

WHAT MAKES DYSLEXIC LANGUAGE LEARNERS SUCCESSFUL IN THE LONG RUN? AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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Abstract: The merits of being able to communicate in English in the global job market are unquestionable in the 21st century. Therefore, everyone should have the right and opportunity to learn English and other foreign languages regardless of their potential learning difficulties. Fortunately, it is increasingly prevalent that special needs learners can learn foreign languages with sufficient help, though it is not clear how far they can get in the process of language learning. What factors might aid special needs learners (e.g., dyslexics) to become successful in language learning is a widely investigated research area; however, we know little about how special needs learners can become and remain successful language users in adulthood when they no longer take part in instructed education. The aim of this study is to seek answers to these questions by interviewing thirteen adult dyslexic language learners/users considered to be successful both by themselves and their previous teachers, and also to figure out if autonomy is one of the factors contributing to learners' success. The results reveal that the emerging themes can be grouped into three main interrelated categories: practical learning strategies, learning environment and motivation, each with various subcategories, which should be considered in curriculum design as well as dyslexia research in SLA.

Keywords: dyslexia, autonomy, success, SLA, interview study

1 Introduction

The question of what makes a successful or 'good' language learner has been constantly in the foreground in second language acquisition (SLA) research since the 1970s (Hymes, 1972; Naiman, Fröhlich, Stern & Todesco, 1978; Rubin, 1975). Several factors, such as aptitude (Neufeld, 1979; Carroll, 1981), attitude and motivation (Gardner, 1979), cognitive style (Brown, 1977), learning strategies (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990), learner autonomy (Benson, 2001), motivation and self-regulation (Dörnyei, 2005) have been investigated in order to understand what leads to high achievement and to find ways of enhancing the performance of less successful learners.

The question of 'success' in language learning is particularly intriguing when it comes to students with special needs, for example, learners with dyslexia. Firstly, it has been widely debated whether dyslexic students should learn any foreign languages at all (Nijakowska, 2010; Kormos, 2017). Fortunately, the answer to this question is more and more frequently 'yes' in the field of education and a definite 'yes' in the field of research (for a collection of the most recent studies see Kormos, 2017). The concept of dyslexia, even without being clearly understood, gradually finds its way into teacher training curricula along with practical teaching methodologies on how to accommodate teaching to special needs (Kormos & Kontra, 2008). Although the situation is far from ideal, dyslexic language learners can receive much more help with their studies in several countries in Europe including Hungary than they

did a generation ago (Kormos & Csizér, 2010; Nijakowska, 2010). The notion of dyslexia and its impact on foreign language learning are intensively researched worldwide along with special teaching methodologies that provide learners with additional help.

In spite of the recent boom in research activity regarding dyslexics' language learning, little is said about the future prospects of dyslexic language learners. From the point of view of success, it is a vital question whether students who fight their way through public education remain active language users after graduation from secondary school; and if so, how they manage to retain and improve their foreign language skills. For educators, it would be important to know if dyslexic adults rely on the strategies they were taught at school and whether they become autonomous language learners and users eventually. The interview study analysed in this paper forms the basis of my PhD dissertation and the results discussed here are considered to be the preliminary findings of the analysis. The overall investigation is based on the assumption that successful language users need to become autonomous language learners and users, may they be dyslexics or non-dyslexics. Therefore, the primary aim of my research is to gain an understanding of the language learning experiences of successful adult learners with dyslexia. Before the detailed analysis of the interview study and its implications are discussed, it is important to set the context by outlining the related notions and providing some theoretical background to the study.

2 Theoretical background

To interpret the procedure and results of the study appropriately, it is necessary to define the basic terminology of the research field. Since the scope of the study is on successful adult dyslexic language users, the concepts that hypothetically contribute to their success, such as learner autonomy and self-regulation in particular, will also be observed.

2.1 Understanding dyslexia: changing perspectives

When looking for information about dyslexia, one can observe a great variation in attitude and the use of terminology. The International Dyslexia Association (2002) explains that this specific learning disability is neurological in origin. As a result of a deficit in the phonological component of the language, problems in reading comprehension might occur. Providing information for a wide range of audience, the British Dyslexia Association (2007) suggests that dyslexia should be considered a specific learning 'difficulty' affecting literacy and language related skills, and warns that the automatic development of these skills may not match the individual's cognitive skills in other areas. They also claim that dyslexia is a life-long condition, which "tends to be resistant to conventional teaching" (p.1). According to the websites of the two associations, dyslexia can be characterized by a combination of such symptoms as difficulties with phonological processing, poor working memory and processing speed, poor spelling and decoding abilities (Nijakowska, 2010).

Beyond a list of symptoms, the condition of dyslexia can be perceived in various ways depending on the aspect from which the notion is examined. Researchers, educators, policy makers, teachers as well as psychologists may interpret the same condition differently in their given context. Despite the frequent use of the term, one of the possible reasons for lacking a mutually accepted definition might be the fact that the professionals investigating dyslexia engage in simultaneous discourse within their own community but fail to communicate with

one another. This lack of communication between decision makers and researchers in the various fields is often disadvantageous for those who are concerned, namely, dyslexic individuals. Chanock (2007), for instance, distinguishes medical, social-constructionist, legal, and pedagogical discourse when attempting to describe the situation of dyslexic students in higher education in Australia. Although each professional field provides important information about the notion of dyslexia, none of them capture the notion in its full complexity. The same 'layers' of communication can be observed in the European context as well, and they often lead to paradoxes or misinterpretations in the field of dyslexia research and education in general. Consequently, expecting a universally acknowledged answer to the question 'What is dyslexia?' would be highly unrealistic; nevertheless, some guiding principles and tendencies must be highlighted from the perspective of educational research.

