

UNDERACHIEVERS AMONG FOREIGN LANGUAGE MAJORS: A SIGN OF LEARNING DISABILITIES?

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1. Introduction

In a time of ever-changing nationwide educational reforms, universities face the challenge of more diversified student populations and the introduction of new study programs. It is a general observation of instructors that each year a larger population enters higher education unprepared for their chosen field of studies. Many of these students can be classified as underachievers since they do not meet the requirements: they withdraw from or do not pass courses, oftentimes receive low grades, therefore, need more time to finish the program or eventually drop out of it. Underachievement may have a number of reasons, including, but not limited to, a mismatch between student expectations and study requirements, unpreparedness for the given study program, lack of study strategies, laziness, inability to manage one's time, or social and financial problems (Crosling et al. 2008, Doró 2010, Doró 2011a, Moxley et al. 2001). Moreover, in higher education, more than in secondary school, many courses build on previously acquired subject knowledge or skills. If students lack these, they have less chance to proceed with their studies even if they do their best in the new courses. As there is a wider and larger pool of the younger generations who enter higher education, instructors have to face new types of student problems: general low cognitive abilities, low problem solving skills, undeveloped social skills, time management problems, attendance problems, inability to follow explanations, not doing homework, and postponing deadlines and exams. We need to predict, however, that in some cases specific learning disabilities are responsible for student failure rather than laziness or unwillingness to study.

For foreign language majors, who carry out their studies predominantly in the target language, inadequate screening prior to entering the university often means they enroll in the program with insufficient language proficiency and subject knowledge. The final examination at secondary school, which also serves as an entrance exam, has proven not to be a good indicator of preparedness for undergraduate studies in a target language. Nevertheless, there are signs of problems that cannot be directly related to low proficiency, typical spelling mistakes or shyness in communication. This study seeks to answer the questions how it is possible to recognize learning disabilities (LD) and other special needs conditions of students, why it should be important to have standardized forms of accommodation to the requirements, and how students themselves perceive their conditions and study experiences.

The sections that follow review the educational and research issues of learning disabilities in reference to LD in higher education and foreign language learning. It also discusses the specific signs of study problems that are detectable in student performances at a selected Hungarian institute of higher education. Then, two case

studies of students of English are presented which are based on classroom observation, informal talks with students, and a structured interview with them. Conclusions and implications of this qualitative study are drawn at the end of this research report.

2. Learning disabilities and study problems

2.1. Definition of key terms

The 2011 World Report on Disabilities of the World Health Organization defines specific learning disability as follows: “impairments in information processing resulting in difficulties in listening, reasoning, speaking, reading, writing, spelling, or doing mathematical calculations – for example, dyslexia.” (p. 309). Nichols (1995) indicates five main types of learning disabilities: visual, auditory, motor, organizational and conceptual. While LDs due to visual and motor impairment are most of the time easily recognizable, the last two categories often remain unrecognized or misinterpreted, and therefore, it is more difficult to accommodate the teaching process to these students’ needs. Adults with LD may experience the following symptoms: “poor or uneven academic achievement, difficulty with language usage, poor organizational and/or sequencing skills, and poor or inappropriate social skills” (Nichols 1995: 36). There is a disagreement in the literature concerning the existence of a specific foreign language learning disability (FLLD), and most of the systematic data come from higher education institutes in the United States offering accommodation or substitution for students who have difficulties in passing foreign language courses (e.g. Ganschow et al. 1998, Hatzes et al. 2002, Sparks 2006). Although Sparks (2006) argues that there is no FLLD, people with LD often experience problems with literacy skills, following conventional teaching methods and materials, which influences their foreign language studies. Learning disabilities should not be confused with inadequate learning styles or strategies, laziness or low level of intelligence (Denhart 2008). Many people with LD have average or above average IQ and develop compensation strategies to balance for their weaknesses (McNulty 2003, Kirby et al. 2008). The literature also points out that there are adults, including students in higher education, who prefer to hide their disabilities, which makes it difficult to estimate the real number of students with LD. Heiman and Precel (2003) review some of the late 1990’s figures available and report on a 3.8% LD prevalence among first-year undergraduate students in the United Kingdom, and an even higher and growing rate for the United States. The British Dyslexia Association uses the umbrella term ‘specific learning difficulties’, including the often co-occurring dyslexia, dyspraxia, dyscalculia, attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (AD/HD), and auditory processing disorder. The Association estimates a 4% prevalence rate for severe dyslexia and a 10% rate for mild dyslexia. Gyarmathy (2007) also estimates similar figures for Hungary among elementary and secondary school students, with figures showing a gradual increase. It is most likely that students with LD enter higher education in larger numbers than a few decades ago when the more thorough screening processes selected out the least academically fit.

