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**Barriers to second language acquisition for  
students with dyslexia: A practitioner focused study**

Item Type	Thesis
Authors	Toomey, Máire
Download date	2026-03-09 08:17:38
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## Barriers to second language acquisition for students with dyslexia

A practitioner focused study

Máire Toomey

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the award  
of Professional Master of Education in Primary/Post-  
Primary

June 2023

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## Abstract

This study investigates the challenges to second language acquisition for students with dyslexia, from a practitioner perspective. It is a small-scale, qualitative study. Through a series of five interviews with stakeholders in education at second-level, it poses questions about best practice in supporting dyslexic students in the Modern Foreign Language (MFL) classroom. Through careful thematic analysis, the principal finding of the study was to identify a highly individualised approach to differentiation as the key to effective support. The study also identifies the main challenges in MFL teaching, including issues of time and teacher expertise, and recommends strategies that could be used to meet these challenges.

## Acronyms

MFL	Modern Foreign Languages
SEN	Special Educational Needs
DES	Department of Education and Skills
CPD	Continuous Professional Development
PP	Post Primary
TA	Teaching Assistants
SLD	Specific Learning Disabilities

## Chapter 1 Introduction

There is a great deal of research regarding dyslexia available to us. This research looks at the nature of dyslexia, how it manifests and the challenges it presents to students and, indeed, to educators. In my limited teaching experience, I have come across students with dyslexia who struggle with second language acquisition and found language classes extremely challenging. Although research on dyslexia dates back as far as the seventeenth century it was not until 1968 that a consensus definition was created. It was defined as 'A disorder manifested by difficulty in learning to read despite conventional instruction, adequate intelligence, and socio-cultural opportunity. It is dependent upon fundamental cognitive disabilities which are frequently of constitutional origin' (Waites, 1968). Since then, there has been an abundance of research and data produced that delves into how to support students with dyslexia in education, with more research being carried out all the time. As a result of all of the work carried out in this field to date, we now have a wide range of evidence-informed methodologies that provide for appropriate differentiation and approaches such as universal design for learning. These practices have helped support students with dyslexia in many ways. However, there is deficit of recent research available in relation to dyslexia and the challenges it can present in second language acquisition. The research available is primarily from the United States or the United Kingdom. This gap in research from the Irish context, along with the desire to develop a more informed and inclusive practice, was the rationale for this particular study.

According to the *Report of the Task Force on Dyslexia 2001 in Ireland*, the Report of the Special Education Review Committee (1993) indicated a preference for the term 'specific learning disability' over 'dyslexia'. It was not until the year 2000 that dyslexia was officially recognised as a distinct disorder requiring specific supports and interventions. Dyslexia is now classed as a disability under equality legislation.

The significance of this study in the Irish context lies in The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (EPSEN), 2004, which calls for inclusive education for learners with special educational needs, including dyslexia. It calls for education to take place in an inclusive environment and to help children with special educational needs to develop the skills necessary to access the curriculum at their own level. The aim is to empower students

to participate in the social and economic activities of society and to live full, independent lives. The Act outlines the roles and responsibilities of parents, schools and teachers in the provision of this education.

In order for teachers to fulfil their responsibilities they need access to evidence-based research in the area of dyslexia and effective methodologies. More specifically to this study, research is needed in the area of second language acquisition.

International inclusion policy and legislation came as precursors to the EPSEN Act in 2004, particularly the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO,1994) that stated that schools should accommodate all children, including those with a disability, and the Dakar Statement (UNESCO, 2000) which subsequently reiterated the commitment to educate all children in inclusive, educational environments. More recently, the adoption of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN 2006) placed an obligation on member states to submit regular reports on progress and implementation. These international policies influenced and shaped the Irish EPSEN Act 2004 and laid the foundations for inclusive practices in our schools today. This research will look at the effectiveness of policy and practice in relation to students with dyslexia in our Post-Primary modern foreign language (MFL) classrooms.

In April 2020, the Department of Education and Skills (DES) produced a report on the quality of MFL practice in Post-Primary schools. In relation to support for students with special educational needs (SEN), the report calls for greater understanding and implementation of differentiation as well as increased collaboration within MFL departments. This collaboration should benefit students of all academic abilities during language classes. The report recommended increased CPD for teachers, to include theoretical and practical approaches based on best practice and an approach to planning that is cognisant of the range of students' abilities. This is an initial report and, to date, no implementation plan has been set down.

The purpose of this study is to look at the challenges for students with dyslexia in second language acquisition from an educator perspective. The study aims to identify what practitioners can do to support these students in the MFL classroom and how they can do so. The literature review examines the research available to us, at present, in relation to the topic and will ask the three main questions that shape the study. A qualitative approach has been selected for this project and the methodology chapter will look at why this was deemed to be the most appropriate approach and will outline clearly the processes, data collection and analysis adopted in the quest to find answers to the research questions. The findings chapter provides an insight into the data collected throughout the process and looks at the variety of perspectives included in the data collection. This is followed by the discussion chapter that delves deeply into what was uncovered through the thematic analysis of the data, how it relates to the existing research and what answers it provides to our research questions.

## Chapter 2 Literature Review

According to *Modern Foreign Languages: a report on the quality of practice in post-primary schools* (DES, 2020) knowledge of foreign languages is essential for our cultural, social and economic development. In some cases, students at Junior Cycle make the decision to give up their modern foreign language, regardless of the consequences. It was this experience that prompted this research. The Literature Review began with the consultation of relevant journals and from there to conference proceedings in the field of dyslexia. At this point, the Literature Review became more specifically related to language learning and proceeded to books, articles, policy documents and legislation around dyslexia. The search began for research on the Irish context. It became apparent that the research available is primarily from the United States or the United Kingdom. The scarcity of research on dyslexia on the Irish context, along with the desire to develop a more informed and inclusive practice, was the rationale for this particular study.

## 2.1 What the research says

In the 1980s Ganschow and Sparks developed the linguistic coding deficit hypothesis (LCDH). This hypothesis came about as a result of 10 years of researching the cognitive, affective and linguistic influences on language learning. It suggested that problems with second language acquisition stemmed from deficits in the native language acquisition. Ganschow, Sparks and Javorsky (1998) suggested that the key influencer in learning a second language was linguistic ability and stated that first language skills played a central role in the acquisition of a second language. They went on to identify two teaching strategies for teaching a second language to students with dyslexia. The first of the strategies was the use of the Orton Gillingham approach. The Orton Gillingham approach is a structured approach that breaks reading and spelling into smaller skills involving letters and sounds and building on these over time. It involves the explicit teaching of the sound system of the second language (Saveski, 2019). The second strategy involved adjustment of the curriculum, a reduction in pace and in volume of vocabulary. This begs the question - does the Irish post primary system accommodate such strategies and if so, how?

In *Dyslexia and the learning of a foreign language in school: where are we going?*, Crombie (2000) stated that the difficulties experienced by students with dyslexia differed according to the language being studied. Factors such as the complexity of the phonology, grammar and syntax of a language influenced the level and type of difficulties experienced by students. Crombie's central question was around what practitioners could do to resolve these problems. She asked whether the practice of withdrawal was appropriate; that is the withdrawal of students from the mainstream class for individual or small group support. This question is of direct relevance to the current situation in Ireland as withdrawal is used as part of the support system in many PP schools. Crombie also asked if one language is easier to learn than another. She suggested that languages which have a simpler phonology, such as Spanish or Italian, may be easier to learn initially. However, not all Irish secondary schools provide a range of languages and Spanish or Italian are not always offered. Crombie concluded that regardless of the cause of the difficulty, students with dyslexia are most likely to benefit from a multisensory approach and that 'learning by hearing, seeing, saying

and writing may provide the greatest chance of success, especially when these processes interact simultaneously' (Crombie, 2000).