Most of the current definitions available in the various areas of dyslexia research categorise the condition among disabilities and put emphasis mainly on dyslexic individuals' weaknesses and difficulties with regard to becoming literate in their native language. This is reflected in most of the terminology dated back to the beginnings of dyslexia research (for a review see Grigorenko, 2001): for instance, word blindness, strephosymbolia (i.e., unusual difficulty in learning to read), specific reading disability, and specific reading retardation are included in the list. The use of terminology has changed a great deal since the early days, but the negative connotation prevails in terms such as specific learning disability (International Dyslexia Association, 2002), a disorder (World Health Organisation, 2010), and a specific learning difficulty (British Dyslexia Association, 2007). Impairment in literacy, attention deficit, visual and/or auditory processing problems and reduced working memory are considered as some of the major weaknesses dyslexic individuals have on a continuum from mild to severe. It must be noted that these difficulties emerge without IQ deficiency and in spite of appropriate educational circumstances (Crombie, 2000; Grigorenko, 2001; Gyarmathy, 2007; Pothos & Kirk, 2004; Reid, 2005).

It may be noted that the terms described above denote only difficulties and take little account of some of the positive aspects of being a dyslexic. The fact that dyslexia also entails strengths, not only weaknesses is attested by the fact that dyslexia frequently occurs among world-renowned scientists, artists, and exceptionally talented people. Besides being unusually gifted in a given area, some common characteristics that dyslexic individuals tend to share to varying degree are creativity, problem solving skills and holistic thinking. As Gyarmathy (2007) explains, dyslexics' visual skills are often manifested as a gift, which enables them to have a unique and creative approach towards the world. Due to this gift, they tend to come up with unusual and unexpected solutions to problems. Davis (1997) is one of the few authors who approaches the notion of dyslexia from a positive perspective and concentrates on the 'gift' aspect of dyslexia in his work. In his view, one of the greatest advantages of dyslexia is nonverbal conceptualisation, that is, thinking in mental pictures of concepts and ideas. It is suggested that such thinking enables the individual to think much faster than of those who think linearly.

The somewhat imbalanced view of dyslexia results in a new generation of theories. Rice and Brooks (2004) describe three main approaches that, in their view, might affect the upcoming theories in the future. The common feature of the proposed models, i.e., the cognitive process model, the self-organising systems model, and the atypical brain development framework, is that all of them draw on the complexity and dynamic nature of dyslexia and point towards a difference approach instead of a deficit one. In other words, both intrinsic (biological) and extrinsic (environmental) factors are taken into consideration along

with the particular context of the dyslexic individual. Amesbury (2007) describes similar trends in terms of understanding dyslexia: one attempting to recognise dyslexia in co-occurrence with other specific learning difficulties (Shoemaker & Kalverboer, 1994; Dewey, et al., 2002; Visser, 2003) and another tendency towards a simultaneous acknowledgment of strengths and abilities (Cooper, 2007). The first approaches the issue from a medical point of view, providing labels and diagnosis for a disability, the latter indicates that dyslexia is a difference rather than a handicap and promotes a social model of disability.

In the context of this particular study, dyslexia is viewed as a learning difference at any age, which is manifested as an impairment in literacy with other potential difficulties (e.g., memory, visual and/or auditory processing, and attention deficit) in spite of appropriate educational circumstances. It is understood that dyslexic individuals show different severity of their difficulties and manifest different levels of varying strengths (e.g., creativity and holistic thinking) that they can build on in their learning processes.

2.2 Dyslexia and foreign language learning

Ganschow and Sparks (2000) were among the first and most influential researchers investigating the effect of dyslexia in foreign language (FL) learning. They conducted research from the beginning of the 1980s in an attempt to understand what problems FL learners with language learning difficulties (LD) experience, how their achievement differs from those of low-achievers without language learning difficulties, and what factors lead to language learning difficulties. They wanted to investigate Dinklage's observations (in Schwarz, 1997) further, who had come to the conclusion that the reasons for some of the problems of language learners at Harvard University were not anxiety, or lack of motivation or effort, but a language-based factor, rooted in their native language. On the basis of 22 case studies, Ganschow and Sparks set up the Linguistic Coding Difference Hypothesis (Sparks, Ganschow, & Pohlmann, 1989), which claims that foreign language learning-related difficulties stem from problems with one or more of the so called linguistic codes (phonological/orthographic, syntactic and semantic) in the student's native language system.

According to their results, most student problems relate to phonological awareness, which might lead to perception and comprehension problems. Students struggle with understanding and applying the rule systems of a language; especially the phonological/orthographic stage proves to be difficult for them. Findings also imply that at-risk learners do not obtain appropriate metacognitive skills; therefore, they cannot reflect on language and cannot make self-corrections without help. Although anxiety, motivational and emotional disorders might have an impact on these learners, these seem to be the result and not the cause of language related problems. In their work, besides providing a solid understanding of the language-learning-related difficulties dyslexics face, they came to a significant conclusion in terms of the perception of dyslexia. Namely, they claim that the basic difference between good and poor language learners, including low achievers as well as at risk learners, indicates that poor students show noteworthy variations rather than deficits with regard to foreign language performance.

