

Giving Students a Voice: Dyslexia and Language Learning Experiences from Childhood to Adulthood in Greece

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the language learning experiences of Greek students in primary, secondary and tertiary education. Data were gathered from interviews with four students currently enrolled in higher education programs. The interviews focused on their language experiences and struggles from childhood to adulthood, teachers, peer relations and family. Data were analyzed using IPA. Findings indicate participants' negative language learning experiences underwent changes in the course of their learning history. Their perceived struggles were more intense in primary school, yet they also had to negotiate a range of L1 and L2 obstacles in secondary and tertiary education. Teachers from the private sector emerged as the decisive factor in participants' ability to overcome dyslexia-related difficulties and cope with the fierce competition of the Greek nationwide university entrance exams. Private sector teachers were also identified as the main factor for overcoming dyslexia-related difficulties in EFL. It is hoped that offering an account of their experiences will facilitate our understanding of dyslexia and the potential for inclusion for Greek dyslexic students across educational levels.

Keywords: dyslexia, Greek students with dyslexia, language learning, EFL, educational experiences.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Dyslexia constitutes an umbrella term which includes difficulties of varying degree largely-but not solely related to specific decoding and encoding processes. As a result, a dyslexic student commonly faces a variety of lifelong reading and writing struggles (Kormos, 2020). Although there is still no consensus for a single definition, the current work endorses the following IDA definition which has been extensively used in L1 and L2 educational literature:

“Dyslexia is a specific learning disability that is neurobiological in origin. It is characterized by difficulties with accurate and/or fluent word recognition and by poor spelling and decoding abilities. These difficulties typically result from a deficit in the phonological component of language that is often unexpected in relation to other cognitive abilities and the provision of effective classroom instruction. Secondary consequences may include problems in reading comprehension and reduced reading experience that can impede growth of vocabulary and background knowledge.”

Dyslexia is the most prevalent learning disorder worldwide (WHO 2018) and research findings suggest that children, adolescents, and adults experience language learning-related anxiety, depression, and social withdrawal across primary, secondary, and tertiary education contexts (Aro *et al.*, 2022; Goldston *et al.*, 2007; Livingston *et al.* 2018; Moojen *et al.*, 2020). Dyslexic students' language

learning struggles stem from environmental factors such as inadequate training and awareness of language teachers, parents' ignorance, and peers' teasing which in turn triggers stigmatization (Alexander-Passe 2015; Riddick 2013). Instead of receiving appropriate evidence-based instruction, they are often labeled as stupid or lazy and develop disabled marginalized identities which prohibit them from achieving their academic goals. They often encounter discrimination, neglect, even humiliation especially during primary and secondary education (Kormos *et al.*, 2009; Kormos, 2020; Riddick, 2013; Livingston *et al.*, 2018).

Previous works within the Greek educational context have provided us with valuable insights on the learning experiences of Greek dyslexic students (Stampoltzis & Polychronopoulou 2009; Stampoltzis *et al.*, 2015) and on Greek teachers' views and their preparedness regarding teaching students with dyslexia (Nijakowska 2019; Nijakowska *et al.*, 2020; Nijakowska *et al.*, 2018; Papalouka 2011) yet works exploring specifically the L1 and the L2 language learning experiences of Greek students from primary school to university are non-existent. This paper attempts to fill this gap and shed light to the L1 and L2 learning experiences of four engineering students who managed to enter higher education and fulfill their dreams from childhood to adulthood.

II. STUDY DESIGN

A. Sampling and Interview Guides

This study employed purposive sampling. It was advertised through word of mouth and emails the researcher sent to her EFL ex-students. Inclusion criteria required participants to self-identify as dyslexic. Since the main objective was to explore participants' experiences and encourage them to produce detailed accounts the interview included solely open-ended questions. Interview questions were constructed based on the review of the literature regarding dyslexic students' L1 and L2 learning experiences (Mullins & Preyde 2013; Seiradakis 2022). For example, "Tell me about your language learning experiences in primary school". Moreover, the question's structure and sequence were flexible and directed based on the participant's response to the previous question. Each interview lasted on average 40 minutes.

B. Data Analysis and Procedure

Data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed based on interpretative phenomenological analysis (Alase, 2017). Participants were recruited from two higher education institutions in Greece. All identifiable information was removed, and participants were asked to choose their own pseudonyms (Table I) to protect anonymity. Prior to the interviews the author asked for informed consent and informed participants would be asked to reflect and provide information about their experiences with dyslexia from primary to tertiary education. Due to Covid-19 restrictions, participants were all interviewed on an online conferencing software. All participants were informed that they were not obliged to answer questions that made them uncomfortable and had the right to pull out anytime.