In 2004 Difino and Lombardino provided us with a checklist of warning signs that identified students at risk of failure in the foreign language classroom. In their research they looked back to the early research into dyslexia by Ganschow and Sparks and even as far back as Orton. They found the theory that 'students who have great difficulties learning a foreign language exhibit processing weaknesses in phonology, syntax, and/or semantics in their native languages' still held true (Difino and Lombardino, 2004). They highlighted the void in teacher understanding about helping students with dyslexia in the foreign language classroom and the lack of alternative methodologies for students who could not learn a foreign language through traditional methods.

Chambers and Pearson (2007) looked at the use of teaching assistants (TAs) as a means of supporting students with dyslexia and other learning difficulties in the MFL classroom. It was a small-scale study carried out in Yorkshire. The findings showed that all participants – TAs, teachers and students – reacted positively to the presence of the TA in the lessons. The research showed that the presence of the TA was not only a support for students with SEN but created a more supportive environment for all students. The challenges were that there was not any time allocated for planning, joint assessment, or evaluation. Positive practices were seen to have developed organically in the classroom over time, leading to the question how new teachers and TAs would develop knowledge and skills. All participants agreed that in order to maximise the potential of having a TA in the classroom, investment in training for all would be crucial. In the Irish context, the DES runs a foreign language assistant scheme to help students experience a foreign language as a living language in the classroom. They are there to support the students and to support the teacher.

In *Dyslexia in the foreign language classroom* (2010), Nijakowska looked not only at problems presented by students with dyslexia in the foreign language classroom but also at the value placed on the ability to speak foreign languages. In Ireland, while it is not compulsory to study a foreign language at Leaving Certificate, some 69% of students opted to study a second language in 2016 and Ireland's Strategy For Foreign Languages In

Education 2017– 2026 have set a target of 79% by 2026. This is a reflection of the value placed on speaking foreign languages in our multilingual society. Nijakowska recognised the challenges that this presented for students with dyslexia and echoed the research of Ganschow and Sparks when she stated that poor native language skills can significantly impede the process of second language acquisition. Two additional challenges that Nijakowska identified were poor awareness of developmental dyslexia among teachers and also a lack of resources or materials designed specifically for teaching foreign languages to students with dyslexia. Tolbert (2017) identified some resources which had proven to be effective.

Joshua Tolbert looked at some of the problems facing students with Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD). His research included the perspectives of students with SLD (including dyslexia) in the US and concluded that students with these disabilities were at greater risk of experiencing anxiety about learning a second language. Tolbert focused on the role of assessment in promoting success for these students. Tolbert agreed with the multisensory approach adopted by Crombie and by Ganschow and Sparks. He found that students with these disabilities experienced a 'learned helplessness' and so, active participation in their learning and increased frequency and quality of feedback were key in supporting these students achieve their learning goals. He identified the use of some digital technologies such as Plickers or Mentimeter as effective tools for identifying students who may need more individualised support. Digital technologies were cited as an affective formative assessment tool as they allowed for anonymous response, so students could not see each other's answers, they required active engagement and provided increased opportunities for feedback or teacher intervention. Tolbert also pointed out that this multisensory approach to instruction and assessment was beneficial for all students. (Tolbert, 2017)

David Wilson (2014) argued that the solution to the difficulties experienced by students with SEN lay in the knowing of the students' educational history. He believed that if teachers were given the time to read reports and act on advice given by a school's SEN department, they could really increase students' opportunities to succeed in the foreign language classroom. Wilson also believed that with the appropriate methodologies, the learning of a

second language could help students overcome difficulties that they had in their own native language. He said, 'the experience of learning German or Spanish may lead a child struggling with English to realise that some languages come with a transparent orthography'. Orthography refers to the spelling system of a language, or the system of transcribing sounds into writing. Spanish would be considered to have a transparent orthography as it has a 'one-to-one' orthography, there is only one way to transcribe each of the five vowel sounds, 'a,e,i,o,u'.

Students with dyslexia can often suffer from low self-esteem and difficulties in the classroom can often lead to frustration and disruptive behaviour. However, through the implementation of appropriate methodologies teachers can solve these problems. Like so many others, Wilson recommended the use of a multi-sensory approach to language teaching, presenting in a structured and explicit manner, dividing the lesson into 'bite size chunks', providing opportunities for 'over learning' through a variety of follow up exercises.

Hascoet (2022) acknowledged that students with dyslexia are often discouraged from language learning solely based on their diagnoses. However, she emphasised that dyslexia occurs on a wide spectrum and affects individuals in unique ways. Hascoet presented facts about dyslexia and language learning and looks at the elements of a language that should be considered in choosing a second language for a student with dyslexia. She considered the orthography of a language and recommends languages of 'shallow orthography' that is, the simplicity with which a single sound is transcribed into writing. Hascoet pointed out that languages with a one-to-one correspondence are preferable to students with dyslexia and suggested that Spanish would be easier as it contains only five pure vowel sounds in contrast to German which has fifteen, French which has thirteen or indeed English, which has twelve vowel sounds. She also looked at patterns, word order, conjugation and inflection and pointed out the difficulties that these can pose for students with dyslexia. Hascoet suggested that parents and educators should start off by evaluating a student's reading skills in their native language. Good reading skills in the first language will support success in reading in a second language 'a learner will only be as good a reader in their L2 as they are in the L1' (Hascoet, 2022).

This view was echoed by Gallardo, Heiser and McLaughlin in 2015 in their research on best practice. They also promoted the use of a multi-sensory structured approach and highlighted the importance of emphasising strengths in feedback to build confidence and reduce anxiety. They found that ‘what is good practice for dyslexic learners is good practice for all learners.’ There is a need to adjust practice for the benefit of all.

The final factor that Hascoet considered was motivation. Unfortunately, self-esteem can be a problem for students with dyslexia and the need for much repetition and consistent practice requires a lot of personal effort. For that reason organised support and encouragement was identified as vital, as loss of motivation can strike regularly. The importance of ‘sensitised teachers’ was highlighted by Hascoet as key to this support and encouragement as these teachers could encourage the kind of ‘over learning’ required and could provide or recommend additional resources to support their students.

## 2.2 What about research on the Irish situation

In 2009 the NCSE produced a document called ‘*Creating inclusive learning environments in Irish schools: Teacher Perspectives*’. This study aimed to look at teacher perceptions about inclusion, current practice in creating inclusive learning environments and current constraints to practicing inclusion. The report defines an inclusive learning environment as ‘a learning environment that regards and respects all pupils, irrespective of gender, ethnicity, ability, socio-economic background or special educational need.’ (NCSE, 2009) What the report brought to light was that although the majority of teachers interviewed were positive about the concept and values of inclusion, they had some concerns. Both principals and teachers expressed fears about their ability to deal with students with significant needs and about needs and conditions that they were unfamiliar with. However, it was mainly students with social and emotional needs, autistic students, or students with a diagnosis of ADHD that were of greater concern than students with SLDs such as dyslexia. The teachers that participated in the study felt that creating inclusive learning environments called for inclusive thinking at all levels, not simply in the classroom. Teachers cited a need for funding at a systemic level, proactive leadership within schools, a responsive support

structure and collaborative relationships between schools, parents, and support agencies as key factors in successfully creating inclusive learning environments. When it came to differentiation, it was clear that teachers saw it as more of a skill than a practice and several participants did not feel adequately prepared. The report called for ongoing training and continuous professional development (CPD) for teachers as well as additional time for joint planning.