A decade later similar problems were confirmed by Crombie (2000), who summed up the language learning situation of dyslexic students in mainstream education in Scotland. Poor working memory, poor auditory discrimination, faulty auditory sequencing, difficulties with motor skill and automaticity, information processing problems, as well as limited attention

were listed among the most crucial problems that learners with LD are struggling with. However, as Nijakowska (2010) highlights “there is no such phenomenon as FL learning disability” (p.74). She claims that language learning ability exists along with potential learning difficulties showing different levels of severity in case of dyslexics as well as non-dyslexics. Therefore, learners with FL learning difficulties should not be exempted from FL education; instead, they should be provided with special tutoring in order to ensure the opportunity to acquire a sufficient level of proficiency in line with their needs.

Prior to the discussion of the relevant special tutoring methods, it is necessary to highlight that in her most recent review of related research, Kormos (2017) underscored a significant link between cognitive and affective factors, especially between working memory capacity and anxiety. She argued that anxiety is not necessarily the result of poor working memory, but an increased anxiety level due to L2 learning, which, in general, might cause more problems with concentration and working memory. In short, the highly interrelated relationship of cognitive and affective characteristics of dyslexic learners should not be overlooked in the educational context, as they are crucial factors when accommodating to special needs is aimed at.

In order to help dyslexic learners with learning difficulties, Ganschow and Sparks (2000) developed a method, the multi-sensory structured language (MSL) approach (Sparks & Miller, 2000; Sparks et al., 1998), built upon their own research findings and those of others. They adopted the Orton-Gillingham method, which had originally been developed to improve native language literacy skills in the field of foreign language learning/teaching. It is believed that the method is effective for dyslexic learners for a number of reasons: it helps them explicitly focus on the structure of the language; provides direct, cumulative, and explicit instruction; and involves several channels of learning simultaneously (visual, auditory, and kinaesthetic-tactile) in order to enhance memory and imprint the written language. Several research studies conducted by Ganschow and Sparks in the American setting and by other researchers in Europe (Nijakowska, 2010; Schneider & Crombie, 2003) both with groups of learners and individual case study subjects (Nijakowska, 2010; Ormos, 2004; Sarkadi, 2005) found evidence for the efficiency of this method for dyslexic learners. They all agree that these teaching/learning principles are beneficial for non-dyslexic learners as well, even though they might be overlooked in the era of communicative language teaching in mainstream education.

Regardless of the fact that explicit teaching methods are beneficial for dyslexic language learners, none of the available research studies provide information about whether students apply the learning tips and methods later in their lives when teachers are not there to support them. It is questionable how they can retain and improve their foreign language knowledge. Research in language pedagogy suggests that autonomy and self-regulation are indispensable in enabling the students to become successful language learners and users; therefore, the following section provides an insight into some of the relevant investigations conducted into these learner variables.

2.3 Learner autonomy and self-regulation

In the context of my research, learner autonomy and self-regulation are investigated together because they are closely related; though, according to the literature, they are not completely identical.

In an early research, Holec (1981) emphasises the aspect of consciousness in autonomy and defines it as “the ability to take charge of one’s own learning” (p.3). He approaches autonomy from a behavioural perspective and focuses on the actions an autonomous learner takes, such as selecting learning materials and planning, monitoring, and assessing the learning process. Little (1991) takes a different approach by concentrating on the psychology of autonomy under the assumption that in order to be able to act autonomously, learners must possess certain underlying psychological capacities. “Essentially, autonomy is a capacity – for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action” (Little, 1991, p.4). This is very important from the point of view of the research because, as pointed out in the previous section, dyslexic learners tend to be weak in metacognition, which entail the very capacities mentioned above.

The concept of autonomy developed over the years as theoreticians proposed new conceptualisations and models of autonomy according to type, variety, level or degree (Benson, 2006). From the point of view of my study what is interesting is the distinction that Littlewood (1999) makes between ‘reactive’ and ‘proactive’ autonomy. Reactive autonomy means that once the goals are defined by someone else, the learner is capable of organising his own resources in order to reach them, whereas in the proactive stage of autonomy, learners are capable of creating their own directions of learning. My research is concerned with proactive autonomy since the participants of my study are independent adult language learners/users who are unlikely to have any external support, such as a teacher, who would identify goals for them. In the framework of this study, autonomous learners are also seen as Illés (2012) claims: “independent language users capable of on-line problem solving and decision making” (p.6). The capacity of permanently assessing communication situations and choosing the most appropriate response linguistically and pragmatically are such complex tasks that being able to complete them requires complex cognitive abilities and metacognitive skills.

Similarly to autonomy, self-regulation is often perceived as capacity or capability (Molnár, 2009; Pintrich, 2000), and is described as “the degree to which individuals are active participants in their own learning” (Dörnyei, 2005, p.81). As for its components, Pintrich (2000) claims that self-regulated learning “is an active, constructive process whereby learners set goals for their own learning and then attempt to monitor, regulate, and control their cognition, motivation, and behaviour, guided and constrained by their goals and contextual features in the environment” (p.453).

The concept of self-regulation in the area of language learning research that mainly derives from motivational studies; therefore, despite showing resemblance to the notion of autonomy with regard to their components, motivation plays a more crucial role in conceptualising the phenomenon. For instance, Lens and Vansteenkiste (2008) propose that self-regulated students are the ones who “are able to control the different cognitive-motivational processes to facilitate their own learning process and who are thus likely to perceive themselves as the masters of their own learning process” (p.145). They explain that, ideally, motivational processes enhance cognitive, affective as well as motivational outcomes. In other words, by manipulating and controlling their own motivational processes through self-regulated learning, students can enhance their performance, enjoy their learning process more, and continue being motivated. Again, considering the fact that motivation, planning, and critical thinking require a high level of cognitive and metacognitive skills, it is essential to examine how they work in dyslexic individuals.

