The Language Learning Experience of Hungarian Dyslexic Students

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Introduction

The question of dyslexic language learners has received increasingly more attention in Hungary and worldwide. A number of studies have investigated the problems of dyslexic language learners (e.g., Kormos & Kontra, in press; Schneider & Crombie, 2003; Sparks & Ganschow, 1993), and there is a substantial amount of literature describing special teaching methods facilitating language learning for dyslexic language learners (e.g., Nijakowska, 2001, 2004, in press; Schneider & Crombie, 2003; Secemski, Deutsch, & Adoram, 2000). In Hungary a growing number of studies have been written about the problems of dyslexic language learners (Gyarmathy & Vassné, 2004; Kormos & Kontra, in press; Ormos, 2004; Sarkadi, in press) However, we still know relatively little about the language learning experience of dyslexic learners studying in Hungarian schools. The present interview study tries to gain an insight into three relevant aspects of this experience. It examines the participants’ experiences concerning the attitude of the school and language teachers towards their learning disability, and it also investigates how these experiences shape the students feelings about language lessons and their attitude towards language learning.

Review of the literature

Dyslexia and the legal situation of dyslexic language learners in Hungary

Dyslexia is traditionally defined as a disorder (Waites, 1968, cited by Hatt & Nichols, 1995) or a deficiency (Frost & Emery, 1995; Smith & Sensenbaugh, 1992), which involves difficulties with reading and/or writing. It is emphasized that these difficulties are not due to mental disability or inadequate instruction (Bryant & Bradley, 1985 cited by Smith & Sensenbaugh, 1992), and cannot be explained by deficiencies in hearing or vision (Frost & Emery, 1995). Neurophysiology defines dyslexia as a neurodevelopmental disorder of genetic origin with a basis in the brain (Smith, Kelley & Brower, 1998, cited by Paulesu, Démonet, Fazio, McCrory, Chanoine, Brunswick, Cappa, Cossu, Habib, Frith, & Frith, 2001). In the cortex of
the dyslexic brain there are abnormalities known as ectopias and microgyria, which affect “connectivity and functionality of the cortex in critical areas related to sound and visual processing” (Paulesu et. al., 2001, p. 2165).

More recent definitions refuse to define dyslexia as a deficiency or as a disorder: Peer (1999) describes dyslexia “as a combination of abilities and difficulties which affect the learning process in one or more of reading, spelling and writing" (p. 61), while Ranaldi (2003) defines it as learning difference, which does not only involve difficulties, but strengths as well.

Studying a foreign language is usually a challenging task for dyslexic language learners. Not only writing and reading in a foreign language is difficult for them, but they have problems with phonological and auditory processing, syntax and short term memory (Schneider & Crombie, 2003). In spite of these difficulties foreign language learning is very important for Hungarian dyslexic learners. As Hungarian is a language spoken by a relatively small number of speakers, the lack of foreign language knowledge severely limits one’s career prospects (Gyarmathy & Vassné, 2004). However, Hungarian dyslexic students are often exempted from evaluation in foreign language classes (Educational Act of 1993) instead of being given extra help in overcoming the difficulties they experience in language learning. This puts Hungarian dyslexic students at a serious disadvantage on the job market. Hungary is a small country in central Europe that is largely dependent on international investments and foreign trade; therefore, it is almost impossible to find a well-paying job if someone does not speak at least one foreign language. Fortunately, exemption from evaluation in foreign language classes is not the only accommodation available for dyslexic students; it is also possible to exempt dyslexic learners from the evaluation of their written work or the assessment of their spelling. Decisions about exemptions and accommodations are made by the head of the school on the basis of the recommendation of the student’s diagnosis issued by the specialist education centers or education advising centers (Educational Act of 1993).