Today, there is an EU funded research project called the TUDORS project (Turning learning disabilities into opportunities) underway. The research involves the collaboration of 30 participants from 30 different countries. The Dyslexia Association of Ireland is one such participant working on the Irish context. The project aims to improve the knowledge and skills of foreign language teachers and to improve their teaching strategies and methodologies by using innovative and research-based practices. This project, approved in October 2020 and finished in November 2022 aims to develop effective methodologies and practices that promote inclusive education and to deliver them directly to foreign language teachers. The findings of this project have not yet been published. However, throughout this research the engagement of the Head of Education of the Dyslexia Association of Ireland will provide insight into the approaches that can be taken to assist and support students with dyslexia in our Post-Primary language classrooms.

### 2.3 Conclusion

This research aims to enhance our understanding of the challenges faced by students with dyslexia in the acquisition of a second language and to identify effective methodologies and practices that teachers can implement to support these students and, indeed, all students in their language learning.

Having considered the literature on the topic, this study aims to answer the following questions:

- What evidence-informed strategies are proven to be effective from a language teacher's perspective, in supporting students with dyslexia in second language acquisition?

- What are the obstacles or barriers to implementing effective practices in the MFL classroom?
- What is required to facilitate the implementation of effective methodologies and interventions to allow teachers and schools to successfully support students with dyslexia in the foreign language classroom?

## Chapter 3 Methodology

From the outset of this study, deciding on the most appropriate methodology involved a consideration of the theoretical positions that underpin the methodologies available to us as researchers. Pring (2010) discusses the importance of understanding distinct theoretical positions, as they provide us with an understanding of the philosophical backgrounds against which research is conducted and, therefore, provide insight into the best methodology for our particular research.

Logical positivism is the paradigm that underpins quantitative research methods. It argues that the methods used in researching the natural world can also be applied to researching the social world, people and society. Logical positivism posits that human experience and behaviour can be measured and quantified in the same way that we measure and quantify things from the natural world such as rocks, trees and minerals. August Comte was one of the founding fathers of positivism and he believed that scientific knowledge about society could be used to improve human existence (Bourdeau, 2022). Quantitative research involves the collection of large amounts of data and generally involves the testing of existing theories using numbers and statistics. This data is used to identify patterns and regularities in line with the principles of positivism, to explain social phenomena (Scott and Morrison, 2005).

While positivism believes that society shapes the individual, interpretivism believes the opposite. Interpretivism does not believe that the social world can be studied in the same way as the natural world. It finds its foundations in philosophy, the social sciences and anthropology and sees the social world as being very different from the natural world. Max Weber was one of the earliest interpretivists and was interested in motives and beliefs. He argued that the social world has meaning for actors and interpretivism seeks to discover those meanings; it seeks to understand subjectively held meanings (Chowdury, 2014). Interpretivism supports qualitative methodologies in research which use data to explore and describe reality as experienced by the research participants. Qualitative research often involves smaller samples in order to elicit deep understanding and meanings. Sarantakos stated that qualitative methods involve 'empathetic neutrality, with the researcher passionately seeking to understand the world of the respondent' (Sarantakos, 1993).

As this study aims to look at barriers to second language acquisition for students with dyslexia and effective methodologies and strategies to support these students, a qualitative research approach was adopted. This chapter will discuss the approach for the purposes of data collection and analysis as well as the processes and preparation required before data collection took place. Data collection was done through five one-to-one interviews with carefully selected participants. The interviews lasted a maximum of thirty minutes and took place over the course of two weeks in March 2023. This chapter will outline how and why the participants were selected and will also clarify the ethical issues involved in this particular study.

### 3.1 A qualitative approach

Aspers and Corte (2019) define qualitative research as an 'iterative process' that leads to improved understanding of the phenomenon under study by making new significant distinctions that result from the researcher's getting closer to it. A qualitative approach allows for, and indeed invites, reflection on practice, experience and issues that arise in the classroom (Pinnegar and Hamilton, 2009). As the aim of this study is to identify what 'works' in the MFL classroom, particularly for students with dyslexia, a qualitative approach was identified as most appropriate. It allows the researcher to delve into the lived experiences of educators and experts in the field of dyslexia and to gain a clear understanding of the issues they face, as well as a clear picture of what strategies and pedagogies genuinely support students with dyslexia in second language acquisition. There are a lot of advantages to using interviews as a means of data collection in qualitative research. Interviews allow the researcher to engage with participants in a face-to-face way that other methods, such as questionnaires, do not facilitate. The conversational nature of interviews allows the researcher to probe and clarify and to extrapolate additional information, opinions and personal experiences. This enriches the quality of the data and allows for a greater understanding of responses. Another strong advantage of using interviews is the ability of the researcher to clarify their understanding of what has been said (Atkins and Wallace, 2012).

### 3.2 Sample

A purposive sampling approach has been selected. As the research questions relate to the support of students with dyslexia in the MFL classroom, participants were identified and selected based on their experience of teaching modern foreign languages in a post primary setting and their expertise in the area of special educational needs and, more specifically, in relation to dyslexia. Purposive sampling has been selected due to the nature of the research study. Nonprobability techniques such as purposive sampling have their limitations but are very useful when restrictions of time, resources or personnel are a feature of the study (Etikan et al., 2016). They are also appropriate techniques when the research does not aim to create generalisations and is focused on answering a more specific range of questions. This study is focusing solely on students with dyslexia. The interviewees consist of a school principal, a SENCO, two Post Primary MFL teachers and a representative from a national advocacy agency.

### 3.3 Data Collection

All participants were provided with an information sheet and invited to participate in the study and written consent was obtained. Participants were informed of the nature of the interview and of their right to leave the study at any stage. Once participants were fully briefed an appointment was made with each one for the interview. Interviews took place in the school and in the offices of the advocacy organisation and were recorded. All recordings are stored and password protected in line with the BERA ethical guidelines (2018).

Due to the highly subjective nature of interviews careful consideration and planning were necessary. The way questions were worded and the language used were key to minimising bias. In preparation for the interviews, topics were carefully selected, questions were written and a schedule was laid out. The interview questions were then piloted to ensure clarity and ease of understanding and to allow the researcher time to practice prompting and probing without leading or presuming. The questions were laid out on cards and the order considered carefully. The order of the questions is very important for building rapport

with the interviewee (Bell, 2006). The interviews fell somewhere between completely structured and completely unstructured, that is semi-structured; this allowed respondents to talk about issues that were key to them and the loose structure ensured that all topics were covered. No checklist was used but rather a framework was established that laid out all of the topics that guided the interviews as outlined by Bell (2006).

### 3.4 Data Analysis

A thematic analysis (TA) approach was selected for this study. The researcher adopted Braun and Clarke's six-phase approach (2013) to identify and analyse patterns in the data collected. The reason for this particular approach was that it works well with small data sets and with a wide range of research questions. The TA approach can be used with a variety of data types including interview transcripts and so, was deemed appropriate for this particular study as participants would share their experiences from real-world classroom and broader educational settings. The Braun and Clarke approach (2013) involves six distinct phases of analysis.

1. Familiarisation is the first of the phases. It involves the researcher immersing themselves in the data – reading, re-reading, listening to audio recordings, annotating and taking note of any initial analytic observations. Once completely familiar with the data the researcher can move on to phase two,

2. Coding. This phase involves the identification and labelling of important features in the data. Every item of data is coded and the phase is complete when all codes are collated and the relevant data extracted.

3. Searching for themes. In this phase the researcher is charged with looking for similarities within the codes and using these similarities to construct themes.

4. Reviewing themes is the fourth phase. This phase involves a lot of reflection, the researcher must ask such questions as 'what story do the themes tell about the data? What is the nature of each theme? What is the relationship between each of the themes?'.

5. Defining and naming themes is phase number five. In this phase the researcher writes a detailed analysis of each theme and assigns a concise and appropriate name for each one.

6. Writing up is the sixth and final phase. This phase involves the bringing together of all the analysis to tell the reader a compelling story about the data and contextualises it in relation to available literature and to the research questions.