With regard to the research interest and the given theoretical context, the subsequent sections describe the specific research questions and the methods by which the study seeks to answer.

3 Research questions

The study attempts to answer the following questions:

1. What do successful adult dyslexic language users recall about their language learning processes?
2. How do adult dyslexic participants see themselves as language learners/users?
3. How can their learner autonomy and self-regulation be characterized?
4. Do language learner autonomy and self-regulation contribute to the learners' perceived success?

Besides the specific research questions, it must be noted that the overall research interest in gaining a deep understanding of adult dyslexic language users language learning experiences that aided them to become successful learners is of prior interest. This is especially important to highlight because the relationship between learner autonomy and language learning success is only a hypothetical one at this stage; therefore, it is not a direct question of inquiry. It is hoped, however, that it will be described indirectly through other related experiences of the interviewees.

Furthermore, in the next phase of my research another question will also be investigated: the relationship between curricular goals for dyslexic EFL students and adult reflections on the means of achieving success. For that purpose, teachers and teaching curricula are going to be consulted. However, the current analysis exclusively focuses on the experiences of adult language learners/users.

4 Methods

Considering the overall goal of my research, as mentioned above, to gain a deep understanding of the general learning experiences besides the role of autonomy and self-regulation in learning a foreign language (English) with dyslexia and explore the issue from the participants' perspective, the study falls into the naturalistic research paradigm. The scope of my analysis considers the participants as individual cases, hence follows Patton's (2002) guidelines in pursuit of bounding the cases and finding patterns in the emerging themes in order to understand "the greater whole" (p.432). During the data collection process qualitative data was collected by conducting interviews and by using other instruments as described in the following subsections.

4.1 Participants

The selection process of the participants followed the principle of purposeful, snowball sampling (Patton, 2002) as the potential interviewees were contacted by the recommendation of their English teacher or other professional helpers (e.g., speech therapist, psychologist) recommendations. The reason for this was twofold: to enhance data triangulation in the role of the teachers and to attempt to address the persistently sensitive

status of dyslexia in the social and educational context. Namely, it is impossible to reach adult dyslexic language learners/users without a direct personal network or without the support of professionals, solely due to lack of information. Consequently, secondary school English teachers and private English teachers, specialized in teaching learners with learning difficulties, were approached and those of their former students were contacted whom they considered to be successful language learners. Even under these circumstances, only a fraction of the prospective participants responded positively or perceived themselves as being successful and were willing to take part in the interviews. For future investigation, it would be worthwhile to extend the scope of the interview study to those learners who do not consider themselves successful language learners in order to compare the experiences of the two groups.

As mentioned earlier, the main criterion for success was not limited to holding a state-accredited intermediate-level (or higher) language exam, but also entailed their self-perception of what success meant, for instance, in their real-life achievements and work-related communication. This is an important aspect because the participants presented a great deal of variation in defining success, which is discussed later, in the results section of the paper. Interestingly, most of the interviewees were female (see Table 1), which was due to two circumstances. Firstly, teachers mostly recommended female students, and, secondly, it was mostly females that were willing to participate. Their age and profession, however, showed a wide range (Table 1) similarly to those learning other foreign languages such as German, Italian, Spanish, and French. The common feature of their foreign language learning history is that the first and main foreign language they learnt was English and that all of them were native Hungarian. Additionally, everyone attended private English lessons besides regular English classes at school, and had an official certificate confirming to be having dyslexia. The average age of the participants was 28 and the average age when they were diagnosed was 17, though most interviewees were diagnosed by a regular competence test either in lower elementary grade 3 or 4 around age 10, which enabled most of them to receive special tutoring through most of their language learning career. Table 1 clearly indicates that maximum variety among the participants was ensured in terms of their age, profession, language learning history, and also geographical location within the country (six were from the capital, seven from other cities in the countryside). No detailed descriptions of the individual participants are provided due to limitations of length.

	Name	Gender	Age	Profession	Age of diagnosis	Language exam
1.	Laura	F	26	Doctor	10	+
2.	Janka	F	29	Architect	10	-
3.	Botond	M	35	ADHD trainer, cultural anthropologist	23 (also diagnosed with ADHD)	+
4.	Alíz	F	31	Photographer	30	+
5.	Noémi	F	36	shop manager	10	-
6.	Kitti	F	25	Doctor	13	+
7.	Mimi	F	44	nurse, shop assistant	43	-
8.	Abigél	F	20	university student (marketing)	18	+
9.	Klári	F	20	university student (psychology)	17	+
10.	Magda	F	22	event planner	10	+
11.	Artúr	M	26	university student (recreation-psychology)	7 (unofficially diagnosed already in nursery school)	+
12.	Péter	M	24	IT specialist	7	-
13.	Matyi	M	24	university student (psychology)	20	-

Table 1. Overview of Participant's Background Information
(Note: All the names are pseudonyms.)

4.2 The interview guide

Before approaching the target group of the current study, namely dyslexic adult language learners/language users, a preliminary study with a similar cohort of participants had been conducted. The aim of the preliminary study was to examine dyslexic language learners' awareness of their own learning processes, and to see whether they can verbalize their perception of these with the help of an interview guide developed for this purpose. Additionally, it was also aimed at finding out whether they perceive autonomy and self-regulation as important factors in achieving success as language learners. The assumption was that it might be difficult to talk about one's language learning experience in detail due to the complex nature of the phenomenon and the frequently mentioned issues of dyslexics with metacognitive skills (Nijakowska, 2010). Therefore, it was especially important to find the best approach, which sufficiently narrows down the focus of the interviewees and, at the same time, provides enough space for other relevant topics to emerge. Consequently, it is essential to briefly summarize the development of the research instrument and some of the findings since they provided the basis for the main study presented here.