The experience of being a dyslexic learner

Dyslexic language learners do not only struggle with linguistic problems when acquiring an L2, but they often suffer from their environment’s reaction to their special situation as well. They are often considered to be talented and "stupid" at the same time because of their unusual profile of strengths and weaknesses (Cottrel, 2003). Ignorance also aggravates the situation of dyslexic students. Most people have vague ideas about the causes of dyslexia, and they often consider it a sign of low intelligence (Ranaldi, 2003), which results in the stigmatization of dyslexics (Gyarmathy & Vassné, 2004). Edwards’ (1994) study illustrates the negative experiences of dyslexic students at school and reveals that even successful and confident dyslexic students experience unfair treatment, discrimination, neglect and humiliation during school years. The language learning experiences of dyslexic have been previously investigated by two studies both conducted in Hungary. Ormos (2004) conducted a case study with a successful dyslexic learner,
whose language teachers reacted positively to the student’s special needs and took the student’s dyslexia into consideration in the foreign language lessons. The participant of another case study (Sarkadi, 2005), however, had negative experiences about her teachers’ attitude to dyslexia, as a result of which she decided not to declare her dyslexia in secondary school in fear of stigmatization.

Research method

Participants

Some of the participants volunteered for the interviews in response to an advertisement recruiting dyslexic language learners who were willing to speak about their language learning experience. Other respondents were recommended by teachers or speech therapists working with dyslexic students. All students held an official document that certified the diagnosis of dyslexia. I tried to achieve maximum variety in sampling the participants; therefore, in selecting the interviewees, I considered their age, age of identification, level of language knowledge and the therapy they received in their native language. The participants also differed in whether their problems were attended to by their foreign language teachers.

Table 1: The overview of the participants’ biographical data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>L2</th>
<th>L3</th>
<th>L4</th>
<th>Participants’ age at diagnosis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Antal</td>
<td>boy</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>German</td>
<td>14</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Barbara</td>
<td>girl</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>German</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Csilla</td>
<td>girl</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Russian</td>
<td>27</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Dénes</td>
<td>boy</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>German</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Eszter</td>
<td>girl</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Russian</td>
<td>23</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Ferenc</td>
<td>boy</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Greek</td>
<td>26</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Gábor</td>
<td>boy</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Helga</td>
<td>girl</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Italian</td>
<td>13</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Ilona</td>
<td>girl</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Hebrew</td>
<td>Spanish, German</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. József</td>
<td>boy</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Russian</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It was also my aim that the participants should represent certain subgroups of dyslexic students. I wanted to include participants who spent a period of their language learning career as unidentified dyslexic language learners, and interviewees who were exempted from the evaluation of their foreign language performance. Moreover, I intended to select participants who were not exempted but were entitled for certain accommodations.
Table 2: Subgroups of dyslexic students in the sample

| Studied as an unidentified learner for at least a certain period of time | Csilla, Ferenc, Eszter, Ilona, Helga, Gábor, Antal |
| Exempted from grading | Helga, Antal |
| Entitled for accommodations | Ilona, Barbara, Dénes, Gábor, József |

Procedures

The research presented in this paper is part of an extensive interview study which investigated Hungarian dyslexic students’ feelings and experiences about language learning and examined the language learning strategies these students applied to overcome their difficulties in language learning. The interview guide used in the extensive research was compiled on the basis of relevant literature concerning the experiences, difficulties and learning strategies of dyslexic learners (Kormos & Kontra, in press; Ormos, 2004; Schneider & Crombie, 2003; Sparks & Ganschow, 1993).

The interview guide consisted of 15 questions which focused on four main topics: participants’ problems in everyday life and in the native language resulting from dyslexia, language learning experiences, language learning difficulties and coping strategies and motivational characteristics. The instrument was piloted with two students, and minor modifications were made to the interview guide after piloting. The interviews were conducted in Hungarian and lasted for approximately 40 minutes. The interviews were recorded and transcribed by the author.

As for data analysis, the main themes of the transcribed interviews were independently coded by the author and a university lecturer experienced in the field of dyslexia. In case of discrepancies in coding problematic issues were discussed until an agreement was reached.