### 3.5 Ethical considerations

A variety of ethical issues had to be considered in advance of this research study. All BERA (British Educational Research Association) 2018 guidelines had to be adhered to and approval from the Hibernia College ethics committee was granted before any research began.

One of the main challenges of qualitative research remains to be ensuring rigour, objectivity and reliability. When it comes to rigour, reliability and objectivity, quantitative methods are more straightforward as the prescribed methods are structured and rigid. Quantitative methods concern themselves with objectivity, reliability and validity to ensure quality. Qualitative methods are more complex due to their more flexible nature (Cypress, 2017). The researcher in a qualitative study is the main instrument for data collection and analysis and, as such, reflexivity is necessary. Reflection allows researchers to understand how their own beliefs, ideologies and political views can impact their data collection and analysis (Watt, 2007). One method of such reflection recommended by Watt is keeping a research journal. Recording personal thoughts, reactions, observations and perceptions throughout the research study can help to inform the researcher of the impact their own positionality can have on the study. Mosselson (2010) argues that 'bringing in the positionality (of the researcher) as a tool in the research process can not only enhance both the ethical integrity of the research but also the research process and the analysis and interpretation of the data' (ibid., p.479).

### 3.6 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the important methodological decisions made in the design and execution of this research. A qualitative interpretivist approach was selected as the research aims to answer questions about the effective methodologies and perceived challenges for students with dyslexia in the MFL classroom. For that reason a series of semi-structured face-to-face interviews was chosen to gain insight from the rich and varied experiences of the participants. A thematic analysis approach was adopted to ensure rigorous data analysis to add reliability and trustworthiness to the study. The research aims to support MFL teachers to develop effective methodologies and implement research informed pedagogies in the real-world classroom so that they can more effectively support students with dyslexia. It was that aim that resulted in the selection of this particular methodology, one which gathers its data from the lived experiences of teachers and educators working with students with dyslexia.

## Chapter 4 Findings

This chapter comprises a presentation and critical analysis of the findings of the qualitative research. Having completed five detailed interviews with five individuals involved in different ways in the education and support of post-primary school students with dyslexia, a thematic analysis approach was adopted to extrapolate what has been found in relation to the research questions. The five participants comprised two teacher participants (TP1; TP2), a school principal (SP), a special educational needs coordinator (SENCO) and an advocacy group representative (AGR). Throughout the process there was a large amount of data collected and the researcher acknowledges that the limitations of the study do not allow for presentation and analysis of all data. What follows is a discussion of findings relevant to the research questions. The main finding was that there was a genuine interest from all participants in identifying successful supports for students with dyslexia in the mainstream classroom but also an acknowledgement of the various barriers that exist, ranging from 'in-child challenges' to systemic problems such as professional development and class size.

### 4.1 Emergent Themes

#### 4.1.1 The importance of a differentiated approach to teaching.

The researcher found that recognising the individual learning profile of each student was the most important factor underpinning successful support of students with dyslexia in SLA:

I have 17 years' experience...every student who sits in front of you is different, regardless of diagnosis. (TP1)

The teacher participants mentioned on various occasions that in all their years of experience, no two students with dyslexia were the same. This was echoed by the advocacy organisation participant, who stressed the importance of teaching the individual and not the diagnosis.

Some students respond well to vocabulary being recorded for them, others prefer to use flashcards, some find a combination of different approaches helpful and others simply require more time to take notes or to having notes presented in block print as opposed to script.

I suppose, if you've met one student with dyslexia, you've met one student with dyslexia. (SENCO)

This speaks to the very individual nature of dyslexia, a condition that is diagnosed using standardised testing but is experienced in very different ways and requires a breadth of approaches and supports that differ from student to student. The key to supporting these students successfully is about understanding dyslexia as a learning difference, knowing the various ways in which it presents and knowing what you need to do.

you need to understand (the) particular individual's profile. (AGR)

This is not necessarily a complicated endeavour. It involves conversations with students, parents and perhaps the SENCO and to ask questions such as 'how can I help you?' 'what do you find most difficult?'. Having an understanding of what works for each individual student will make it easier for teachers to plan lessons, create resources and develop effective strategies that will work for all students in the class, not only students with a diagnosis of dyslexia.

When asked how this might be achieved one of the teachers answered

If we had more SNAs, more team teaching, more one on one time... (TP1)

This one-on-one time would allow the teacher to develop a relationship with the individual students and to better understand the learning profile of the students.

One observation that the researcher made was that there was not much discussion or reference to evidence-informed strategies, which was one of the main research questions. Some strategies were mentioned – specifically, the use of technology, flashcards, recording vocabulary, the science-based approach to reading. But, in the main, the researcher found that the participants referred more to knowing your student and understanding the individual challenges and how to work with them.

This theme opened-up conversations and observations about other very important factors in the support of students with dyslexia such as Student Mindset/Attitude and Time.

#### 4.1.2 Student Mindset

Another factor deemed to be instrumental in the success of students with dyslexia was mindset. It came up in 80% of the interviews. There were several elements cited as influencing the mindset of students. Students may have had a very challenging experience in primary school, and this can have a detrimental effect on their attitude to school, self-esteem and level of engagement.

students come in in first year having had a very traumatic experience in primary school of trying to learn language pre-diagnosis ...they come in with the idea that they can't do languages. (TP1)

One of the teaching participants discussed how they approach incoming students with these concerns or who are coming from a traumatic experience. They invite students to participate in the language class but remove the idea of end of term exams.

there's no exam pressure (...) and once they can see that they're able to learn it well, they keep it on. (TP1)

The idea of the impact of student mindset ties in closely to the previous theme of a differentiated approach. A lack of understanding of the emotional state or confidence of a student can lead to other difficulties. A student operating under additional stress may become disengaged and this can be

attributed to not being interested or not being attentive... (AGR)

This lack of understanding can then have detrimental effects on the relationship between teacher and student which, in turn, can have a negative effect on the learning. Another factor that all participants mentioned was the importance of empathy.

confidence may be very fragile...feedback needs to be given in a very sensitive, empathetic way. (AGR)

The approach of the teacher is key here. Students need to be treated with empathy and understanding and an appropriate response from teachers can be really influential in giving the students the confidence they need to succeed

students could come in 1st year having had a very traumatic experience in primary school of trying to learn languages pre diagnosis. Or having been withdrawn from Irish to get learning support but still having to do Irish and they come in with the idea that they can't do languages. ... but they get, as I say, we've plenty of experience in guiding students through that mindset and showing them that they're making a fresh start, and that's a good thing. When they come in first here, everybody, regardless of their prior experience or prior knowledge, is starting from zero which levels the playing field for everyone in a certain sense. (TP2)

#### 4.1.3 Parents

The attitudes and engagement of parents were cited as crucial by a number of participants. The value placed on education and the willingness of parents to take some responsibility for the support of their child is key to the success of students with dyslexia. It is important for parents to understand the reality of what a school can do in terms of support and to realise that they, as well as their child, have an important part to play.

Both teachers mentioned the effect that the attitude to education and, more specifically, to language learning has on the student. If students are receiving encouragement and support at home, they are more likely to experience success in the classroom.

we use Quizlet, for example, so the topics are up there and we can teach the students to print out the flashcards themselves. So, the onus is back on the student or their parents. (TP1)

A positive relationship between home and school is key. When parents have a clear understanding of what the school can do and the school has a clear understanding of the level of support a student is receiving at home, it is a lot easier for all involved.

there's a constant expectation from some parents that schools can deliver more than they are able to deliver. (SP)

There is an increasing number of students presenting to schools with educational psychologist reports that make recommendations for supports that schools cannot provide. Schools can provide support for literacy and numeracy and for social and emotional needs but schools are not therapeutic centres.

in an ideal world, we would have a cluster of schools who had access to a number of therapeutic services. (SP)

This particular comment was made in relation to additional support needs in general and was not in relation to dyslexia specifically. However, due to the fact that people with dyslexia commonly have co-occurring conditions the researcher found that it was relevant to the research (Snowling et al., 2020).