2.2. Study problems among English language majors

A major requirement for foreign language majors and minors would be an advanced level of target language proficiency upon entering higher education. Since in Hungary no direct screening process is available for BA level applicants, students are selected on the basis of their secondary school course and final exam results. This, however, does not give enough feedback to students on how they will perform in a predominantly foreign language medium education program and does not provide enough information to staff members on the incoming students. The insufficient screening process allows for academically unprepared students to enter the system. At the university under investigation, a major source of the students' difficulties is their insufficient proficiency level in the target language. Many undergraduates do not meet the B2 level entrance requirement, although a more advanced level would help them in acquiring academic English and subject knowledge in their linguistics, literature and culture courses (Doró 2009). From the instructors' side the following problems need some kind of response in the form of student guidance or modification of class content: lack of strategies for remembering information, preparing for and taking tests, using reference sources, inability to follow classroom presentations and discussions, to take notes or to make good use of study time and space. Even a growing number of more advanced students show problems with reading the assigned book chapters and articles, lacking the analytical skills for processing information and experiencing major difficulties in writing a research paper.

Some of the aforementioned problems, however, cannot directly be linked to or they go beyond general language proficiency problems. For example, written work of students, including home assignments, exam responses and essays, often show writing difficulties, rewritten words, letters added, left out or mixed, and problems with proofreading. Students may also show signs of poor visual memory, slow reading rates, trying to read word by word or letter by letter and not getting the meaning of the text, or having problems with cloze tests. These could be signs of dyslexia or dysgraphia (Nichols 1995, Gyarmathy 2004). Others struggle with impulsiveness, inability to sit still for 90 minutes, they are always late or do not come to class, do not meet deadlines for assignments, are unable to follow or take active part in class discussions and seem bored in class. Especially if the symptoms persist and co-occur, they can be signs of attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (Sparks et al. 2004).

Students might or might not be aware of their problems and instructors are often not able to recognize the signs or misinterpret them for laziness, unwillingness to cooperate or language proficiency problems. Also, many students choose to hide their learning disabilities or attention problem as they view them as something that should not be revealed, but kept in secret and dealt with on an individual basis. They may even choose to be labeled as lazy, inattentive or unprepared (Denhart 2008). This may happen even if students are unable to cope themselves with their learning disabilities and eventually drop out of the courses or the entire program. This observation of cautiousness to disclose learning disability conditions like dyslexia is documented in the literature reviewed by Nalavany and colleagues (2011) in adults who felt emotional

stress, low self-esteem, anxiety or anger due to their fear of perceived stigma or unsuccessful coping with their condition.

While some kind of accommodation is available for students with special needs in the Hungarian higher education system, the higher education act and the special needs regulations of higher education institutes seem to focus more on students with physical impairment and fewer specific recommendations are given as to who should be classified as LD and how accommodation should be carried out. This is a tendency that exists also elsewhere (Hatzes et al. 2002). Moreover, there could be a number of students who receive partial or overall exemptions from evaluation in foreign language classes in elementary and secondary schools (often as a result of diagnosed dyslexia), but do not have the same option when enrolling in foreign language studies at a university, and therefore, meet unexpected challenges.

It is a major dilemma how foreign language study programs should recognize these students and their special needs and to what extent the requirements can and should be modified to meet their needs.

The need for this research study is in line with departmental and university goals to improve education, discover the reason for achievement gaps of students and assist them in becoming more successful students or, if necessary, to redirect them towards other fields of studies more suitable for them.

3. The empirical study

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to gather information from students with signs of LD in order to explore possible courses of action to improve student performance in a foreign language program.