Seventeen themes were identified, out of which I will only discuss those related to the topic of the present paper. These themes are the following:

- The reaction of language teachers to dyslexia
- Feelings about language lessons
- Language learning attitude

The themes were further analyzed into smaller categories by the author. The emerging categories within the three main themes were the following:

The reaction of language teachers to dyslexia

- Refusal to take dyslexia into consideration
- Special attention to the problems of dyslexic language learners
- Reactions to the problems of unidentified learners
- Reaction to the exemption from the evaluation in foreign language classes
Feelings about language lessons

- General negative feelings
- General positive feelings
- Boredom
- Anxiety

Language learning attitude

- General negative attitude
- General positive attitude
- Acceptance of failure
- Indifference

Results and discussion

Unidentified dyslexic language learners

Seven participants could comment on about their teachers’ reactions to the problems of unidentified learners. Three of them (Eszter, Csilla and Ferenc) were diagnosed as adults, whereas four (Ilona, Helga, Gábor and Antal) were all diagnosed over the age of 10, so they spent a certain period of their language learning career as unidentified learners.

The participants were of the opinion that the majority of their teachers did not recognize their special needs and failed to provide special attention to them. The students’ needs were neglected, which is a common reaction to dyslexia on the part of the teachers according to the findings of Edwards’ (1994) interview study. Without special help, all the participants found language learning difficult. The unidentified learners were given bad marks, two of them failed in a foreign language and four were on the verge of failing.

Some of the participants had especially vivid memories about their teachers’ reaction to their problems. One of the interviewees (Ferenc) recounted the experience when his first language teacher in secondary school told him “that’s it for you, you are going to fail”. Another student (Helga) explained that “they did not try to help me, but they emphasized that I am having problems, but not like wanting to help me but as a kind of humiliation”.

Unidentified dyslexic language learners whose needs were neglected in school had negative experiences about language lessons, and their language learning attitude was rather negative. For example, one of the participants (Csilla) mentioned that language lessons were tragic experiences for her. Having been successful in other subjects, it was very unpleasant for her to experience failure in language lessons. Her memories about English lessons were especially painful, in these lessons she was taught by a teacher, “who really did not tolerate” her problems. She even failed in English in secondary school despite being a good student in other subjects. She had to retake all the subjects of the second year of grammar
school just because she was not able to pass the end of year retake exam in English. This failure and the way her English teacher reacted to her problems had a destructive effect on her attitude to language learning:

I lost my interest in studying languages because of her. I even lost my interest in studying general[ly] for a while.

Fortunately, there were also some positive comments about teachers’ reactions to the problems of unidentified learners. One of our interviewees (Csilla) mentioned that though her German teacher did not know about her dyslexia, she recognized that she needed some special help.

At the end of the year when I was on the verge [of] failing, she might have wondered “Oh my God! How should I help this student of mine?” And she was helpful, and she asked me do some exercises which I was able to do. So I did not fail.

The teacher’s empathy should definitely be appreciated, considering the fact that she was not given any guidelines about how to help this student, and she was not informed about her special problems either. Another participant (Antal) who was exempted after his diagnosis, had positive experiences with a teacher at the time when he was an unidentified learner. This teacher frequently assessed her students’ oral production, and she had a good relationship with her students. It is interesting to consider that this student performed much better and was more motivated to study English while he was taught by this teacher than after his diagnosis.

Language learners exempted from evaluation in foreign language classes

The practice of exemption from evaluation in foreign language classes is widely criticized in Hungary. For example, Kormos and Kontra (in press) describe exemption as an inappropriate reaction to the learning difficulties of dyslexic students which seriously disadvantages the student. Though exemption can be considered as a form of special attention to the problems of dyslexic students, the exempted participants of the research were of the opinion that their teachers usually did not care about their language learning. For example, the teachers of one of the participants (Antal) did not expect him to attend language lessons. It seems that in their interpretation, the student’s exemption was also an exemption from attendance. The following quote from one of his language teachers demonstrates this attitude:

One of my teachers told me: “If you don’t want to turn up at the lesson— that’s OK, if I want to attend the lesson that’s OK, you can do whatever you want.”
It can be argued that this interpretation of the exemption of dyslexic language learners differs from the regulations of the Educational Act of 1993, since there is no regulation suggesting that dyslexic learners can be exempted from attending language classes.