#### 4.1.4 Time

Throughout the interview process one topic that came up frequently was that of time. It was referred to in various different contexts but was definitely a key factor in supporting students with dyslexia.

The SENCO pointed out that, depending on the type of dyslexia, some students may need more time to process instructions. So, pacing the lesson and incorporating strategies to support these students is key.

often, teachers will write in script on the board...This can be a huge difficulty for some students... (SENCO)

She went on to say that in the absence of assistive technology this one issue can have a detrimental effect on learning as the student feels that they are left behind.

Another participant felt that the 'gap' between lessons is often too long. In a school where you have one hour lessons, seeing a class group on a Monday and not meeting again until Thursday can be problematic. Students have forgotten what was covered in the previous class, so the benefit of having a one-hour class is eroded.

From the perspective of the advocacy group one of the most important aspects for teaching students with dyslexia was frequency - they need regular reinforcement

the key is frequency. (AGR)

It was also mentioned that due to a growing number of students with ASN, not just dyslexia, teachers would benefit from more time to prepare specific resources such as the voice

recording of vocabulary; to collaborate with colleagues, to discuss individual students and to share best practices. It was agreed by all that colleagues are an excellent resource not only in your own school but colleagues that you meet through cluster days and CPD events.

#### 4.1.5 Teacher expertise

Teacher expertise and training was the one theme that arose in 100% of the interviews. It was universally agreed that teacher attitude is key and that teachers must have an interest and a desire to support students, not only with dyslexia but with ASN in general, in order to effectively engage with training, CPD and implement strategies that really serve to help these students.

There is very little done in the PME around supporting teachers..... there's a lack of training and a lack of understanding. (SP)

From a management perspective this was cited as being very problematic. The advocacy group representative went further and mentioned a survey of 600 teachers carried out by their organisation that showed that 93% of teachers felt they were not prepared adequately to teach students with dyslexia.

The teacher participants both spoke very positively about CPD albeit in relation to ASN in general and not specific to MFL. One teacher stated

the best CPD is really when teachers have free time to talk to one another about what they do and their experience.(TP1)

This view was echoed on several occasions across interviews with a school principal who spoke about the benefits of peer observations, another teacher who spoke about the benefits of sharing best practice and how colleagues were one of the best resources available to teachers.

The SENCO also cited the 'gap' in teacher training as being a major challenge

they get a couple of hours versing in ASN and it's a very generalised approach.(SENCO)

After that it is down to the individual teacher to seek out CPD or to have training included in the Croke Park schedule (Under the terms of the Public Sector Agreement 2010-2014 The 'Croke Park Agreement' teachers were required to work an additional 33 hours per annum (the Croke Park hours) These hours can be used for school planning, staff meetings, parent teacher meetings, and training and CPD.)

and yet, we have no time really to do it within the school. (TP2)

This ties in with the previous theme of time. The gap in teacher training and expertise is exacerbated by the lack of time allocated to professional development and training.

## Chapter 5 Discussion

In this chapter the findings from the study will be discussed in the context of the three research questions and how those findings relate to the literature. There was a wealth of data collected, with new insights and interesting perspectives. Throughout the process the researcher has been drawn to ask many more questions. These additional questions may be alluded to throughout but, for the purposes of this study, the focus will be looking at the three research questions and at how far the findings go in providing answers.

### 5.1 What evidence-informed practices are proven to be effective from a language teacher's perspective in supporting students with dyslexia in second language acquisition?

One of the initial and most surprising findings of this research is that the practitioners did not speak specifically about evidence-informed practices. What they spoke about was the importance of differentiation and how the key to successful differentiation is understanding the needs of the individual. This emerged as one of the key themes in the analysis of the data. It is through this theme that the research question regarding evidence informed practices is addressed.

There was mention of the use of certain technology such as Quizlet and particular fonts for presentation.

We use Quizlet. And on Quizlet, you can use the arrow button on each flash card and hear what it sounds like. (TP 1)

This echoes what Crombie discussed in her book *Dylsexia and the learning of a foreign language* (Crombie, 2000). Crombie looked at the advantages of a multi-sensory approach to language learning for students with dyslexia. She states that 'learning by hearing, seeing, saying and writing may provide the greatest chance of success, especially when these processes interact simultaneously' (Crombie, 2000).

Crombie also stressed the significance of the particular language that students with dyslexia choose. In her work she asked whether one foreign language was easier to learn than another. What she found was those languages with a simpler phonology, such as Italian or Spanish, are easier to learn. The findings suggest that this type of research is currently influencing practice and policy in our schools:

in our school, they're encouraged to take Spanish. French grammar right from the start is complex. Pronunciation is complex. Spanish is phonetic. (TP 1)

This approach has been adopted in the teaching of students with dyslexia and was looked at briefly in the literature review. The approach focuses on teaching the connections between letters and sounds – this lends itself well to the teaching of Spanish, a language with a very clear phonology. The Orton Gillingham approach also emphasises the individual needs of each student.

It was this approach that informed Ganchow and Sparks' strategies in the 1980s and this in turn led to Crombie's thesis about the multi-sensory approach to language learning. All of this research and these approaches have informed the body of work that is now known as the science-based approach to reading. It emphasizes the role of phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. It is based on knowledge of the cognitive processes involved in reading and in the instructional strategies that are most effective in the development of these processes.

In the interview process the representative of the advocacy agency spoke about this approach as a strategy for helping students with dyslexia. He specifically named the science-based approach where

taking the science of reading based structured approach where letters can be sounded out and then conventions, blends and rules and exceptions are taught sparingly and in a planned way so as not to overwhelm or confuse students.(AGR)

The practices and approaches discussed by the teachers and the SENCO echo what the research suggested as effective methodologies for supporting students with dyslexia in second language acquisition. It was the advocacy representative that could formally name the approach and the rationale for it. In answer to the research question, however, the findings would suggest that while the teachers may not have an acute awareness of the names and origins of the evidence-informed practices referred to in the literature review and by the advocacy representative, the methodologies, and practices they habitually apply in their classrooms are, in fact, grounded in these same theories.

## 5.2 What are the obstacles or barriers to implementing effective practices in the MFL classroom?

The findings brought up a theme that relates very strongly to this question – that of teacher expertise. In 2004 Difino and Lombardino highlighted the void in teacher understanding about helping students with dyslexia.

In interviews with the principal, the SENCO, and the advocacy representative they all mentioned the lack of teacher expertise in this area, with a particular focus on the inadequacies of initial teacher training / PME.

There's a huge deficit, it's the initial teacher training. I would have thought that (SEN training) would be a much more significant element, given the number of mainstream students who have SEN. (SENCO)

In their research on the use of teaching assistants to support students with dyslexia in the MFL classroom, Chambers and Pearson identified a lack of time dedicated and assigned to planning, collaboration, joint assessment and evaluation as one of the major barriers to effectively supporting students with dyslexia (Chambers and Pearson, 2007). This obstacle was also identified in the thematic analysis - the issue of time was mentioned in several instances not only by the teacher participants but also by the SENCO.

If we had more SNAs, more team teaching more one-on-one time, these are all the ideals. (TP 2)

Both teacher participants also mentioned the lack of time for collaboration with colleagues and the sharing of best practice. Both also agreed that some of the best CPD that they have completed has involved hearing from other teachers about what strategies they are using in the classroom and what works well, how things can be improved and how they can support one another. We saw in the review of the relevant literature that the NCSE called for more time to be allocated to joint planning (NCSE, 2009). This was echoed strongly by the observations of the research participants.