3.1. Participants

The specific study population was two students of English who agreed to discuss their study experiences with the author of this article, who served as their teacher in small group seminars. Students were identified as possible special needs students as the course proceeded because they showed signs of having major difficulties in keeping up with the rest of the group.

Student A was a male student in the first year of his BA level English studies, while student B was a male student in his last year of the 5-year MA level English studies.

3.2. Methodology and procedure

A qualitative multiple case study approach was adopted for this inquiry, including classroom observation, analysis of written work done by the participants, informal talks with them and a semi-structured interview. The rationale for choosing multiple data collection methods is that the qualitative data set and results provide a general picture of the research problem, namely the situation that potentially LD students face. They are labeled as 'potentially LD' as no formal diagnosis is available for them, but are identified through coursework as students whose performance or academic

achievement make them distinct from other students with general language proficiency or motivational problems.

The primary data collection technique was an in-depth semi-structured interview carried out individually with the two subjects, in a quiet room and recorded for later transcription. The participants were asked to give consent to record their answers, and they were informed prior to the interview about the types of question asked. Student B was given the list of questions beforehand in order to compensate for his attention problems. The interviews were done in Hungarian, the native language of the participants, and included questions from the following main areas:

1. *general experience at the university*

How can you summarize your study experiences at the university? What kind of problems have you encountered? Do you proceed with your studies slower than expected?

2. *following courses, taking exams*

Can you concentrate for 90 minutes in class? Can you take notes when you understand the instructors' explanation? Do you prefer written or oral exams?

3. *doing assignments*

What makes homework difficult? Do you read the assigned reading materials? Do you have reading/spelling/writing problems in Hungarian or in English? How long does it take for you to write a one-page essay at home? What compensation strategies do you have to overcome/balance for your problems?

4. *feedback from others*

Have you noticed that you are behind your peers or do not meet expectations? In what ways? Have your instructors/peers/family members noticed and told you that you are behind or have special needs? Have you ever asked for special accommodation or help from your instructors (extra preparation time, changing deadlines and changing tasks, asking for notes, extra tutoring)?

5. *previous studies*

Did you have extra difficulties in any of the classes in elementary and secondary school? Were you given exemption in any of the classes in elementary and secondary school?

6. *diagnosis vs. self-identification*

Have you ever been diagnosed with learning difficulty, attention deficit, dyslexia, etc.? Have you ever had the feeling that you might have any of these?

The performance of the two students was also observed for a semester in small study groups. For student A this was done in a language proficiency class that involved both oral and written assignments, regular vocabulary tests and a reading journal. Student B was observed in an applied linguistics seminar which required him to follow the instructors' explanations aided with Power Point presentations and short videos, reading and commenting in writing and in speech on research articles, being an active participant in short discussions in English on classroom topics and writing a 6–10-page long research report.

4. Results and discussion

This section reviews the major findings from the data collection for the two participating students separately, then discussion of the data follows.

4.1. Student A

He was noticed by the researcher in the seminar group as a very quiet student who was unable to carry on conversations in English with his classmates when discussion tasks were given to the group. This happened when Student A was paired up with any of his peers. He showed difficulties in retrieving even high-frequency words, named target words in Hungarian or said nothing at all. In writing, he showed serious spelling mistakes, untypical of other learners, such as omitting and mixing letters, frequently crossing out then rewriting the same words in a modified or unmodified form, and using the hypercorrective word final -s (e.g. children). He also used a mixture of lower and upper case letters in tests and had serious problems with cloze tests. He wrote very short homework essays full of grammatical, structural and spelling mistakes. Accommodation for him was made in the form of small adjustments, such as paring him up with the instructor during some of the discussion tasks in class, accepting shorter essays, giving extra feedback, giving opportunity to take missed tests, discussing his needs and accommodation strategies. These and the constant encouragement seemed to have had a positive effect on his class performance, although he was not able reach the desired level.

