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TAMIL LANGUAGE FOR DYSLEXICS

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Abstract

Dyslexia is a specific learning disorder, characterized by problems with accurate or fluent word recognition, poor decoding and spelling abilities. Different languages have varied characteristics and demand and hence dyslexia will manifest itself in different ways. This paper explores the various aspects of Tamil language which serve as a support or barrier for a dyslexic learner. Though the transparency of the language is supportive to a dyslexic learner, other aspects such as high demand on visual and muscle memory, diglossia effect, homophones etc serve as a hindrance to master the language. It is important to consider the individual learner aspects and analyse the suitability of a language rather than generalizing that a transparent language would be easier.

Index Terms: Dyslexia, Tamil, Language, Learning

Introduction

Learning a language is an important aspect of the school years. It paves way to acquisition of knowledge available in the language, expression of oneself and functions as a basic requirement for further opportunities in higher education and career. There are many languages across the world and each language varies in terms of its letters, symbols, sounds etc.

Dyslexia

According to the Diagnostic Manual, the DSM-5, dyslexia is a specific learning disorder. It refers to a pattern of learning difficulties characterized by problems with accurate or fluent word recognition, poor decoding and spelling abilities. The other areas affected may include memory, attention, organizational skill etc. Different languages have varied characteristics and demand. Depending on the language, dyslexia will manifest itself in different ways and will be more or less easy to identify. (Kamala 2015)

Language Learning

The degree of opacity or transparency of orthographies is an important factor influencing the different writing systems of the world. English is often identified as one of the most difficult languages for dyslexic learners, due to its complex syllabic structure (Helland & Kaasa, 2004).

Transparent languages with consistent and predictable spelling have been considered easier for dyslexics. This paper aims to explore the various aspects of Tamil language which serve as a support or barrier for a dyslexic learner.

Comparison of transparent and opaque writing systems is a key point to better understand dyslexic students' needs and difficulties. It could be stated that students have problems with English because of being opaque and with its many different consonant clusters but, at the same time, Catalan is not that transparent. (Maria Vilanova 2025)

If grapheme–phoneme relations are consistent, then even a child with phonological difficulties may, with appropriate instruction, learn to map print onto speech and accordingly show little or no delay in reading acquisition. When grapheme–phoneme relations are consistent, children can easily acquire the grapheme–phoneme correspondence rules and use these to assemble pronunciations for novel letter strings. (Landerl 1997)

The double deficit hypothesis (Bowers and Wolf 1993) maintains that children with both phonological and naming-speed deficits will be poorer readers than children with just one or neither of these deficits. Most dyslexics, had a double or triple deficit in phonological, naming-speed, and orthographic skills, which the child cannot easily compensate. (Badian 1997)

Predictors of akshara knowledge appear to be related to aspects of both visual and phonological processing. It is argued that the visual complexity of the Kannada script poses somewhat different challenges to a child learning to read than those reported for visually less complex orthographies. (Nag Snowling 2014).

Analyses of errors showed confusions between the symbols for phonologically similar consonants, visually based errors, particularly on small diacritic marks, and influences of dialect. Kannada has been considered a transparent writing system, but the challenges that arise in mastering this visuo-spatially complex and extensive orthography suggest that previous studies have missed certain factors that contribute to the ease or difficulty with which a writing system is learned. (Nag Treiman 2010).

Orthographic knowledge, phoneme awareness, and rapid automatic naming were independent predictors of reading rate and, together with syllable awareness, predicted individual differences in reading accuracy. (Nag Snowling 2011)

Tamil Language

Tamil is the official language of the Indian state of Tamil Nadu. It is a language with 247 letters - 12 vowels, 18 consonants, a special character called ayutha ezhuthu and 216 vowel-consonant combination letters. The letter name and sound of the letters are same. 216 letters (12x18) are vowel-consonant combination letters, with a symbol attached to the consonant to represent a particular vowel sound added to it. These letters are predictable for all vowel sounds except for short and long *oo* sound.

The literature that is available in the field of Tamil orthographic knowledge suggests that transparency assists in learning and that the younger reader and poor reader are particularly vulnerable to phonological errors (Nag-Arulmani 2003).