Another one of the challenges that was identified through the literature review was related to student mindset. Joshua Tolbert looked at the increased risk of students with Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD) (including dyslexia) suffering from anxiety. He referred to a 'learned helplessness' and a belief in students that they are not capable of succeeding in the MFL classroom (Tolbert, 2007).

The data collection process brought to the fore the theme of student mindset. The influence of the individual student's mindset on their level of success was brought up by 80% of the research participants. It was remarked that the students' experience in primary school has a great effect on their mindset as they come into secondary school and are faced with the prospect of taking on a new language.

they come in with the idea that they can't do languages... (TP 1)

Tolbert mentioned the use of certain technologies and the importance of appropriate means of assessment in supporting students who experience anxiety around language learning. Technology and assessment practices were also mentioned by our teacher participants as strategies that they adopt to support students with dyslexia and other learning difficulties. Quizlet was one of technologies specified along with a modified approach to assessment.

we'll have her in the class anyway. She doesn't have to worry about the exams. She can pick up any Spanish she wants along the way.

there's no exam pressure in terms of the state exams, and then they generally don't give it up, they just keep you know, they see that it's doable and taking into account their difficulties and once they can see that they're they are able to learn it well, they keep it on. (TP 1)

Almost all the barriers identified in the review of the relevant literature were also cited as barriers by the teachers and other research participants. Both the literature and the teachers mentioned different strategies for overcoming these barriers. One such strategy was mentioned not only by the Teachers, but the SENCO, the Advocacy Representative and the Principal – the importance of an individualised approach. They all cited understanding the student in front of you, knowing their needs and what works for them as the key factors in supporting students with dyslexia in second language acquisition. This theme also served to answer the third and final research question.

### 5.3 What is required to facilitate the implementation of effective methodologies and interventions to allow teachers and schools to successfully support students with dyslexia in the MFL classroom?

As the researcher worked through the data and the literature and looked for answers to the research questions, they found that the third and final research question was answered by the same data that answered the first two questions. What is required to facilitate the implementation of effective methodologies and interventions in the MFL classroom is more teacher expertise, more time allocated for planning and collaboration for teachers, positive student mindset and a good relationship between the school, the student and the parents/carers.

Under the current system, this is a real challenge for schools, particularly at a management level. The school principal participant spoke about the perception of schools as 'therapeutic centres'. This can create a certain tension between schools and parents/ carers

It's the expectations of schools by society that schools can deliver more than they are able to deliver. (SP)

The 2009 NCSE document looked at perceptions about inclusion and supporting students with SEN. The document reported that both principals and teachers expressed fears about their ability to deal with students with significant needs. Principals and teachers called for funding at a systemic level to support them in their inclusion of students with SEN (NCSE, 2009). While the report looked at SEN in general, students with dyslexia are part of that cohort and the findings of the report are certainly echoed by the views of the participants in this research project.

In the interviews with the teachers, the SENCO and the advocacy representative, one clear theme emerged as being vital for the successful support of students with dyslexia in the MFL classroom. That theme was knowing your student

If you've met one student with dyslexia, you've met one student with dyslexia. (SENCO)

David Wilson also referred to this theme. He believed in the importance of knowing the student's educational history and profile. Wilson also promoted the idea of time being allocated to teachers for reading reports and collaborating with the SEN department.

Knowing the student would allow the teacher to plan effectively and implement methodologies that will work for all students (Wilson, 2014). The researcher also notes here the reappearance of time as a key theme.

Hascoet wrote about dyslexia as a spectrum and acknowledged the different ways that it can affect individuals. Her research looked, in part, at the problems with self-esteem that students with dyslexia can experience and highlights the important role that 'sensitised teachers' can play in the support of these students. Through appropriate strategies, planned support and encouragement teachers can provide or recommend resources that will genuinely help their students (Hascoet, 2022).

In the five emergent themes that were identified in the data analysis process, the importance of a differentiated approach is the overarching theme and the foundation for the success of all the others. The themes of teacher expertise, time, student mindset and parental/carer engagement are all underpinned by a differentiated approach.

## Chapter 6 Conclusion

### 6.1 Introduction

The research has highlighted the nature of the challenges faced by students with dyslexia and also the challenges faced by practitioners in supporting these students in second language acquisition. What emerged as a very strong theme was the importance of teachers really knowing their students, understanding their needs and taking a proactive approach to supporting their needs in the MFL classroom.

### 6.2 Limitations

A qualitative approach allows the researcher to get very close to what is happening in the classroom and it requires careful reflection on practice, lived experience and on the real issues that arise for practitioners (Pinnegar and Hamilton, 2009). It was for this reason that a qualitative approach was adopted for this study and great insight has been gained into the

nature of the challenges that dyslexia can pose to students in second language acquisition and to teachers in their efforts to support them. However, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of the study, namely the small sample size and the scale of the research project. The small sample size means that the findings are not generalizable to a larger population. The same research could be carried out over a prolonged period on a much larger scale, with input from a lot more practitioners and with the use of surveys to capture data that would give a clearer picture of the effects on a larger population. To mitigate against the small sample size the researcher gave great consideration to the planning of the interviews, the data collection and made every effort to minimise the potential impact of their positionality on the study, in line with Bell's recommendations (Bell, 2006).

### 6.3 What we have learned.

#### 6.3.1 The centrality of the learner profile

This research has shown that educators are clearly engaged and invested in helping students with dyslexia achieve to the best of their ability. The centrality of teachers knowing their students and developing greater understanding of each student's profile as a learner was the main finding. This aligns with the writings of David Wilson which stressed the importance of knowing a student's history and their individual profile (Wilson, 2014). Teachers expressed that taking time to understand the struggles dyslexic students may have experienced, prior to entering the MFL classroom at second-level, and taking an empathetic approach to these difficulties, was the most important factor in creating successful learning conditions for dyslexic students. Understanding the student profile informs the development of appropriate resources and employment of teaching methodologies that best suit a given student.

#### 6.3.2 Barriers to implementation

The research also indicated that while the teachers have a good sense of how to support dyslexic students, there are certain barriers to implementation of these approaches and strategies. For example, the educators all identified deficits in teacher expertise and time as significant barriers to the successful teaching of dyslexic students in the MFL classroom.

The deficit in expertise was born out by the advocacy group representative, who cited a survey of 600 teachers which showed that 93% of teachers felt they were not prepared adequately to teach students with dyslexia. In turn, this was echoed by the SENCO, who noted a lack of adequate training for teachers taking the PME. The training received was perceived as being too generalised.

The deficit in time is inextricably linked to the issue of teacher expertise. Irrespective of the specific training given to PME students with regard to teaching students who are dyslexic,

teachers also identified time as a significant issue with regard to very practical aspects of their day-to-day jobs. Teachers called for more time to collaborate with colleagues, the necessary time to develop multi-sensory resources, more time to work with students one-to-one, as well as asking how the timetabling of MFL classes could facilitate more regular contact-time with students. Chambers and Pearson named this lack of time for planning and collaboration as one of the major barriers to effectively supporting students with dyslexia (Chambers and Pearson, 2004).

### 6.3.3 The impact of student mindset

Also cited were challenges that went beyond the classroom and could be more accurately located in the individual student and the home. The mindset of individual students was identified as playing a huge role in a dyslexic student's levels of engagement with MFL as it was in the work of Joshua Tolbert. Tolbert found that students with SLDs were more likely to suffer from anxiety (Tolbert, 2017). However, the dyslexic student's mindset with regard to MFL cannot be divorced from the student's prior learning experiences. Developing an understanding of the difficulties and successes experienced by a student facilitates the teacher in developing approaches and resources that will engage a student. Both teacher expertise and time are crucial here in creating conditions in which a positive student mindset can develop. Another important factor in a student's success is that of parental support. Parents need to have an appreciation for what schools are actually resourced to provide in terms of support for dyslexic students. Parental support is an issue that can be partly addressed by greater teacher expertise with regard to teaching dyslexic students.

