

MODIFICATION OF GRAMMAR-LEXICAL TESTS IN ENGLISH LESSONS FOR THE INDIVIDUALS WITH DEVELOPMENTAL LEARNING DISABILITIES AT LOWER SECONDARY SCHOOL

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Abstract:

The aim of the paper is to suggest several modifications of grammar-lexical tests for the individuals with developmental learning disabilities at lower secondary school in English lesson maintaining their validity and reliability. The participants of the research were ten eight graders with one or more learning disabilities. During the qualitative research, we used the tests from the course book Project 3 as a research tool and a brief questionnaire for the learners as a research method. The research results showed that if the tests are adequately modified respecting learners' specific disabilities, the likelihood of passing the test will be higher.

Key words:

modification, test, grammar, lexis, English language, learning disabilities, lower secondary school

Modification and evaluation of grammar-lexical tests for the individuals with developmental learning disabilities

A heterogeneous group naturally includes the learners with individual needs. The learners with developmental learning disabilities (special learning needs) are also included in this group which requires a specific teacher's approach and teaching strategies. In the paper, we specifically dedicate our attention to dyslexia, dysgraphia and dysorthography because these learning disabilities significantly influence teaching of English language.

A special pedagogical counselling centre generally recommends to extend test time for the individuals with developmental learning disabilities. This recommendation is, however, not directly related to grammar-lexical tests. In other words, it does not include the points which would help these individuals to complete the test successfully. Polgáryová (2015) suggests to modify the font and highlight the important words using bold or underline them in a test whereas using italics is not appropriate. Other suggestions include the use of mother tongue in terms of instructions in the written tasks and the use of compensation strategies in the form of lexicon-grammar table or dictionaries. Generally speaking, the aim is not to reduce the number of tasks in a test but to help the individual with proper aids to achieve "his / her best" in spite of learning disabilities.

Schneider and Crombie (2003) add that multiple choice and matching tasks are the most appropriate for the individuals with learning disabilities. Considering the tasks "fill in the blank spaces", the authors advise to write down the words below or above the exercise and to use pictures. Concerning reading and also writing, they recommend to use shorter texts because of problems with eye movement from one point to another. Based on specific symptoms of the disability, they suggest to complete the test at home

on a / without a computer under supervision of the teacher. The point is not to avoid the test but to create suitable external conditions for individuals with different disabilities to complete it successfully.

Polgáryová (2015) continues with specific modifications of Testing 9 (external testing of learners of the 9th grade at lower secondary schools) for the individuals with learning disabilities. These modifications can also be relevant for the tests in general. Author's intention was to modify the tests without reducing the content because they should be comparable with the ones aimed at intact individuals. As a result, the author divides possible modifications into the following areas:

1. formal modifications which include line spacing, highlighting key words and underlining important words in the task. Considering longer extracts, it is necessary to structure them (to divide them into shorter paragraphs).
2. content modifications which are related to the tasks themselves. It means that the tasks are shorter and it is possible to replace one task with another one. However, it is necessary to maintain the essence of the task.
3. environmental modifications that require the help of teacher assistants. It is very demanding to apply them during "traditional" teaching (see the sixth area).
4. extended time which is connected with slower working tempo of individuals with learning disabilities. As we implicitly mentioned in the first area, reading comprehension is a more time-consuming activity for individuals with different disorders and extended time enables them to use higher cognitive processes. In other words, the learner integrates the previous facts with the new ones searching for various interconnections which requires a higher mental effort and a considerable amount of time.
5. compensation strategies which should be based on individual education plan. They usually include additional linguistic tables and dictionaries.
6. teacher assistant who assumes several roles. First of all, he/she should collaborate with the teacher in order to be familiar with the objective of lesson and the amount and quality of knowledge the individual with learning disability should acquire. The teacher together with a teacher assistant prepare a modified test corresponding to individual's specific disorder. If necessary, a teacher assistant leaves the classroom with the individual as indicated in the third area to create better external working conditions.

Hornáková (2018) reminds that the teacher should respect the fact that the individuals with learning disabilities often write down a phonetic form of a word. Although the individual is familiar with the rule, he / she does not know how to apply it. Using marks is, therefore, not the appropriate method of evaluation.