When children write memorized answers to questions set out in their book, diglossia effects are low, but when children write stories or explain a taught concept in their own words, many words may be written as they are spoken (Sonali Nag 2019)

In spite of Tamil being considered a transparent language, the following aspects serve as difficulties to a dyslexic learner in learning and mastering the language.

- Number of letters are more in Tamil (when compared to languages like English) with many similar looking letters, demanding a higher visual memory and visual discrimination. Each of the letter given below is different, but looks similar.

  த - ந, ஓ - ஒ, மூ- மூ,

  எ - னெ - ளை - னை

- Letter identification and the phoneme-grapheme association takes longer as the number of letters is more with similar and confusing sounds among them.

- There are few simple letters that can be easily written with standing and sleeping lines.

  ட ப ஈ

- Letters with more curves and intersecting curves are difficult to write.

  அ இ ண

  For such letters, proper letter formation has to be ensured to get the final output letter written in the right manner. If started at a wrong point, the letter can entirely go wrong. Such complicated letters make writing more of an art work.

- The above aspects demand a higher visual memory and muscle memory.

- The symbols used in the vowel consonant combination letters are similar and confusing.

  கெ, கே, கை, கொ, கோ, கௌ

  For dyslexics with a left right confusion, there might be reversals in these symbols as well as the letters.

- Misplacing the symbol, for instance a long vowel sound with a short vowel sound of the same consonant or vice versa, might give an entirely different meaning to the word.

  சக்தி - energy   பல் - tooth

  சகதி - mud   பால் - milk

  கெடு - to spoil (verb)

  கேடு - damage (noun)

  கொடு - give

  கோடு - line

- Single word may have different word meanings.

  பார் - to see, world

  ஆறு - six, river

- The spoken and written forms of words vary. Even for a child who speaks Tamil as mother tongue, the written format would have to be learnt.

  The following sentences show the spoken format.

அம்மா எனக்கு புதுத்துணி வாங்கித் தந்தாங்க.

அது ரொம்ப அழகா இருந்துச்சு.

The following sentences show the written format of the above sentences.

அம்மா எனக்கு புத்தாடை வாங்கித் தந்தார்.

அது மிகவும் அழகாக இருந்தது.

- Words in sentences may be longer, when two words are combined to form a single word.

அன்பு + இல்லாதவர்கள் = அன்பில்லாதவர்கள்

படத்தில் + இருந்து = படத்திலிருந்து

Even when a child can read individual words with good fluency, he/ she may struggle to read the combined word in sentences.

- Writing is a much tougher task than reading. There are three letters for *na* sound, three letters for *la* sound, two letters for *ra* sound. The pronunciation varies slightly for each letter which is not very clear even among native speakers. A child can read words with any of these sounds, knowing that all the letters correspond to a similar sound.

- The above aspect manifests in a worser way while writing. Knowing which letter is to be used for a particular word is a common confusion even among non-dyslexic children. Though there are rules, it is tough to remember the *when*, *where* and *how* of the rules and its exceptions.

- The rules don't apply to all words. Some words have to be remembered as such, making it more complicated.

- Misplacing a letter for the *la*, *na* or *ra* sound might give an entirely different meaning to the word. There are many such homophones in Tamil language.

வால் - tail

வாள் - sword

வாழ் - to live

- Some simple two letter words like those shown below, look bigger like a four or five letter word because of the symbols added to the consonant.

கொடி, கோழி, தோசை, யானை

It demands more effort from a dyslexic child to write all the four or five units of the word perfectly to write a simple two letter word correctly.

For children with Tamil as mother tongue, learning in mother tongue may help the child understand the concepts better at school level. However, the technical words introduced at each grade level have to be learnt afresh. Also, errors in writing will impose a problem throughout the learning period. All this effortful learning might not be useful at college level as the degree courses are offered mostly in English.

Conclusion

Practice and appropriate teaching methods can improve language skills. But it is vital to acknowledge that various aspects of a language may give a natural advantage or disadvantage to dyslexic learners. It is evident from the above discussion that there are many drawbacks in spite of

the consistency and predictability of the language. Though the transparency of the language is supportive to a dyslexic learner, other aspects such as high demand on visual and muscle memory, diglossia effect, homophones etc serve as a hindrance to master the language. It is important to consider the individual learner aspects and analyse the suitability of a language rather than generalizing that a transparent language would be easier.

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