the student and slowly explain to them what I expect them to do and help them make a plan for writing with key words. / Different information is written on the dice on each side, from which they are to compose a story. Thus, they are offered: the place of action, the time, the character and the magic object. After rolling the dice, the student solves the problem more easily, of course with the teacher's help and additional instructions./ For example, give the student an assignment to write about a topic that piques their interest!/ When writing essays, I offer more words for descriptions and pictures to show what they should write about./ Adjust the font./ Additional instruction and one-on-one tutoring./ If dyslexia is present, larger font, spacing and printing on pastel yellow paper would be helpful. In the case of dysgraphia, instead of an answer line, write dashed lines on the exam, of which there are as many as there are letters in the answer./ Research lessons in

which the student briefly presents the work of the group./ Small number of students in the group, recording speech with interpretive representations by teacher, games to complete letters and words, shapes of letters in kinesthetic sand and clay..../ Creative simple problem tasks of a visual nature./ Patience in explaining./ Special, clearer templates for oral or written expression./ Use of customized textbooks from NLJ Publishing, shortening the text according to IFLA guidelines./ Teaching based on digital technologies as support has proven to be very effective. Process writing as well as developing different reading strategies in students are important steps to achieve expected results./ Writing texts in smaller units./ Creating mental maps or representing content with drawings or pictures./ Individualized approach./ Correct the reading error immediately, then the student repeats the word correctly when he hears it; check the notebook several times and regularly during the lesson./ I give the student detailed written instructions for writing an essay. I allow a student with severe dysgraphia to write tests and essays in capital letters (following the rules of capitalization - highlight the capital letter with a different color or similar). I create a board plan for the student with key words highlighted. I adapt the reading to the student by giving him shorter texts to read and preparing questions to help him understand the text./ I prepare materials with appropriate font, font size, and spacing. I divide the text into smaller units, repeat the instructions several times, and check to see if the student has understood them. / A special type of language practice (written or oral), respect and praise even for minimal progress, making mind maps that have proven useful and interesting to the student, and making cards with specific terms that the student puts together to form a specific unit./ Creating materials depending on the student's level of difficulty / Visually highlighting the most important parts of the text the student is reading, separating the most important parts, but the most important thing is patience, perseverance, not giving up after the first obstacle./ / When writing an independent literary work, I talk to the student about the topic, and together we try to find out what he wants to write about ... Then I ask him, in capital letters, five or six questions about the topic that he should try to answer. In this way, the student can successfully write an essay with targeted questions./ If the child has a problem with the articulation of certain voices or stutters, in eloquence or oral retelling, we prefer a written form of testing./ Rewriting texts and repetition with music./ I do not have a student who has complex difficulties, so I just adjust my work a little; more time for occasional tasks./ Write a story based on pictures./ More time, larger print, more visuals./ Read his essay for which he was praised in front of the class, or recite a poem./ Praise, praise, work check, praise .../ You have to give the student much more time, give him space and guide him. Also divide the exercise into several shorter tasks.

The fact that almost all participants answered this question might indicate that teachers have something to say, but also want to talk about this current, stimulating and important topic when it comes to students who have difficulties in reading and writing. In their detailed responses, as well as in shorter elaborations, teachers showed interest in students with reading and writing difficulties and made a strong effort to work with these students. Teachers' deep thinking about these students and their commitment to developing different ways to adapt planned activities and tasks to their difficulties are also evident. Teachers clearly demonstrate willingness to help students and selflessly invest extra time and all available resources with the intention of promoting student success and progress. One can read patience, understanding and tolerance in their responses, which explicitly state the values and most important qualities to consider when working with students who have difficulties in reading and writing. In addition, it is clear how the teachers apply cognitive adaptation by giving instructions on how to carry out a task (*Different pieces of information are written on the dice on each side, from which they should compose a story. Thus, they are offered: the place of the action, the time, the character and the magic object. After rolling the dice, the student makes it easier than offered, of course with the help of the teacher and additional instructions*). Additionally, an adaptation of language is evident with a slower explanation of expectations and individualized support for the student to create a writing plan, as well as an adaptation of the demands of the work, realized, for example, in statements *I break texts into several smaller units* or *Writing text in smaller units*. Teacher's responses also show an adjustment in perception, first by adjusting the font, then by increasing spacing, using yellow pastel paper and designing as many lines as the student responses are expected to be. It is also evident that teachers use creative practices and techniques in teaching language expression by planning games for students with difficulties to *complete letters and words and kinesthetically shaping letters with sand and clay...* Teachers also use digital tools and educational technology that they believe have proven successful in supporting students with difficulties.