## 6.4 Recommendations

### 6.4.1 CPD for MFL teachers

The research has identified a lack of teacher expertise in the area of supporting students with dyslexia in the MFL classroom. Based on this finding a recommendation for CPD for MFL teachers to develop an understanding of how dyslexia presents in different ways for each student seems appropriate.

### 6.4.2 Changes to PME programmes

The researcher recommends that all PME programmes be obliged to specifically emphasise best practise in teaching dyslexic students in the MFL classroom, as it is a diagnosis whose impact is particularly relevant to the acquisition of language. Such training should encourage

teachers to develop an empathetic appreciation of the experience a student may have had in terms of language acquisition at Primary-level, and to gain experience using a range of evidence-based approaches to teaching and assessment of dyslexic students.

#### 6.4.3 Scheduling collaboration time on teachers' timetables

A possible solution to deficit in time to collaborate, create resources and discuss best practice would be the inclusion of planning periods within the MFL teacher's timetable to collaborate with colleagues in the MFL Department. This time could be used to develop and share the resources and expertise in the area of dyslexia.

#### 6.4.4 Teacher training on how parents can support their children

Being able to communicate to parents what the school can do to support students who are dyslexic and what the parents can do themselves to support their child can only be effectively achieved through teacher expertise. Teachers being trained and informed on dyslexia, as a specific educational barrier, will be better able to appreciate the limitations of their own role and to identify where parents can support these students.

Based on the findings of the research the aforementioned recommendations would require change and adjustments at a policy level, in terms of obligations regarding the PME programme, at a practical level, in terms of teachers completing CPD in the area and at a management level, in terms of providing the much needed time for teachers to collaborate, develop effective methodologies and share best practices. Despite the limitations of this particular research, these are recommendations that could be put into practice on a very large scale and would be for the benefit not only of students with dyslexia, but indeed for the benefit of all students in their second language acquisition as highlighted by Gallardo, Heiser and McLaughlin (2015).

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## Appendix 1 Principal's Letter

Mr [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

January 2023

Dear [REDACTED]

I am writing to you in relation to a research study I will be undertaking in fulfilment of my Professional Masters in Education degree. I would like to provide you with information about my study and seek your consent to conduct the research with members of your teaching staff.

As you know, students with Specific Learning Disabilities, particularly dyslexia, can experience challenges when it comes to second language acquisition. My proposed research will contribute to our understanding of the exact nature of those challenges and how we, as teachers, can adopt strategies and methodologies in our teaching to facilitate success for students with dyslexia in the MFL classroom.

The objectives of my research are to: identify the barriers to second language acquisition experienced by students with dyslexia and to identify which teaching interventions are most effective in a post primary mfl classroom. It will also examine whether teachers and management feel adequately resourced and equipped to deliver the interventions to pupils, and to explore the challenges and benefits of implementing the specific interventions identified in the research. To address these areas, I propose to conduct five short (20 to 30 minute) semi-structured interviews with teachers, management and experts in the area of dyslexia. My project has received ethical approval from the Hibernia College Ethics Committee.

Interviews would be held at the convenience of the school and of the teachers concerned on school premises. With their written consent, interviews will be recorded for transcription and dissemination purposes. Participation in the study is voluntary. Interviewees may refuse to answer any questions or withdraw from the study at any time. No school, teacher or student will be identified specifically in any publication of the work.

I am writing to you to gain your informed consent that I may request an interview with five members of your teaching staff and that I may hold the interview in your school in January at a time convenient for the school and the teachers concerned. Confirmation of your consent can be sent either to me directly via email or by signature of the attached consent form posted to: (xxxx)

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me by phone xxx or at the abovementioned email address.

I look forward to hearing from you and thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

[REDACTED]

## Appendix 2 Research Information Sheet

### Research Information Sheet

<b>Researcher:</b>	Máire T. [REDACTED]
<b>Organisation:</b>	Hibernia College Dublin
<b>Supervisor:</b>	[REDACTED]
<b>Title of study:</b>	Barriers to second language acquisition for students with dyslexia; how can teachers facilitate success for these students in the MFL classroom?

#### Outline of research study:

Ireland is a plurilingual and pluricultural society, fully engaged in a globalised world. Knowledge of foreign languages is essential for our cultural, social and economic development, particularly in the context of a changing international political environment. (DES, 2020) However, acquisition of a second language can pose great challenges to students with SLD's particularly dyslexia. This research will look at the challenges experienced and the interventions that facilitate success.

#### Objectives of the project:

The objectives of this research are to identify the nature of those challenges to explore what we can do, as teachers, to facilitate success for these students in our classrooms.

#### What would I need you to do?

Your participation in this research project is greatly appreciated. This research project has received ethical approval from Hibernia College Dublin. If you agree to participate, you will participate in a short semi-structured interview with the researcher. Any information you provide about your own identity or that of the school will be anonymous and confidential. Quotes from the interview may be used and may also be published in the research however your name and the name of the school will not be published. The interview will be audio recorded and transcribed, and a copy of the transcript will be made available to you on request. This research will be used in a publication of a thesis for Hibernia College Dublin. It may also be used in conference proceedings or used in academic articles. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time.

#### What is the purpose of this research?

The purpose of the research is to complete small-scale study which forms part of the final year of the Professional Masters of Education (Post-Primary) with Hibernia College Dublin.

## Appendix 3 Research Consent Form

I, \_\_\_\_\_ have read and understood the Letter of Information provided to me by \_\_\_\_\_ I agree that in order to conduct research about barriers to second language acquisition for students with dyslexia, she may request an interview with five teachers and upon receipt of their consent may conduct interviews on school premises at times convenient for the teachers and the school. I understand that participation is voluntary and that there are no physical or psychological risks associated with the study. I know that all answers provided during the interview will be used for the purposes of the study only and that all responses will identify no individual or the school itself.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix 4 Interview Questions

### **School Principal**

The principal will be asked to talk for a minute or two about their experience, the school they are in, school size, number of teachers, what subjects are offered in the school?

1. What do you think is the importance of modern foreign languages in the Post Primary setting?
2. Can you explain the school policy around MFL? Is it mandatory? Are there any exceptions?
3. What is the school's position on students with SPLDs, particularly dyslexia, learning a second language?
4. How can a school support these students?
5. From a principal's perspective where should this support be delivered?
6. In what way does the current structure of 'support for all, support for some, support for few' effectively support students with dyslexia?
7. Is the school adequately resourced to provide effective support?
8. In what ways are the teachers resourced to provide effective support? Knowledge, training, expertise?
9. What, if anything, do teachers need to effectively support these students?
10. What, if anything, does the school need to effectively support these students?

### **MFL Teachers**

The teachers will be asked to talk for a minute or two about their subjects, their experience, their school context.

1. Are your language classes streamed or are they mixed ability?
2. Are you fully aware of the AENs in your classes? How are you informed?
3. Thinking specifically about students with dyslexia, do you observe any common difficulties or challenges for them in the MFL class? If so, can you describe them?
4. Are there any specific strategies or pedagogies that you use to support students with dyslexia in the MFL classroom? If so, can you describe them?
5. In what ways are you, as a teacher, resourced to support these students in second language acquisition? Do you feel you have enough knowledge, training and support?
6. What, if anything, do teachers need to be able to support students with dyslexia in the MFL classroom?
7. What are the main challenges to supporting these students in the classroom?
8. What CPD do the Department of Education offer for MFL teachers in this area?
9. Have you completed any CPD or training in this area? If so, can you describe it? Was it useful?
10. As a teacher, ideally, what resources would facilitate you in effectively supporting these students in the MFL classroom?
11. Are these challenges specific to MFL or are they seen across all subjects?