Research methodology

Research problem

The individuals with learning disabilities achieve average results in terms of testing language skills. The issue which specifically causes more problems is testing grammar and lexis. The reason for elaborating this topic consists in the fact that although the authors such as Schneider and Crombie (2003), Ott (2007), Zelinková (2009), Harčariková (2008, 2010), Hudson, High and Al Otaiba (2013), Žovinec and Staňová (2015), Burr, Haas and Ferriere (2015), Polgáryová (2015), Kováčová (2017), Hornáková (2018), Grosjean (2019) and many others state specific recommendations for the individuals with learning disabilities applied to school environment, they do not state methodological guidelines regarding the modifications of grammar-lexical tests. Based on the above mentioned theoretical framework, we formulated the following research problem:

How to modify grammar-lexical test for the individuals with learning disabilities at lower secondary school to achieve their highest possible achievement at the test in the English lesson?

Research aim and research questions

The aim of the qualitative research was to modify grammar-lexical test for the individuals with learning disabilities to increase their achievement while maintaining its validity and reliability. Resulting from research problem and above stated theoretical framework consisting of domestic and foreign scholars in the field of foreign language teaching of the individuals with learning disabilities, we formulated three research questions:

1. How to modify grammar-lexical tests for the individuals with dyslexia in English lessons at lower secondary schools?
2. How to modify grammar-lexical tests for the individuals with dysgraphia in English lessons at lower secondary schools?
3. How to modify grammar-lexical tests for the individuals with dysorthography in English lessons at lower secondary schools?

Research plan

Initially, it is important to state that before conducting research we had known all individuals very well because we have been teaching them for four years. At first, we carefully selected two grammar-lexical tests for the individuals with learning disabilities from the course book Project 3 (Hutchinson, 2014) corresponding to their level of proficiency. The individuals completed the original test (without modifications) placed in the course book and then they completed the modified test. After completing both tests, we compared individuals' achievement in percentage. We also compared their achievement in individual types of tasks. We specifically dedicated our attention to the individuals with multiple learning disabilities. The research started to carry out from October 2019 to March 2020. The research was interrupted due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Then, it continued from September 2020 to October 2020 until the moment when it was again interrupted because of the identical reason. After writing the modified and not modified test, the learners filled in a short questionnaire in which they stated their opinion on the tasks in the test.

Subjects of the research

Research participants were ten learners of the eighth grade at a lower secondary school. The learners are 13-15 years old because some of them had failed to meet standards of the previous grade or their school attendance was postponed. In the group, there were five girls and five boys with one or more learning disabilities who were marked with the following symbols: learner 1 (L1), learner 2 (L2), learner 3 (L3), learner 4 (L4), learner 5 (L5), learner 6 (L6), learner 7 (L7), learner 8 (L8), learner 9 (L9) and learner 10 (L10). The total number of eighth graders was 23. In each English lesson, learners were divided into two different groups while the second one is attended exclusively by the learners with learning disabilities. In the classroom, there was a teacher assistant and special educational needs teaching assistant. The Table 1 clearly shows that most of the learners suffered from dysgraphia, then dysorthography and dyslexia. Moreover, some learners suffered from other learning disabilities such as attention deficit disorder (ADD), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) or communication disorder.

Tab. 1: The list of learners with learning disabilities

Eighth graders	Dysgraphia	Dyslexia	Dysorthography
L1	•		
L2	•	•	•
L3	•		•
L4	•		•
L5	•		
L6	•	•	•
L7		•	•
L8		•	
L9	•		
L10	•	•	•

Legend: L1-L10 – learner 1-learner 10

(Source: Authors' own research)

Research method and tool

Grammar-lexical tests

The aim of the first test was to test individuals' knowledge in the following grammar-lexical topics: verb forms exercise, forming the questions in Present Perfect Tense and using adverbs "ever" and "never" in sentence. Lexis focused on the topic "Experiences" ("Have you ever done something like this?") and litter production. Considering speaking, the individuals were supposed to use the sentences in Present Perfect Tense. The test was written at the end of September 2020.

The aim of the second test was to test individuals' knowledge in the following grammar-lexical topics: usage of the verbs "should" and "shouldn't", "must", "mustn't" and "don't have to" and phrasal verbs. Lexis focused on the topic "Something's wrong", emotions, pain and health problems which was practised in speaking. The test was written in the middle of October 2020.

Questionnaire

The aim of the questionnaire was to receive feedback from the individuals with learning disabilities on the modified and not modified test. The questionnaire consisted of five questions written in the mother tongue of the participants of the research. In the first question, the individuals expressed their opinions on the level of difficulty of the test on the scale "very simple" - "simple" - "average" - "difficult" - "very difficult". The second question focused on their feelings after writing the test using the scale "very good" - "good" - "neither good, nor bad" - "bad" - "very bad." The third and fourth questions were aimed at the simplest and the most demanding tasks in the test. In the last fifth question, the individual wrote down which mark he/she got from the test.