Interviews were chosen because the aim was to gain a deep insight into individuals' personal experiences. A semi-structured interview guide (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994) was designed in order to ensure room for any unexpected themes to emerge that might prove to be relevant during the analysis. Creswell (2003) suggests that the work of the researcher can be eased by an interview guide as they can rely on it during the conversations, which is not only beneficial for the administration of the interviews, but also useful for gaining comparable data

in case of multiple participants. In the interview guide, I developed the questions partly based on relevant literature concerning autonomy and self-regulation (Tseng, Dörnyei, & Schmitt, 2006; Benson, 2006, 2013) and partly based on my own experience as a teacher of dyslexic students. The interview guide consisted of three main sections: introductory items, questions about autonomy, and questions about self-regulatory mechanisms. The latter two also provided an opportunity for the interviewees to share any general language learning-related thoughts they might have had.

Subsequently, the interview guide was piloted with the help of 4 participants: young adults (between the age of 19 and 20, 3 male and 1 female) attending grade 13 in a special program for dyslexics in a secondary school in Budapest. They were in their final year at the time of the interviews and none of them had had English lessons for a term as they had passed their school-leaving exam in English the year before in Grade 12. The selection of the participants was based on two criteria: proximity to the intended target group for the main research and language learning success. The former criterion was met by the age of the participants and the fact that they did not attend formal language education at that time. Success was measured by objective and subjective criteria as well. All four participants were considered successful because they had obtained intermediate language examination certificates and they also perceived themselves as being successful because they could communicate in English ‘effectively even with foreigners,’ as one of them (Participant 3) said.

The research instrument fulfilled its purpose, the interviews elicited rich data. All of the participants could give a detailed description of their learning, the techniques that did or did not work for them along with the reasons for why or why not. They were also quite capable of formulating ideas on such abstract notions as their will power, for instance. In the process of the data analysis, several interesting themes emerged which were grouped into broader categories, either referring to self-regulation (e.g., English language learning strategies, motivation and attitude), to autonomy (e.g., will power, after school activities/extra effort and source of language input), or to overlapping themes between the two constructs (e.g., time management, maintaining concentration and metacognitive learning).

Consequently, the procedures and the results of the pilot study justified the research instrument and the feasibility of further research. The interview guide was modified to some extent, irrelevant questions were eliminated, certain questions were rephrased and/or shortened, and more follow-up question options were added as alternatives to guide the conversations (The finalized interview schedule can be seen in the Appendix).

4.3 Data collection and analysis

With the help of the interview guide, it was ensured that the conversations with each participant had the same goal with a similar flow, but also had space provided for the discussion of topics raised by the interviewees. The interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis with each participant in Hungarian – the common mother tongue of the participants and the researcher – and they all gave their consent to have the conversations audio-recorded. Depending on the participants’ stories and individual characteristics, the dialogues lasted for approximately an hour (varying between 45 and 80 minutes). The location of the meetings was chosen at the convenience of the interviewees, typically in a quiet café or restaurant in order to generate a friendly atmosphere.

The audio-recorded interviews were then transcribed and the transcriptions were shared with the participants in order to follow the principle of member checking, which enabled the interviewees to alter their answers to any of the questions, to modify or fine-tune any of their comments. This process not only strengthens the dependability of the data, but functions similarly to a second round of interviews, when both parties can add more ideas to the final conclusions drawn. The transcribed (and in some cases modified) data was read through several times on multiple occasions in order to identify meaningful units in the texts, which were coded and grouped according to recurring patterns with the help of the constant-comparative method (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). The interpretation of the data and the findings are supported with selected quotations from the interviews.

The following main categories emerged from the analysis: motivation, practical learning strategies, and learning environment. These are further interpreted in the discussion section to seek answers to the research questions; furthermore, as an unexpected outcome of the analysis, the components of language learners' success are proposed in a model.

5 Results and discussion

The constant re-reading process of the transcriptions slowly helped to outline the most important recurring patterns in the massive amount of data. Occasionally it was difficult to judge which information was relevant, partially due to my attachment to the personal stories, which obviously could not be separated from the 'purely' language-learning related layer of the interviews. Each participant had a touching story about their background: either about difficulties in the family or with their peers, often at school with the teachers. Nevertheless, they all considered themselves successful language learners and users, and managed to verbalize some of their thoughts and ideas regarding the key to their success, not to mention the fact that their difficulties also contributed to the achievement of their long-term goals. It must be highlighted that success, as the key concept and the most important topic around which the conversations were evolving, often derailed the interviews towards a direction about life in general and not specifically related to language learning; sometimes the two concepts were inseparable.

