

Hungarian teachers' perceptions of dyslexic language learners

Judit Kormos and Edit Hegybíró Kontra
Eötvös Loránd University Budapest
Department of English Applied Linguistics
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Background to the study

- 7-10% of Hungarian school-children exhibit symptoms of learning disabilities.
- Due to the transparent nature of Hungarian orthography, dyslexia is often diagnosed only when school-children start studying English.
- Speaking foreign languages is highly important in the EU. Lack of foreign language competence is a serious disadvantage not only in the job market but often in everyday life.



Research question

- How do language teachers, speech therapists and special education teachers see the foreign language learning problems of students with dyslexia?

Research method Phase 1. Interviews Participants

Focus group interviews:

- 19 participants: 15 language teachers, 3 speech therapists, 1 special education teacher
- 5 primary schools from different regions in Hungary – representing various geographical areas, socio-economic status and school-types
- The schools participated in a special program aiming to help dyslexic students in studying foreign languages

Interviews

1.5 – 2 hour semi-structured interviews

Questions targeting language learning difficulties, behavioral problems, motivation, family background etc.

Qualitative content analysis

Independent coding

Phase 2 Questionnaire survey

- National representative sample of primary schools
- 324 language teachers – 185 teachers of English and 97 teachers of German (rest teach a variety of different languages and a combination of German and English)
- 36 item questionnaire
- 23 items with a Likert-scale, 7 yes/no questions, 7 open-ended and multiple choice questions on biographical background
- Content:
 - teachers' attitude to dyslexic language learners, their foreign language education in integrated language classrooms, exemption and accommodations
 - Questions on teachers' background knowledge and in-service and pre-service training concerning dyslexia
 - Teachers' self-perceived ability to identify dyslexia in the foreign language classroom

Results – Major emerging themes in the interviews

- Problems related to **oral language**, such as repeating utterances, constructing sentences orally, fluent speech, recitation, listening comprehension, and comments including the comparison of written and oral speech production.
- Difficulties related to **learning vocabulary**, including problems with word classes, homonyms, and the rate of learning.
- Difficulties in **reading**, including reading aloud and reading for comprehension.
- Problems related to **writing** and copying, also including spelling difficulties and issues of legibility.
- Overall low **pace** and the need for more time for performing tasks.
- **Serial integration**, including problems with letter and word sequences, lists, and series of instructions.
- **L1 problems** affecting L2 learning including problems with L1 speech production, orthography, limited range of vocabulary and little awareness of linguistic structures e.g. word order

Results - Interviews

Category	No. of units in category
L1 problems affecting L2 learning	19
Problems related to writing and copying	18
Difficulties in reading	15
Problems related to oral language	14
Difficulties related to learning vocabulary	14
Seriality	10
Memory	9
Overall low pace and the need for more time	6

Problems related to oral language

- “In the first year we build on oral methods, and we can already suspect dyslexia when children cannot repeat the words the way they heard them. We can notice the exchange of sounds or the addition of similar sounds to the word already at this stage. From this we can infer [that the child is dyslexic] and our inferences usually prove to be correct ...” (1ABE)
- “...they find it difficult to pronounce sounds denoted by a series of two or three vowels or consonants” (1DLB)
- Teachers’ views varied as regards the students’ problems in producing continuous stretches of oral discourse.

L2 reading problems

- “students cannot find the sounds corresponding to letters” (3DLB)
- They mix up letters while reading in L2.
- “students with learning disabilities are not able to read aloud and pay attention to what they are reading simultaneously” (3BPK)
- “they have difficulties reading longer texts” (3BHZS)
- “they have comprehension problems” (3ABE).

L2 writing problems

- “cannot copy words from the blackboard” (4BHZS),
- “leave out and mix up the order of letters, use capital letters incorrectly, sometimes mix Hungarian and English spelling” (4BHZS)
- “write down the words as they would pronounce them in Hungarian” (4BSZE).
- Dyslexic student also find it difficult to fill in gaps in written texts.

Problems in learning foreign language vocabulary

- Students mix up similarly sounding words (“I have a student who is in 8th grade now but still mixes up the words lesen [read] and lernen [learn]” (2BHZS) and words that have similar meaning.
- Students find it difficult to memorize abstract words, and they find it easier to learn nouns than verbs and adjectives. “In the case of compound words, it happens that they either remember the first or the second part of the word” (2DPM) and they cannot segment compound words.
- Learning the gender and plural form of nouns also poses problems for dyslexic learners of German.

Vocabulary cont.

- “They might invest a lot of energy in learning in vain because for them the given sound and letter string might not be the same. Maybe when they are studying, they learn a different string, which is not the same as the one I taught. So they might have studied a lot, and we might not be able to understand why their performance is poor. Actually we do know that as long as they do not learn how to recognize a word independently and with certainty, they cannot study alone, and we cannot take our hands off them; we have to practice in class as long as they do not know this.” (2CGA)

Problems with the pace of learning, and memory

- “In the very first lessons it becomes apparent that they have much slower pace [than non-dyslexics]” (5ACA)
- “They need more time because they are faced with the problem all the time that they cannot finish the assignment. Thus they tend to give up thinking that they cannot do it anyway. They cannot pay attention for such a long time, their attention wanders away, and then they start talking and laughing...” (5ESZA).
- “they don't have this net, we have to teach them again and again because there are holes in their nets, and we have to revise the material regularly because they forget it” (5CGA).

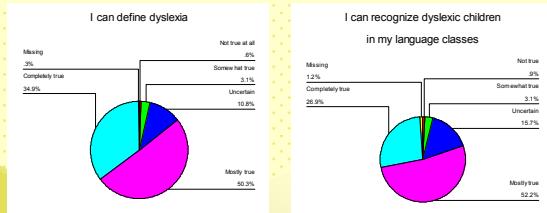
Seriality problems

- “They know that the letters T, H and R appear in this word but not in which order, and they write down these letters but not in the appropriate order” (6ESZA).
- Memorizing sequences of words, which can be observed in students' mixing up numbers (e.g. 34 with 43)
- Using inappropriate word order.
- Above the sentence level: “cannot memorize a series of three or four instructions. They lose the thread at the first instruction, and even though they would be able to do all of them, halt and do not know what to do” (6APK).

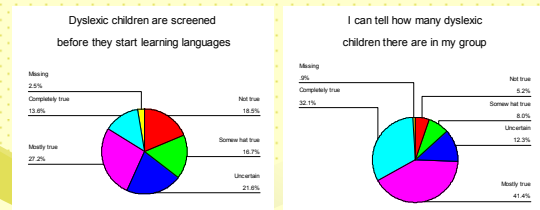
L1 related problems

- a smaller range of vocabulary in their L1: “today in [English] class we were talking about butter and margarine, and the children did not know what the difference is in Hungarian” (7ANO).
- names of months and the days of the week
- students face difficulties understanding grammatical relations in their L1

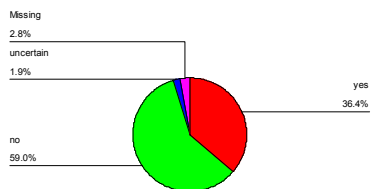
Results from the questionnaire survey



Results from the questionnaire survey cont.



I have sent a child to an advisory center because I suspected dyslexia



Discussion of survey results

- Dyslexia is often not recognized before students start learning foreign languages.
- Teachers are aware of the key terms concerning dyslexia, and they are confident they can recognize dyslexia in language learning, but they are much less certain about how many dyslexic children there are in their classes.
- Teachers are probably over-reporting as regards their ability to recognize dyslexia in the language classroom.