Research results

Test 1

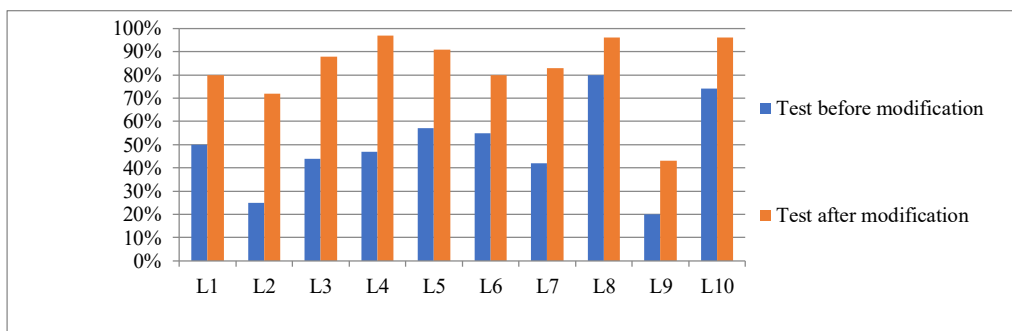


Fig. 1: Comparison of individuals' achievement in not modified and modified test 1
(Source: Authors' own research)

Figure 1 compares the achievement of individuals with learning disabilities in not modified and modified test 1. It clearly shows that individuals were more successful in the modified test. Whereas the average score gained by the individuals in not modified test was 49%, in the modified test it was 83% which is a significant improvement. L4 improved his score gaining 50% more in the modified test. On other hand, the lowest percentage of improvement was 16%. If we compare the score of the individuals with multiple learning disabilities, they improved 30% on average.

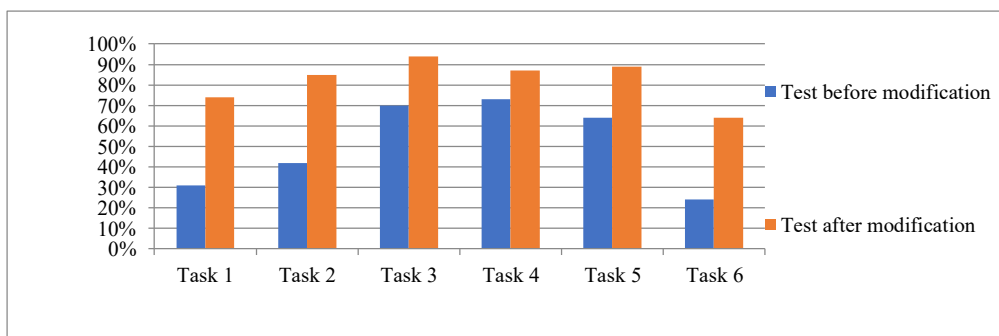


Fig. 2: Comparison of individuals' achievement in not modified and modified test 1 in particular tasks
(Source: Authors' own research)

Figure 2 compares individuals' achievement in particular types of tasks. The tasks in not modified and modified tests were not identical but grammar and lexis which were tested were identical in both tests. From the figure 2 it is clear that some individuals significantly improved their score. Although the usage of grammatical phenomenon or lexis in conversation was considered by the individuals as the most demanding task, they improved their score in this particular task in modified test. The individuals improved their score also in other types of tasks, however, it was not so significant. In three tasks the individuals improved 40% on average and in other three ones, they

improved 15% on average. The simplest task was multiple choice and various matching tasks with the pictures.

Test 2

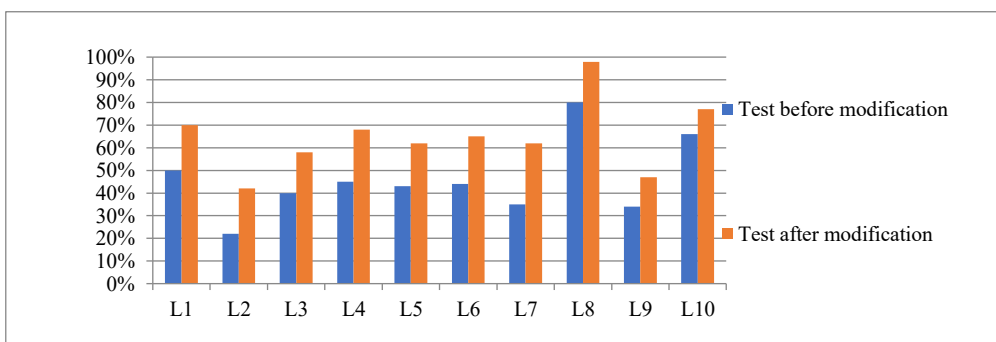


Fig. 3: Comparison of individuals' achievement in not modified and modified test 2
(Source: Authors' own research)

Figure 3 compares the achievement of individuals with learning disabilities in not modified and modified test 2 which is not so significant in comparison with the test 1. In not modified test the individuals gained 42% on average whereas in modified test it was 65% on average. The lowest percentage of improvement was 10%. If we compare the score of the individuals with multiple learning disabilities, they improved 19% on average.