TABLE I: PARTICIPANTS' DEMOGRAPHIC DETAILS

Name	Diagnosis	Discipline	Age
Markos	3 rd grade	Electrical and Computer Engineering	22
John	4 th grade	Electrical and Computer Engineering	22
Maria	4 th grade	Electrical and Computer Engineering	23
Eric	5 th grade	Marine Engineering	22

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Primary School

Similarly, to findings from previous works who have also explored dyslexic adults' learning experiences during their primary education years (Stampoltzis, & Polychronopoulou 2009; Hellendoorn, & Ruijsenaars 2000; Ingesson, 2007), all participants in the sample had negative memoirs of learning both L1 and L2. Participants' accounts revealed that both Greek and English teachers, often seemed unable to understand their struggles in language learning and treated them as being lazy or slow. Their narratives included a series of painful and upsetting instances which probably had a negative effect on their self-esteem and their self-efficacy, both of which are particularly fragile during the ages of 7–11 (Berk, 2003). During primary school years, students start evaluating themselves based on what "important others" such as teachers, parents and peers think of them, and this tendency bears a risk of seriously jeopardizing their self-esteem. The extracts below vividly

illustrate John's and Eric's experiences during the first grades of primary school:

"Primary school was a nightmare for me...Greek was a nightmare; English was a nightmare. I remember myself trying and trying to learn the spelling rules in Greek, feeling inferior compared to others because I couldn't learn them." (John)

"I remember when I was really young, first grade, second grade struggling with reading and writing in Greek and around the third grade which was the point that I became a bit better because my parents found a teacher who was specialized in dyslexia and she helped me a lot, I must say that, then suddenly, boom, English...And it was horrible because it was like I started from scratch all over again because English was extremely difficult for me to spell, to read and to write, it was and it still is worse than Greek." (Eric)

Dyslexia-triggered difficulties in L1 and L2 learning during primary school caused tensions with participants' parents who also seemed not to understand the reasons their children struggled in language learning:

"I didn't like Greek, I didn't like English, I didn't like languages altogether and I wasn't a good student in neither of them...and my parents were extremely worried and we had endless fights and then at school the same thing with the Greek teacher mostly, the English teacher didn't really care, she would just go on with her lesson, which I preferred because I wasn't being humiliated in front of the others." (Eric)

"I remember experiencing all these feelings of shame and disgrace both for Greek and English and I remember myself literally dragging myself there...and then I remember going back home, having constant fights with my mum who was pushing me for hours to study and do my dictation work whereas my sister never had that." (Markos)

"...I was trying and trying to learn the spelling rules in Greek and then in English hours and hours, having endless private lessons in the afternoon, having my mum all day trying to teach me the rules in Greek..." (John)

Maria, the only female participant in the cohort also described primary school as a difficult period of her life but she described a different survival strategy she had developed both with teachers and parents:

"I wasn't a good student in Greek language, but I was good in Math, and I was also quiet and polite, trying to stay under the radar so teachers in general liked me despite the fact that back then I wasn't able to read or spell properly...I was also the quiet one at home, constantly studying or pretending that I was studying." (Maria)

It is possible that Maria, the only female participant, strategically chose the "staying under the radar" strategy to fit in the stereotype of girls being "quiet" and "polite" in order cover up her difficulties out of fear of being humiliated by peers or seen as a "bad" student by the teacher as suggested by Singer (2005).

B. Secondary Education

Thematic analysis on secondary education L1 and L2

language learning experiences, revealed that participants felt more comfortable both in English and Greek language classes, although their struggles did not disappear. What changed from their primary school years was that dyslexia-triggered fears and anxiety focused on their academic progress and not on whether peers or teachers would perceive them as “bad” students. This shift could also be related to the fact that in high school they gradually started to comprehend what their diagnosis actually meant in a more concrete and tangible manner. Instead of viewing themselves as “bad students” they slowly started realizing that dyslexia affect only specific areas. This disability “compartmentalization” (Pettersson *et al.*, 2006) i.e., understanding that dyslexia is a condition that affects specific skills and not their identity gave them strength both to react to offensive comments or teasing and also actively advocate for their needs and wants as dyslexic students:

“...In high-school, I felt a bit better with myself, I think that was the point where I realized ok, I have dyslexia, I’m not stupid, I’m a slow reader and a poor speller but I’m good in sciences and this is what I’m gonna focus on.”
(Eric)

“Around 9th grade, I started not caring about my spelling errors as much, I was freed from all the guilt and the shame...I was really good in Math and that helped me a lot.”
(John)

John’s and Eric’s heightened awareness about dyslexia during high school encouraged them to speak out about their needs and wants both at school and at home:

“...I had a history teacher who demanded we all read aloud like a whole page in alphabetical order that was our lesson with her. Tried to explain to her repeatedly and politely that I didn’t want to do that because I wasn’t good at it, but she got aggressive cause she thought I was doing on purpose...at that point, I didn’t really care...for me the only thing that mattered back then was the panhellenic exams.”
(John)

“Greek literature, Ancient Greek, History, was still a nightmare, but at this point I made it clear to all the philologists that I make a lot of spelling errors and that they shouldn’t take under consideration when marking my work.”
(Eric)

Participants’ interviews especially regarding senior high school were dominated by their memoirs of endless hours of studying, feeling overwhelmed and frustrated as their slower reading pace and poor spelling skills could have a negative impact on their future dreams about entering higher education:

“I felt helpless sometimes, really, I knew that I could take oral exams but first of all this is also extremely difficult, second of all I’m a slow reader which means I had a disadvantage compared to all the others and I had to work twice compared to others”.
(Markos)

Similarly, to other works which have also explored dyslexic students’ experiences during secondary education (Rowan 2010) teachers emerged as a major factor for managing to enter higher education. In this study however, participants’ accounts revealed that the majority of teachers

who helped them came from the peculiar parallel private system of supplementary classes and the centers that provide this tuition called “frontistiria” (Kelpanides *et al.*, 2016; Zampeta, 2014; Sianou-Kyrgiou, 2008) and not from state schools. “Frontistiria” are an integral part of the Greek education system for the past fifty years. They constitute the heart of the Greek “shadow education system” especially in senior high-school which is the period Greek students prepare for the national-level university entrance exams (Panhellenics). Due to the low status of Greek state schools which is triggered by the lack of evaluation policies at the national levels as well as infrastructure issues, Greek parents persistently opt to pay huge amounts of money to “frontistiria” especially for the Panhellenic exams (Zambeta 2014):

“I had a great philologist, she helped a lot to be here (at the university) right now...She knew what to do with me, she knew what dyslexia is and she was patient and encouraging...School was a waste of time for me, especially in the 12th grade. School is a waste of time for everyone takes panhellenic exams even if they don’t have dyslexia.”
(Eric)

“My teachers helped me a lot, but my parents wasted a lot of time to find them and a lot of money for my tuition...It’s not just because I’m dyslexic because almost all parents in Greece pay crazy money for the panhellenic exams but at the same time dyslexia causes extra difficulties which means you are at a disadvantage compared to others which in turn means teachers are even more important.”
(Markos)

Similarly, to the panhellenic exams, “frontistiria” emerged as a major theme for participants’ L2 education, especially English. Normally, around middle school Greek students take exams for obtaining B2 or C2 language certificates. “Frontistiria” which in this case refer to local private language centers play a decisive role in obtaining these certificates and dominate the Greek EFL landscape whereas English in state schools is essentially considered a “shadow” subject with minimum participation (Angouri *et al.*, 2010; Gkonou & Miller, 2019, Karavas-Doukas, 1995). Given that dyslexia cause several difficulties in decoding and encoding processes in English which as opposed to Greek is an “opaque” language (Nijakowska *et al.*, 2018), it is not surprising that participants’ accounts were again dominated by reflections on EFL teachers from the private sector rather than their school:

“...English was still difficult form, but I had private lessons by then with a really good teacher and I took the C2 with no extra accommodations whatsoever...”
(John)

“...I realized I have really serious issue with spelling in English, because it is a really difficult language to spell you never write what you hear and this still is exhausting for me, but I managed and I got a B2 and I was really proud of that...I had a great teacher at the frontistirio, she knew how to teach dyslexic students, she used color coding, repeated again and again rules, she helped me a lot.”
(Maria)

For Markos, even attending a “frontistirion” wasn’t enough for getting the “much wanted paper”:

“I never actually managed to get the B2 despite the fact I

wasted 6 years at a private language center...School is out of the question for English, not just for me, for everyone.” (Markos)

C. Tertiary Education

Participants reported that dyslexia-related difficulties persisted at the university. L1 difficulties revolved mostly around encoding processes and spelling errors in lab reports, assignments, mid-terms, and finals. Interestingly, their descriptions of being scared to be perceived as “stupid” or “illiterate” resembled their accounts of the primary school experiences. Throughout the interviews, the empowerment and confidence they exhibited during secondary education was essentially absent and it seemed like they returned to feeling embarrassed, fragile, and concerned about how “important others” this time professors and laboratory teaching staff thought of them:

“...My main worry is that my poor spelling automatically undermines my work...Especially during my first year, I used to spend hours and hours to write a proper lab report...I had done the work but spelling errors also related to grammar were there.” (Eric)