Secondly, the student’s comments also reveal that his teachers did not mind what he did when he attended the lessons. An extreme example of this lack of expectations is the interviewee’s answer to the question asking about how he spent his English lessons:

As I was the only boy in the class, the teacher got used to it that during the English lessons I was lying on the desk, and one of the girls was sitting next to me, and we were talking.

Another comment suggests that at least one of his teachers did not know what to expect from the interviewee, and he was not sure how to treat a dyslexic language learner exempted from the evaluation of his language abilities:

Sometimes I tried to cooperate. The teacher told us “Write this down! No Antal you don’t have to write this down.” I asked him why not, if he did not have to correct it. I just wanted to write it down. Then he said “OK, then write it down. Or you know what, don’t talk back! Leave the classroom!” Yes, these kinds of things happened.

As for the other exempted student (Helga), she attends English lessons, but she is not involved in English lessons and according to her, the main point of her exemption is that teachers do not have to care about her:

They never ask me questions. The main thing is that they don’t have to pay attention to me. But that’s natural.

Helga’s Italian teacher makes some effort to include her in the language lessons. She is sometimes asked to answer questions or take part in group work with the other students. She also writes the same test as the other students in the group, but she is not awarded grades. This attitude seems to be more advantageous than the carelessness which could be observed in the case of Antal’s teachers and Helga’s English teacher. However, despite the teacher’s efforts to include Helga in the classroom, Helga does not have a good opinion of this teacher. According to her, she does not teach well and she “kills the love of the language in the students” by concentrating only on the memorization of words and grammar rules.

Recounting memories about language lesson lessons where they were not involved in the learning process, both interviewees emphasized that they felt bored during these lessons. They also mentioned that they tried to engage themselves in activities to feel less bored. In the case of Antal it involved disturbing the lesson; therefore, he was often sent out of the classroom, while Helga does not disturb the others because she usually draws during the lessons.
It is also worth mentioning that both students have mixed feelings about being exempted from evaluation in foreign language classes. Helga appreciates that fact that she does not experience failure and humiliation in language lesson anymore, but she points out that it is very difficult for her to accept the fact that she is unlikely to achieve success in language learning:

It is really a burden that there is a thing that you will never really be able to do well in your life.

Similarly, Antal also did not mind the fact that he was exempted, and he said he really liked the fact that he could avoid attending English lessons. However after leaving secondary school, his view changed on this question, recognizing the importance of language learning he regretted that he had not studied English.

Considering the comments of the two exempted language learners, there seems to be a number of problematic issues concerning exemption from evaluation in foreign language classes. First of all, there seems to be an uncertainty about the interpretation of this legal concept among teachers. Most of the language teachers the participants met regarded exemption as an official excuse not to have to deal with the student in the foreign language class. Moreover, in case of one of the participants, teachers also interpreted this accommodation as an exemption from attendance. Another problem is that as the exempted students were usually not involved in the language lessons they felt bored and did not spend their time in a meaningful way. Finally, while exemption may provide a short term relief for the students, it was also burden for them, since it involved the acceptance of failure in language learning, and it also deprived them of the opportunity of acquiring a foreign language.

**Dyslexic learners entitled for accommodations**

In this section I will focus on the language learning experience of those dyslexic participants who were entitled for accommodations such as exemption from the evaluation of their written work or the consideration of their dyslexia in the assessment of their spelling mistakes.

Considering the reaction of language teachers to this subgroup of dyslexic learners, we can see a lot of examples of what Edwards (1994) calls “unfair treatment”. Three participants (József, Dénes and Barbara) reported that their language teachers ignored their dyslexia and refused to acknowledge their rights for accommodations. Dénes and Barbara, only had one language teacher who refused to acknowledge their rights for accommodation, while in József’s case all his language teachers ignored his dyslexia.