Teachers use an individualized approach for students with difficulties and cite *creating a mind map and presenting learning through pictures or drawings* as an example of a task that has proven effective. Among the responses of the teachers interviewed, the following certainly stand out: *Reading his essay, for which he was praised in front of the class, or reading a poem. / Praise, praise, checking the work, praise...* The positive and stimulating attitude of the teacher towards the student who has difficulties in reading and writing certainly helps to strengthen their self-confidence, initiative, motivation and activities in the field of language expression, and thus has a positive effect on their success.

Conclusion

Students who have difficulties in reading and writing are part of our teaching reality, so dealing with them is an extremely important task for the teacher. This means that Croatian language teachers need to think about different ways of adapting the teaching of language expression in order to help these students reach their full potential in a subject they find challenging due to difficulties. Since most students with specific learning difficulties attend classes following the regular curriculum with individualized work procedures, every Croatian language teacher should be sufficiently informed about the symptoms that students with reading and writing difficulties suffer from and be able to adapt instructional materials and approaches to the student so that the student with difficulties can successfully participate in class and acquire knowledge and skills equivalent to those of their peers. Reading and writing difficulties such as dyslexia and dysgraphia make it very difficult for these students to participate in language expression classes, which are based on oral and written expression and whose content includes reading and writing activities. Research findings are generally satisfactory when it comes to adapting the teaching of language expression to students with reading and writing difficulties. Croatian language teachers try to adapt teaching materials and methods to students with difficulties, paying attention to the design of the text, visual highlighting of key concepts

and creativity in writing in general. These are certainly ways to help students participate in the classroom and reduce the impact of their difficulties on their success at work. Such a research result could be due to the increasing availability of information on the subject and greater collaboration among teachers, homeroom teachers, parents and professionals such as speech therapists and psychologists, but also to the fact that everyone is working together to try to eliminate the stigma attached to these students and enable them to reach their maximum potential. Similarly, satisfaction with the results achieved may be due to the way teachers deal with students with reading and writing difficulties, although additional training could improve this. Also, by providing additional resources for teaching materials to work with students with difficulties not only in reading and writing, the quality of the teacher's work could be even higher. This would certainly reflect the improved ability of teachers to use modern online tools that would facilitate the teaching of students with reading and writing difficulties. This could certainly be facilitated by hiring more teaching assistants, who would provide more individualized attention to students with difficulties and better outcomes. However, it is necessary to mention certain limitations of the research conducted. First, the data were collected using the self-assessment method, which increases the risk of giving socially desirable answers. In future research, it would be useful to include other sources of information, such as the students with specific learning difficulties themselves, their parents or professionals. In addition, the relatively small sample limits the ability to generalize and compare results across participants (e.g. from urban or rural areas). There is also the possibility of self-selection of participants, meaning that teachers who participated in the survey are already aware and trained in the field of research, which in turn limits the possibility of generalizing the results.

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RAD NASTAVNIKA HRVATSKOGA JEZIKA S UČENICIMA SA SPECIFIČNIM POTEŠKOĆAMA U ČITANJU I PISANJU

Sažetak

Iako se tijekom inicijalnoga obrazovanja na nastavničkim fakultetima stječu nastavničke kompetencije, među kojima posebno mjesto zauzima metodička kompetencija, mnogi nastavnici nisu educirani za rad s učenicima sa specifičnim poteškoćama u učenju te kako im pristupiti u nastavnome radu. Specifične su se poteškoće učenja počele proučavati tek u novije vrijeme, kada se postupno počelo i proučavati simptome takvih učenika te raditi na nastavnim metodama prilagođavanja nastave svakomu pojedinom učeniku. Ciljevi su ovoga rada razložiti specifične teškoće učenja – disleksiju i disgrafiju – te opisati mogućnosti nastavnikova rada s učenicima koji imaju te poteškoće. Da bi se istražilo kako nastavnici hrvatskoga jezika prilagođuju svoj rad učenicima s teškoćama u čitanju i pisanju, provedeno je istraživanje metodom ankete koje je obuhvatilo nastavnikovu infomiranost o učenikovim poteškoćama, nastavnikovu izradu nastavnih materijala, primjenu nastavnih metoda u radu s učenicima s poteškoćama u čitanju i pisanju, način davanja uputa za rad, način provjeravanja te učinkovite primjere poučavanja učenika sa specifičnim poteškoćama u čitanju i pisanju. Uzorak je obuhvatio 40 nastavnika hrvatskoga jezika osnovnih i srednjih škola. Rezultati su uglavnom zadovoljavajući i može se reći da je pristup nastavnika prema učenicima s navedenim poteškoćama u nastavi jezičnoga izražavanja kvalitetan, iako bi se dodatnom edukacijom kvaliteta mogla još poboljšati.

Ključne riječi: nastavnik hrvatskoga jezika; disleksija; disgrafija; nastava jezičnoga izražavanja; specifične teškoće učenja