Consequently, it is not surprising that the topic of success appears in research, though not in relation to language learning. Gerber and his colleagues (1992) draw a model of success (i.e., overall in life) based on qualitative data gained from interviews of 79 successful dyslexic adults. In short, they examine financial income, job satisfaction, and employment level as measurement factors of success in their framework, which is still widely used (Leather et al., 2011). In their analysis, they distinguish internal (i.e., self-understanding, goal orientation, and motivation to succeed) and external (i.e., ideas of goodness of fit and social ecologies) components of success. The external factors refer to finding positions in which their strengths are emphasized and finding those people or associations that can provide support in any possible form. This model seems relevant in case of language learning success since most of their categories also emerged from the interviews conducted for the current study. Setting goals and being motivated to succeed are obviously essential in language learning as well; whereas, self-understanding might be parallel to metacognitive skills and self-awareness of one's own learning, i.e., preferred learning styles and strategies, conscious choices in the language learning process fitting the individual's needs. Considering the

goodness of fit subcategory in the foreign language learning context, it could be supplemented by a rational or realistic ‘ideal-self’ image. A common feature of self-perceived success by the participants is the realistic description of their ideal self, which enables them to lower the discrepancy between their ideal and actual self. The most common replies when answering the question how they see themselves as language learners/users include the adjectives ‘functional’, ‘pretty good’, ‘not perfect, but efficient’ with further detailing the situations in which they use the language efficiently. I believe there is a strong correlation between their goals (also ideal-self) and the positive perception of their actual self. None of them compared their language proficiency to any kind of native-like level that could be considered perfect; rather they described their desired self as a competent language user in specific circumstances (e.g., working with other foreigners, studying with other foreigners, having fun abroad), hence their goals remained attainable.

Still in the realm of external factors, the role of family members and friends or teachers was of high importance in the transcriptions, mainly from an emotional perspective. As Nalavany and Carawan (2011) sum up, “when a learning disability is diagnosed, a unique set of emotional experience [feelings of sadness and depression, stress, anxiety, past pain, and exhaustion] ensues that involves living over time with a hidden phenomenon that is prone to misunderstanding” (p.61). Several research studies (for a comprehensive list see Nalavany & Carawan, 2011) conclude that lifelong struggles, emotional distress, and labelling associated with dyslexia might result in constant emotional challenges, misunderstandings, miscommunication and even discrimination both in the work-related situations and in the private lives of adult dyslexics. They argue that the negative emotional experiences generated in childhood clearly persist in adulthood, and are painfully difficult to overcome. Furthermore, they also underline the fact that there is a significant link between social support and emotional well-being; however, the impact of family support in the process of providing emotional support is often ranked behind organizational support in research. As a general conclusion, it is noted by multiple studies (Gerber, Ginsberg, & Reiff, 1992; Nalavany & Carawan, 2011) that families often support their young adult dyslexic family member by identifying a strength field, where they can succeed and provide constant emotional support, which eventually may improve their self-esteem indirectly, partially depending on the degree of emotional support is perceived by the individual. This supportive function of families is echoed in the interviews in the current study both as an important factor with regard to their overall well-being and as a necessary prerequisite for language learning success. The participants clearly articulated the need for emotional support from their family either by highlighting how much they received or indicating the lack of it. It is an interesting question on its own how they perceive this emotional support and what influences them in the process, which could be studied further.

Beyond emotional support, several comments and stories in the data lead into the complex topic of motivation, which is vital to analyse with the help of an existing model. Having gained qualitative data from interviews with 15 dyslexic students learning English and other foreign languages, Csizér, Kormos and Sarkadi (2010) created a dynamic model of nested systems in motivation, in which there are several correlating internal and external factors fostering or hindering motivation for learning a foreign language. They suggest that goals, attitudes and motivated behaviour create a “closely interrelated co-adaptive system” (p.483), in which interaction can change any element. Among the many conclusions drawn from the data, the most relevant ones in relation to this study are the following: the general social context is also identified as an important factor in motivation; mainly instrumental goals were mentioned by the participants (e.g., language exam or international

communication); more favourable attitudes towards other foreign languages with more transparent orthography were found. Additionally, as with the more emotional components of motivation, in most cases a discrepancy between their actual and ideal selves in line with negative perceptions of themselves as language learners was reported often with lower level of self-confidence and higher anxiety. In the current study the theme of motivation as an encouraging factor was truly interesting since it emerged as a result of certain negative experiences in almost each case, that is, they felt motivated to improve themselves as a reaction to a harsh comment or criticism; therefore, the main trigger to learn English was to prove to their environment that they were capable of doing so. Alíz and Janka summed this up briefly:

“I believe the most important thing is to start learning through topics in which they are truly interested. Besides this, they must be extremely patient with themselves and don’t believe the good old dogmas repeated by their environment: *You’ll end up being a chimney sweep.*” (Alíz)

“I’m grateful to my university teachers now that I was not admitted to university, only for the fifth occasion. This experience taught me that nothing is impossible and I can use this even in learning English. It strengthens me that I know that I must be patient and I must keep on going because I will reach the final result, no matter what I won’t give up.” (Janka)

Taking the final outcome into consideration, the ‘negative’ motivation could be just as efficient as its positive counterpart, still it must matter how and why an individual learns a language when it comes to education and support of special needs students. Other aspects of motivation and their link to success involved setting such ambitious goals as learning another foreign language (e.g., German, Spanish, Korean) with the help of English both as the language of instruction and the language that provided foreign language learning experiences.