### **Support Educational Needs Coordinator**

The SENCO will be asked to talk for a minute or two about their subjects, their experience, their school context.

1. As AEN coordinator can you describe the main difficulties that students with dyslexia experience when it comes to second language acquisition?
2. What structures are in place to support these students? Can you describe them?
3. Are teachers equipped to support these students in the MFL classroom from a knowledge, expertise and training perspective?
4. Are teachers adequately resourced to support these students in the MFL classroom?
5. Are you aware of any specific methodologies or strategies that are used to support students with dyslexia in the MFL classroom? Can you describe them?
6. Given the resources provided by the Dept and teachers' training, knowledge and expertise, can effective support be provided at present? Why/ Why not?
7. What, if anything, is needed for the school to be able to effectively support students with dyslexia in the MFL classroom?
8. Is there any CPD or training available for teachers specifically related to supporting students with dyslexia in the MFL classroom?
9. As an ASN coordinator, what resources do you believe would help in the effective support of students with dyslexia in the MFL classroom?
10. Are these challenges specific to MFL or are they seen across all subjects?

### **Advocacy group representative**

The representative will be asked to give a brief description of the organisation and its function and their experience in relation to education for students with dyslexia.

1. What are the main barriers to success for students with dyslexia in second language acquisition?
2. Are these barriers specific to MFL or are they experienced across all curricula?
3. What supports are needed to facilitate success in the MFL classroom at second level?
4. Are schools adequately equipped from a knowledge, training and expertise perspective to effectively support these students in the MFL classroom?
5. To what extent are schools resourced to support these students?
6. What resources would help in the effective support of students with dyslexia in second language acquisition?
7. Are there particular strategies or pedagogies that are effective in supporting students with dyslexia in second language acquisition? Can you describe them?
8. Is there any CPD or training available for MFL teachers specifically in the area of supporting students with dyslexia?
9. To what extent does your organisation work with individual schools in supporting students with dyslexia?
10. To what extent does your organisation work with the Dept of Education in the design of supports for schools when it comes to dyslexia?

## Appendix 5 Thematic analysis sample

Teacher Participant #1

*Mummi MFL 1.*

Audio file

Lakelands Ave m4a

Transcript

Speaker 1

OK, so first of all, can you just give me a little bit of context as to your experience and your current role in the school you teach in?

Speaker 2

OK, so I teach in an all girls secondary school in ~~xxxxxxxxxxxx~~ so not a private school, so non fee paying. Secondary school under the patronage of ~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~ there's we're up to about 650 students and 64 staff, and that includes 4 SNAs. / resource teachers, I think we have 4.

Speaker 1

As well, OK. Excellent. OK. So are all of your and your main subject is Spanish?

Speaker 2

Barnish. Yeah. Open the head of the Spanish department. Since about 2008 and in that time Spanish has really grown. So when I started there were six students in the leaving search class. And now there are this year there are 46, so it outweighs French. It's overtaken French in school. Umm, proportion of two to one. Uh, languages are compulsory in our school and you have to take the way to leaving Cert. So most kids do French or Spanish. You can't do both. And then some take on Japanese and Russian. And in some very small number of cases, students drop the language where there's special needs or additional needs. That require it.

Speaker 1

OK, perfect. Are your language classes streamed or are they mixed ability from 1st to 6th year? there a difference?

Speaker 2

Though recently it's always been mixability at junior cycle. We used to always split then the classes at the start of fifth year depending on how the students did in their Junior cert and what their preference was for higher ordinary. But over the last, I think three years we have kept maybe 2 5th and 6th year classes is mixed ability. Just because we didn't have high enough numbers of students to make that one class and obviously the benefits of mixed

OK. And is that the same with French or is that particular to Spanish?

Speaker 2

I think is particular to Spanish because French grammar right from the start is complex. Pronunciation is complex. Spanish is phonetic. It's what does it. Say on the board. Call out those. Leads like you know, just blending your vowels and your your consonants and. You know it's it's, yeah.

Speaker 1

So the thing we're leading strategies apply. OK. OK. And in what ways are you as a teacher resourced to support these students in second language acquisition? Like, do you feel you have enough knowledge and training and support to support these students?

Speaker 2

I think I have. I have 17 years experience and so you're always learning and obviously the same as all the other students, every student who sits in front of you is different regardless of diagnosis. UM, so they have different strengths, different weaknesses and. We do guess. Some training from experts every couple of years would come in maybe and do a session on dyslexia. And of course with the advances in technology, things are being updated all the time, like dyslexic font and word was installed for all of us a few years ago now. I don't know if many people still use it. But yeah, we're well resourced school in terms of technology and uhm, I would have a particular interest in keeping up to date with strategies for students with additional needs and language learning anyway.

Speaker 1

OK, so your personal interest?

Speaker 2

Yeah, personal interest is very important. OK? And because it's not necessarily across the board, if you've student, maybe with dyslexia and some other. Additional needs. Uhm, they can sometimes be left behind, or the assumption is that, OK, well, they sit in my class. But really when they're in learning support, somebody else will teach them this. So you do, yeah.

Speaker 1

OK. And maybe your question has answered this, your answer has answered this question already, but what, if anything, do teachers not necessarily you do teachers need to be able to support students with dyslexia in the MFL classroom?

Speaker 2

Time time is always the most precious and uh, most scarce thing that teachers have. So for example, I've had students who've requested that the vocabulary be recorded for. Then uh and emailed to them or that flash cards are made by the teacher to to give them to the students. And obviously you're very willing to do those things. But. If you multiply that out by the amount of students that you have, particularly in our school, where they're encouraged to keep on the language, it becomes hugely time consuming, and then you multiply it by the six years of students that you're teaching, and it's an almost impossible task. Now again, we do have good access to it. We use quizlet, for example, so the topics are up there and we can teach the students. To print out the flash cards themselves. So if the onus is back on the student or their parents to print them out and laminate

Dealing with individuals

Strengths & needs based

Attitude & interest of the teacher.

Time is key.

Time to meet request

- number of students

responsibility back on H. ch. to t/parents

Technology

them or whatever. And on quizlet, you can also use the arrow. Uhm, button on each flash card here. What it sounds like. Umm so learning ways of using technology to help with the lack of time you have for making extra resources is uh, is hugely important.

Speaker 1

Great, OK. And what would you say are the main challenges again, maybe that you've already answered this, the main challenge is to supporting these students in the classroom.

Speaker 2

UM, yeah. If we had more snas, more team teaching more one-on-one time like these are all the ideals. Also, what does happen is that students could come in and 1st year having had a very traumatic experience in primary school of trying to learn languages pre diagnosis. Or having been withdrawn from Irish to get learning support but still having to do Irish and they come in with the idea that they can't do languages. That's always a bit of a drawback. Uh, but they get, as I say, we've we've plenty of experience in guiding students through that mindset and. Showing them that they. Can you know they're making a fresh start, and that's a good thing. When they come in first here, everybody, regardless of their prior experience or prior knowledge, is starting from zero. UM. Which levels the playing field for everyone in a certain sense.

Mindset of the student

Speaker 1

OK. And you find that an effective?

Speaker 2

Yeah, 100%. OK, good.

Speaker 1

OK. And and what CPD, do the Department of Education offer for MFL teachers that?

Speaker 2

You can think language specific, sorry specially specific in languages 0.

Speaker

OK.

Speaker 2

As far as I as as I have experienced. So for example JT. This week we had the MFL JT training and there was one session dedicated to LP two. Sorry L2LP.

Speaker 1

L2LP.

Speaker 2

Learning outcomes and it was just, but in terms of planning, how would you plan for these learning outcomes? There were no resources, no strategies, no methods, nothing provided in terms of this is how you do it or this is best practise. UM, if you want to find what best? Practise is or. What the professionals are doing, or what the experts are doing, you have to find that yourself.

No real specific training from Dept