“Spelling worries me here; it’s embarrassing to hand in an assignment or a report at a university and have errors in it...I’d also be pissed off with a student who doesn’t know basic spelling rules and syntax in Greek but wants to become an engineer.” (Maria)

“... I am at an engineering department, so the number one priority here is not language, but I need to be able to produce a decent piece of writing based on academic standards and making spelling or syntax mistakes isn’t and really shouldn’t be acceptable...” (John)

Reading long and complex texts with abstract words and terminology also emerged as a struggle:

“...Reading long texts with really difficult concepts and ideas like research articles, this is hard for me both in Greek but especially in English, it’s even harder...It’s slower and more time consuming.” (Markos)

“Sometimes it’s hard to read long chapters or notes and to actually comprehend them...Text becomes blurry or jumps around lines. It’s dyslexia, I know it’s dyslexia, I know my problems now...It’s not going to stop me from graduating, but it makes it harder and more time consuming for me.” (Maria)

Contrary to primary and secondary education where English was perceived as a less important, findings regarding tertiary education indicate that it is one of the main reasons participants felt inferior compared to their non-dyslexic counterparts:

“...Marine engineering is directly related to English, the job I have chosen depends on English, I cannot survive without a high-level in English...Everything is in English, engine manuals, specifications I need to write technical reports in English, marine engineering and English are interwoven... It doesn’t matter if you are the best engineer in the world the companies need you to know English at a very high level and this is really frustrating for me and I

also think it’s a sort of discrimination for dyslexics.” (Eric)

“...I don’t know if my difficulty with paraphrasing and avoiding plagiarism especially in English is related to dyslexia...I have an issue with vocabulary and grammar and syntax in English so paraphrasing is hard for me, I know how to avoid plagiarism now but it’s hard to express what I want in proper English...It worries me a lot because research is only written in English in ECE, my dissertation is also going to be in English.” (Maria)

IV. CONCLUSION

Findings indicate that participants’ negative language learning experiences underwent changes in the course of their learning history. Their perceived struggles were more intense in primary education. Despite their struggles, participants appeared to have adapted to the challenges of adulthood and university. After the hardships of primary school, it seems that they slowly got used to coexist with dyslexia and instead of victimizing themselves they adopted an active, more empowered approach, constantly searching for solutions to solve their language related problems. These findings, however, may be related to the fact that these students suffered from mild dyslexia difficulties and most importantly, they all had kind and caring families who provided them with psychological and financial support throughout their lives. Encouraging and supportive parents play a pivotal role in reducing fear, anxiety, and the negative impact of dyslexia on children’s self-esteem and on whether in the long run they will attempt to achieve their academic and professional goals as adults (Abd Rauf *et al.*, 2021; Carawan *et al.*, 2016; Hellendoorn, & Ruijsenaars, 2000; Ingesson, 2007).

In the current study, participants’ parents had the financial means to support their children’s education from primary school all the way to senior high school. Had they belonged to a different social class, it is highly doubtful that these students would have entered higher education. Previous works have-sadly-found that there is a direct link between Greek parents’ socio-economic status, the quality of out-of-school provision in “Frontistiria” and the Greek students’ performance in the nationwide university entrance exams. High and middle social class parents invest extreme amounts of money to ensure their children will be able to cope with the fierce competition in these exams and safeguard the reproduction of social privileges that come with a university degree (Chryssakis *et al.*, 2009; Gouvias *et al.*, 2012; Verdis *et al.*, 2019; Zambeta, 2014).

In reality then, the Greek public education system, especially in secondary education is not really public and the concept of equity is illusive (Verdis *et al.*, 2019; Katartzi, 2017; Vryonides & Gouvias, 2012). In this context, Greek students with dyslexia stand little chances of entering university without financial support from their parents. Similarly, to secondary education the EFL landscape in Greece is also commercialized as the vast majority of Greek students attend private language centers (Karavas-Doukas 1995; Sifakis, 2012; Tsagari, & Sifakis, 2014) despite the

fact that Greece currently offers 14 years of EFL public education from K-12. Within this peculiar educational environment, it is obvious that Greek students with dyslexia must turn to the private sector in order to be provided with evidence-based instruction and the accommodations they need in terms of language learning.

Previous works have shown that evidence-based language courses and interventions during school years (Fragkouli *et al.*, 2020; Tijms *et al.*, 2020) and higher education (Seiradakis, 2022) are perceived favorably by Greek students, but it seems that these courses are not implemented at the national level yet. The main implication of the current work is that there is an urgent need for actually implementing the inclusive practices and create the inclusive learning environments in state schools as described in relevant laws which however still remain on paper since Greek parents still pay for the children's needs (Bray, 2021).

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