When language learning was in the scope of the discussions, practical learning strategies emerged immediately almost in every case. This topic was the most frequently mentioned and the most clearly identifiable unit of data in the transcriptions. The interviewees seemed highly conscious about their own learning process and the strategies, technical tips they apply while learning English. It was also a common feature that they did not consider any of their regular learning practice a special one, rather something which is common sense and obvious, known by everyone learning a foreign language. They could easily talk about how they learn without further help or providing examples. For instance, Laura mentioned: “I really love doing two things: watching series and reading books, and I think reading a lot helped me cope with my ‘dys’-problem.” Botond shared a similar experience: “I started reading Harry Potter books and haven’t stopped reading ever since.” Surprisingly, six participants out of 13 recalled reading in first place when they were asked to list the most useful activities or learning tips that worked for them. Applying reading as the best ‘training’ to strengthen those skills, which are considered weaker in case of dyslexics, proved to be extremely efficient in their cases. However, all of them mentioned that it was extremely difficult to start reading in a foreign language since most of them had not read books for pleasure in their mother tongue, either. On the merits of reading, Botond explained that he expanded his vocabulary through his reading experiences and slowly managed to integrate passive vocabulary items into his active language use; additionally he could create more

complex sentences in English. Alíz and Noémi emphasised that it is also essential to start reading a book based on one's own interest and build on that excitement when choosing the next one, through which it is possible to make reading an everyday habit. To conclude, the benefits of reading in English besides the obvious skill improvement can manifest in various forms, such as a sense of achievement, overcoming previous failure, and gaining self-confidence.

Other practical suggestions related to the use of IT tools and online sources, learning strategies and exposure to the target language. Most of the interviewees mentioned that they used online video-sharing websites and language learning websites to listen to music with lyrics or find specific tasks, e.g., grammar practice, vocabulary practice, and various spelling games. These sources were found to be useful as language learners and also as active language users in an attempt to retain their level of proficiency. The role of peers, friends, and family members must be noted here since they are the ones who often recommend certain ideas, which are mostly welcome by dyslexics and are added to their language learning toolkit. On top of these, the majority of the participants presented a wide range of general learning strategies and techniques, such as the use of mind maps, visuals, drawings, colour coding, which is probably due to explicit training they received at school or from their private tutor. They always referred to an external source of information, never mentioning that they developed these strategies themselves. This fact should not be surprising considering the average age of diagnosis and special tutoring they received. Most of the interviewees named their teacher, speech therapist or a specialized language teacher as the source of raising awareness with regard to learning styles and learning strategies. Beyond these tips, Kitti highlighted another significant aspect of language learning success since she believes that "the most efficient help is being forced to use the language in a native environment. This was the most helpful when I was learning German too; because then you're intensively pushed to use the language all day long." The positive effect of exposure to the target language is obvious in SLA. On the contrary, it is not so often mentioned by special needs learners in practice; therefore, I found this opinion especially intriguing. All the other interviewees referred to communication with foreigners as the biggest challenge and the 'ultimate' aim of language learning, which should be delayed and definitely not to start with as a language learner or even competent language user.

The category of learning environment is defined in a broad sense involving both the physical environment and human relationships. Answering the questions about the ideal place and circumstances for learning most efficiently, most of the participants were able to give quite detailed descriptions regarding the arrangement of the room, the music (if present), their posture, the most probable attention span and also if alone or with company. However, the human factor was concluded to be the most determining factor. The learning environment in a wider sense, i.e., communicating with peers, teachers, or foreigners/native speakers strongly influenced their experience and their emotions undermined or facilitated their progress. The following quotations from the interviews raise different aspects of the category labelled here as learning environment.

"I always received positive feedback, even from native speakers; I believe because I had the courage to communicate, I was just speaking and speaking and they understood me." (Kitti)

"I felt shame for a long time. I didn't know how to cope with this." (Noémi)

“The English teacher told me she didn’t care about my official exemption. I was told that my handwriting was too nice to be dyslexic.” (Janka)

“I was sitting in the back row drawing and hanging out. (in English classes)” (Péter)

“No problem, probably you know more in English than I know in Hungarian. (said the native teacher)” (Janka)

Unfortunately, there were several stories told about neglectful and even humiliating teacher attitudes towards dyslexia and dyslexic learners’ needs, which led to the loss of self-confidence and anxiety issues along with lowered performance, in the case of many of the participants. On the other hand, positive feedback could also be encountered resulting in a much more positive learning environment and increased motivation.

Besides the main bounded areas of topics in the transcripts, the identification and description of autonomy is much more complex due to its abstract concepts and overlapping characteristics with many other topics already discussed above. As Benson (2013) points out

autonomy is manifested in the form of autonomous language learning, which here refers to learning practices involving learners’ control over aspects of their learning or, more broadly, learning that takes place outside the context of formal instruction. (p.840)

In case of adult learners and language users, the context of language learning or attempts retaining their knowledge clearly takes places outside the context of formal education; therefore, they de facto meet certain requirements of learner autonomy. However, other trends proposed by Benson (2013) as opposed to the traditional approaches toward the concept of autonomy are worth considering when autonomy is being conceptualized. He claims that “attributes such as sociability, self-initiative, and an ability to create learning opportunities” are just as important as the traditional “abilities related to planning, monitoring, and evaluating language learning” (p.841). The most significant change he mentions is the abundance of sources due to digital achievements and the Internet. Accordingly, he draws attention to the phenomenon of ‘translingual’ practices, which refer to “work or play within and across languages” (p.841), and language learning might occur as a side effect of another activity. On the basis of this summary and the aforementioned theoretical and practical information about the learning experience of dyslexic adults, I propose that metacognitive skills and learner autonomy are keys to language learning success and are underlying components of the model below (see Figure 1). They are presented in two separate corners of the figure in order to indicate that they cannot be exclusively linked to any other units of meaning since they are so strongly interrelated with each of the components that they are assumed to be present in the retaining process of foreign language in an underlying way.