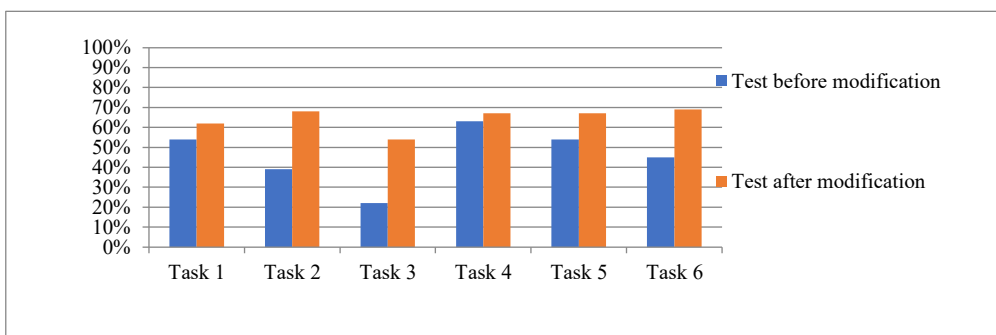


Fig. 4: Comparison of individuals' achievement in not modified and modified test 2 in particular tasks
(Source: Authors' own research)

Figure 4 compares the achievement of individuals with learning disabilities in not modified and modified test 2 whereas the score of individuals improved 19% on average. The lowest percentage of improvement was 4% and the most significant one was 32%. The third task "circle the mistake in a sentence and correct it" in not modified test was the most demanding for the individuals with learning disabilities. The average achievement in this type of task achieved 22%. Not modified test contained another task that is matching the expressions which was also considered as the demanding one. The average achievement in this type of task achieved 39%. Use of pictures undoubtedly contributes to improvement of the individuals' score in modified test.

Questionnaire

Test 1

The first question dealt with the level of difficulty of not modified and modified tests. Five individuals considered not modified test as “very difficult”, three individuals considered it as “difficult” and two individuals as “average” whereas modified test was in the view of six individuals perceived as “average.” The rest considered modified test as “simple” and “very simple.”

The responses to the second question were aimed at individuals’ feelings after writing test 1. Six individuals had “very bad” feeling after writing not modified test and two individuals had “bad” feeling. One individual had mixed feeling (“neither good, nor bad”) and one individual had “good” feeling. After writing modified test, individuals’ feelings changed significantly. Five individuals had a “good” feeling after writing test, two individuals had a “very good” feeling and the rest had a “very bad”, “bad” and mixed feeling (“neither good, nor bad”).

The task which was considered the most demanding one in modified test by the individuals with learning disabilities was the task 1. The aim of the task was to choose the right verb and put it in Present Perfect Tense which includes the use of correct forms of irregular forms of verbs. The tasks which were considered the simplest ones in modified test by the individuals with learning disabilities were multiple choice and match the word with the corresponding picture.

Test 2

The results of the questionnaire were similar to the previous ones. Eight individuals considered not modified test as “very difficult”, one individual as “difficult” and one as “average.” Modified test was considered by one individual as “very simple” and also one individual mentioned that modified test was “simple.” Three individuals claimed that modified test was “average,” three individuals stated that it was “difficult” and two of them considered modified test as “very difficult.”

After writing not modified test 2, seven individuals had a “very bad” feeling, two of them had a “bad” feeling and one individual had a “good” feeling. In comparison with modified test 1, after writing modified test 2, individuals’ feelings changed partially. Two individuals had still a “very bad” feeling, three had a “bad” feeling, two had mixed feelings (“neither good, nor bad”), two individuals had a “good” feeling and one individual had a “very good” feeling.

The task which was considered the most demanding one in not modified test was right-wrong: correct the mistake in a sentence, match the right expressions and put the words in the correct order and make a sentence.

The tasks which were considered the simplest ones in modified test by the individuals with learning disabilities were multiple choice and filling in the gaps with several options.