During the interview he admitted having difficulties in classes and proceeding with his studies slower than expected. To balance for his language problems, he had studied English for 3–4 hours per day on top of doing homework assignments. This had led to his complete exhaustion by the second semester, in which he realized this was not an adequate compensation strategy, as his tiredness resulted in his complete inability to follow classes. His instructors had told him he was not meeting requirements, which was also evident from his grades. He also reported, though, that the feedback given by some of the instructors was very discouraging and he often felt helpless and lost motivation to practice English on his own. The instruction given in classes to do individual learning or check problematic language elements did not work for him as he was unable to identify the problematic elements and/or look them up in sources. His report on not being able to follow 90-minute classes confirmed the researcher's observation. He added that students were not giving feedback or study support to each other and concluded that "everyone is struggling on his own". Nevertheless, as he was unable to follow classes or to take notes, he relied on his peers' notes. It took him two hours to write a one-page essay at home, which he found insufficient, therefore adapted the strategy of quicker free-writing. He admitted producing a great number of grammar errors this way, but added that the earlier, slower method of writing hadn't led to better results either. When asked why he was writing such short essays and producing many errors, he replied that he wasn't a "writing type". Similar explanations or excuses were given about not doing assigned reading for class ("lack of time") or having blocks during oral language production tasks ("lack of

vocabulary”). These seemed to be avoidance strategies and not the real causes of his problems.

He reported on having tried out certain strategies for vocabulary learning, and speeding up oral and written production, some of which produced results, while others not. One of the most interesting and failed methods was what he called ‘drawer technique’. As he considered himself a visual type of learner, he tried this method, which involves the imagining of a chest of drawers where you put different sentences to remember them. When you open the drawer, the information is there the way you put it in. Student A reported that when he opened the imaginary drawers, single letters and punctuation marks were floating out, which made it impossible to reconstruct the original text.

Data gained during this interview are in line with the observations made in class and during the reading of the student’s texts. He seemed to show a variety of difficulties both with oral and written language use in English. He reported to be aware of some of his weaknesses and had tried various compensation strategies, but most of these had failed. His low level of general English proficiency, the slow improvement in his reading, writing, listening and speaking skills suggested that he had little success in academic achievement in even the first-year courses. Although he was willing to and had tried to compensate for his problems, he was unable to meet the requirements.

4.2. Student B

Student B stood out of the group as the late comer, the only one not taking notes and seemingly not paying attention either to the instructor’s explanation or the Power Point slides. If he turned in weekly assignments (summary of and comments on research articles, individual tasks), the written work was much shorter than expected, but language-wise and content-wise good. After the first few weeks he asked for the Power Point slides, which were then made available for all the students in the course. As other ‘potentially LD’ students were also identified in the class, homework assignments included a variety of sources (oral, written and visual) to balance for possible reading and writing problems; furthermore, reading in class was limited to short texts followed by pair or group discussions on the content, and individual accommodation for the final written project was offered. Since special education needs of university students was one of the course topics, Student B discussed with the researcher the option of writing about his own experiences as a follow-up of the interview he was asked to participate in.

During interview and in the follow-up essay he noted that his problems had become more disabling as he was progressing through the education system. For years he had not realized he had special needs, relied on what was heard in class, but was unable to study from books. He wrote “I was born in a family who thought I was special. I was, but probably not in the way they thought”.

He was labeled as a good, but misbehaving student, which was tolerated in the non-state schools he attended. Even at the university, as he wrote, he felt an average student who developed survival techniques as a reaction to the growing challenges. He

rarely studied for classes and exams, and relied on the notes of peers or those of the instructors. Altogether he had good English skills, but it took him much longer than others to do readings or write longer texts. He admitted not being able to read long assignments, or writing reviews; instead he adopted the technique of reading thesis statements, highlighting key words, and relying on these during class discussions. As he was unable to prepare for exams, he cheated at times. "...when there was no other choice, I cheated on the exams with a pure soul, because I knew I could have never learned that material, and that I would probably never need to use it in the future".

He believed his difficulties had not been recognized by instructors and peers, and even by himself for years. Only in the final year of the university did he notice "strange things" about himself. He wrote "as until the last 1-2 years, I did not think that I may have learning impairments, it was never an issue, and even now, no one realizes that I have difficulties in studying, probably because through the years, I learned how to present or explain my shortcomings even to myself, and the most I usually need to do is ask teachers to delay deadlines for me, which they usually do without asking why." He had never been tested or diagnosed with any LD, and problems had multiplied as the study demands got overtly challenging for him. He identified himself as a person with attention deficit and with learning impairments.