These teachers were informed about the students’ problems and read their diagnosis; nevertheless, according to the participants, they did not care about it. For example, Dénes wrote a petition to the headmaster and the language teacher to test him orally and attached his diagnosis which explicitly claimed that he should
be tested orally in language lessons. He describes his unsuccessful attempt to benefit from the facilitations he was entitled for in the following way:

My certificate said that I should be tested orally. I gave her my certificate. She tested me orally for a few weeks. But then she returned to the old system.

The participants used rather strong negative expressions to describe what it was like being taught by a teacher who ignored their dyslexia. For example, József said that he considered his English lessons to be disastrous, and he hated the moment when he had to enter his English classroom. His comments about the lessons also revealed anxiety:

Before the lessons I always look for the teacher in the corridor. I always hope that she won’t come. The other thing that I always check is whether she has brought some tests with her.

These participants also had a rather negative language learning attitude. Barbara said she hated English and did not want to say a word in English while she was taught by a teacher who ignored her dyslexia, whereas József made several claims which reflected that he accepted the fact that he was unsuccessful in language learning.

In contrast with the rather negative experiences of those language learners whose rights for accommodations were ignored, the participants who received the accommodations they were entitled for (Barbara, Dénes, Ilona and Gábor), appreciated the fact that their teachers took their dyslexia into consideration, and they all found accommodations as means of appropriate help in their language studies. The participants’ marks also improved and their language learning attitude also became more positive. One of the interviewees (Ilona) expressed her opinion about this in the following way:

My Hebrew teacher did not get any training in teaching dyslexics, but he does not consider spelling and that’s it. This was all I needed and now I can speak one more language... So if your spelling is not assessed, it will be easier for you, and you don’t have butterflies in your stomach anymore, that my God, I have to get this right. Once you are relieved of this stress, you will do better. It will be much better.
Conclusion and implications

This paper examined the experiences of dyslexic language learners concerning language teachers’ attitude towards their learning disability, and it also investigated how these experiences shape the students’ feelings about language lessons and their attitude towards language learning.

According to the findings, teachers reacted differently to the problems of three different subgroups of dyslexic learners (unidentified language learners, exempted language learners and language learners entitled for facilitations). In the majority of cases, teachers failed to recognize the problems of unidentified learners and the special needs of these students were often neglected. These learners usually had negative experiences about language lessons, and their language learning attitude was also negative. Fortunately, in some cases language teachers realized that their student was struggling with language learning and they provided assistance even in the lack of a diagnosis.

As for the experiences of dyslexic learners exempted from evaluation in foreign language classes, there seems to be a number of problematic issues concerning the practice of exemption. First of all, the teachers did not care about the language learning of exempted learners. Moreover, the students were usually not involved in the language lessons and tried to engage themselves in different activities to feel less bored. One of the long term consequences of the exemption was also a heavy emotional burden for the students who had to accept the fact that they were in a disadvantaged position because of the lack of foreign language knowledge.

Considering the experiences of participants entitled for accommodations, it can be seen that teachers can do a lot of harm or a lot of good, by ignoring or accepting the students’ rights for accommodations. Three out of the five participants entitled for accommodations mentioned that their dyslexia was not taken into consideration. These students were as neglected as the unidentified students; however, in their case the teachers’ reaction also involved a decision to ignore the recommendation of an official document. The students who received the accommodations, on the other hand, found them as means of appropriate help in their language studies and had a more positive language learning attitude.

As for the implications of the study, I think it is essential that language teachers should be informed about the symptoms of dyslexia and the problems of dyslexic language learners, since it may help them to recognize the problems of undiagnosed learners and also help them to understand why accommodations are essential for the success of dyslexic students. Furthermore, it would be also very useful to reconsider the situation of exempted learners and try to involve them in language learning, since it seems that according to the present practice they do not take part actively in language learning in schools.
Acknowledgments

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References