Discussion

Schneider and Crombie (2003) state in their research some reactions of the individuals with learning disabilities which clearly demonstrate the above mentioned negative feelings. One learner claimed that he tried to do his best for more than 100% and he got only D or F. Another learner points out that he is not able to manage this problem. Even though he was attending two months of intensive English course, he was not able to acquire a foreign language. The next learner admits that she has been studying a foreign language for four years but her level of proficiency is “beginner.” According to her and her peers, the main reason of their failure was the fact that the course did not correspond to their learning tempo. Based on these research results, Schneider and Crombie (2003) suggest multisensory structured language (MSL), or, more precisely, a

structured multi-sensory teaching approach (method) which is a specific scientific based approach for the individuals with developmental learning disabilities. As the name suggests, this approach uses more senses that is auditory, visual and kinaesthetic to make neural pathways stronger. For instance, when learning the letter "d", the individual at first pronounces the letter correctly (auditory), then he/she observes the process during which the letter is formed (visual) whereas it is recommended to use colourful cards. As a result, the individual copies the letter (kinaesthetic) into his/her exercise book and reads it aloud. The teacher is supposed to use the word/words containing this letter in the context (Australia Dyslexia Association, Timor, 2014).

Harčáriková's (2008) research confirms the results of Schneider and Crombie (2003) and Čornák and Popelková (2009) emphasizing that classroom conditions are not created properly for the individuals with learning disabilities. It means that a social integration is insufficient, there are a lot of learners in the classroom and it is not possible to work with the individual according to his/her specific learning disability. In addition, teachers evaluate the individuals with learning disability as average or below average. As a result, individual's attitude towards learning a foreign language and learning as such is negative.

The issue of individual integration was elaborated by Walterová (2012). She was studying several individual education plans coming to the conclusion that recommendations are not carefully formulated. She stated that the evaluation from Slovak and English language of an individual was formulated vaguely. For example, the document suggests to use marking scale according to which the individuals with learning disabilities are evaluated maximum by mark three. This recommendation does not comprise any specific guidelines in comparison to our research in which final evaluation of the test was preceded by particular formal and content modifications of types of tasks.

Current research is limited to two grammar-lexical tests and a fixed sample of learners which could be considered as one of the possible limitations. This kind of research would require a longitudinal study, systematic evaluation, cooperation of more teachers and a special educational needs teacher, a psychologist and a sociologist. In this way, the research would be more complex and interdisciplinary.

Current research, however, contains specific modifications which are easily applicable to teaching practice and they may help the teachers to organise their lessons more effectively. The list of recommendations is a working document which is necessary to up-date on a regular basis.

Conclusion and recommendations for teaching practice

We can assert that the individuals with learning disability often failed in their attempts because a test does not or only partially respect their "difference." In order to apply this difference to teaching practice, it is necessary to study an individual education plan, to observe the individual focusing on his/her current mental state, to be familiar with his/her family background (support of the individual, everyday communication with parents and siblings, home preparation for school) and to be familiar with his/her ability to learn a foreign language. Thanks to constant, regular and systematic collaboration, the individual is motivated and encouraged to work on the improvement of his/her foreign language abilities and skills.

If we had the opportunity to extend our research, we would like to write down more grammar-lexical tests to find out which types of tasks are appropriate and inappropriate for the individuals with learning disabilities. Then, we would compare the results of their tests with the ones written by intact individuals whereas the tests for the individuals with learning disability would be modified according to the results from the current research.

Before doing research, we formulated three research questions:

1. How to modify grammar-lexical tests for the individuals with dyslexia in English lessons at lower secondary schools?
2. How to modify grammar-lexical tests for the individuals with dysgraphia in English lessons at lower secondary schools?
3. How to modify grammar-lexical tests for the individuals with dysorthography in English lessons at lower secondary schools?

The answers and at the same time recommendations for teaching practice are as follows:

1. make the spaces in sentences bigger and use bold.
2. omit the tasks in which the individuals write the whole sentences and omit the tasks in which the individuals fill in the missing letters in each word.
3. reduce the tasks in which the individual modifies the words.

Based on research results, other appropriate modifications for the dyslexic individuals, those who suffer from dysgraphia, dysorthography and multiple learning disabilities are suggested:

- underline keywords and the words which are necessary to use in that particular task,
- omit the tasks such as find a mistake in a sentence,
- use shorter tasks,
- reduce a number of items in a test,
- use the tasks such as filling in the gaps and multiple choice,
- use the task filling in the gaps with the given words,
- use multiple choice,
- write down the instructions in the individual's mother tongue,
- add the pictures to the tasks,
- respect the level of learning disability preparing a test,
- use more types of tasks with lower number of items.

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