He also chose not to disclose his weaknesses to others, as he worded "I never told a teacher about my impairments, and not because I find it a shame, but simply, because I think I would feel ashamed if I had to do less than others for the same grade. I'd rather get a worse grade or be thought to be lazy or a layabout, instead of being treated as a student with some kind of handicap, who needs help and "special" treatment".

He had also adopted what he called 'survival techniques', such as focusing on the task he was doing and excluding everything else, imagining a loved person as a reader for his assignments, and forcing himself to keep to deadlines.

4.3. Discussion of the results

The purpose of this study was to describe the study experiences, areas of difficulties, strategies for academic coping, and self-identification of two potentially LD students. Data obtained through semi-structured interviews with the participants provide empirical support for the author's observation of special needs students in courses. The finding regarding students' need for some accommodation in terms of assignments, tasks and deadlines can be viewed in light of Heiman and Precel's (2003) report on the academic strategies of university students with and without LD. Both students were able to report on some of their major problems and the unusual survival techniques and compensatory skills used. Neither of the two students, however, can be considered academically successful without adequate study and literacy skills. It is important to note here that Student A was unable to compensate for his problems in lack of a good English proficiency as a basis, whereas Student B could survive challenges and even hide his problems with the help of his advanced language skills. This also implies that while Student A could be identified by a multiple of instructors as a weak student, Student B was able to pass unnoticed or mislabeled. In light of these results, it is very much

questionable, how these and similar students are able to proceed with their studies without some minor or major accommodation offered to them.

It is also important to pose the following questions: Whose task is it to identify and assist foreign language majors with learning difficulties? Do they know about their impairments, and if yes, are they willing to admit them? Do they want to be identified and labeled? To what extent can they cope with the challenges of a foreign language major even with additional help or good strategies? Whose failure is it if they fail? And finally, how can instructors, who are not trained to identify LD, prepare and be prepared for a diverse student population that includes students with LD? These and related questions should be systematically reviewed before a rationale for recommended and commonly accepted accommodation can be provided to students. Individualized tutoring and small modification of tasks were done by the researcher for the participants, but these cannot be considered a regular or commonly accepted practice or option that is available if larger prevalence rates of LD students appear on top of non-LD students with different language and academic difficulties.

When students are not successfully meeting the requirement, the focus often turns to instructors, who experience more pressure in today's academic environment from parents, educational professionals, and decision makers to teach and prepare all students for exams. The growing number of dropouts and the pressure to keep in the system even the academically unfit suggest that teaching practices of years past must be changed. Before doing so, however, it is necessary to discover instructors', students', policy makers' and university staff members' perceptions of the situation.

A general first-year population of English majors has been found not to be able to make good judgments about their level of preparedness for their studies or seek help when needed (Doró 2011b). All students, including those with LD or other academic-related problems, should be encouraged to be self-regulated learners who are able to understand their needs, study goals, and use adequate study strategies (Zimmermann 1990). This is especially important in light of the results that students are unwilling to disclose their problems, probably for fear of being labeled and stigmatized. They seem to prefer the protective mass of peers, even when unable to cope on their own with their failures.

It also needs to be considered and clearly stated that any accommodation to the requirements should not result in the compromise of academic standards, loss of credibility for the instructor, the introduction of a certain inequity of treatment between student performances or the victimization of students.

A major shortcoming of this study comes from the inability to generalize the findings to larger student populations. Yet, they show striking evidence for the existence of students with major and co-occurring problems that go beyond those of their non-LD peers and which hinder their chance for academic success.

5. Conclusion and implications

This study discussed the need for a better understanding of foreign language majors who show serious signs of underperformance compared to their peers. It was shown, through the example of two students, that some of the potentially LD students can be

detected on the basis of their class performance, but it remains a question to be solved how to approach these students, how to raise awareness among staff, and how to accommodate requirements without jeopardizing academic standards. It was also pointed out that most of the special needs students are reluctant to ask for help or accommodation, or do not even know how to modify their own study strategies and methods. The current general approach of no accommodation seems to meet both sides' immediate interest, namely the students' unwillingness to disclose problems and the academics' unpreparedness to cope with the situation. This, however, is not a long-term strategy to be adopted, as professionals in education should search for a common approach to assist learners with special needs.

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