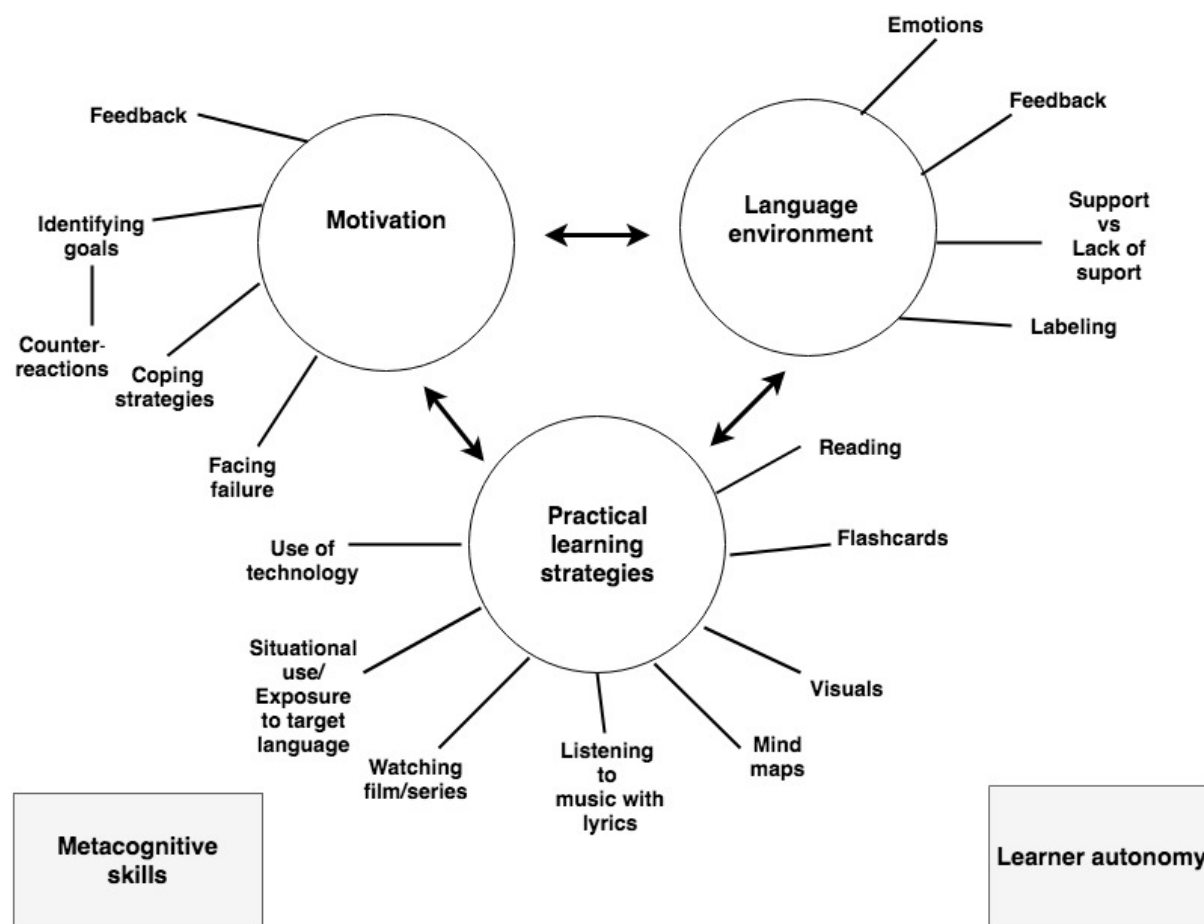


Figure 1. The components of self-perceived success

6 Conclusion

The aim of the study was to investigate what makes dyslexic language learners successful in the long run and to set an example by showing that dyslexic language learners can also aspire to become successful language users. In an attempt to gain an insight into their learning experience and the potential factors contributing to their success stories, several intriguing units of meaningful data emerged. Although each case is different and individual, some similar patterns were identified, such as the role of the family, peers, and teachers in supporting them, a stable emotional background without labelling and bullying, conscious learning strategies and individual learning techniques. It is also proposed that learner autonomy could be perceived through several overlapping components of motivation and learning strategies, which all contribute to the overall success of language learning and language use in adulthood. The participants' views clearly showed that the research interest demonstrated in this study is an important gap in research both in dyslexia-related SLA topics and from the point of view of pedagogical considerations. It might be beneficial from an educational perspective to consider the participants' suggestions and implement them in the teaching curricula.

Numerous questions remained unanswered, though. It would still be important to analyze how these components of success could be synthesized with existing autonomy and

self-regulation frameworks and success models, if at all. Some of the factors mentioned in the interviews inevitably overlap with well-known autonomy and motivation theories. However, as regards autonomy it is questionable and has been disputed for a long time how it could be promoted, what the difference is between learner autonomy and teacher autonomy, how learner autonomy can be fostered by teachers or if it should be self-developed. These questions are especially relevant in case of dyslexics as they have to make much more effort to achieve results in foreign language learning; therefore, it would be crucial to identify what can help them efficiently and how. As a follow up, the next phase of my study will focus on interviewing teachers and will hopefully add another perspective to the model proposed here.

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APPENDIX

Interview guide in English

Introductory questions

1. How old are you?
2. Where are you from?
3. How long have you been learning English?
4. Why did you choose this language?
5. Who helped you choose this language?
6. Are you learning another foreign language/other foreign languages?
7. Why did you choose other foreign language(s)?
8. Tell me more about how your dyslexia was diagnosed. (Who, where, how diagnosed it? Do you have an official document proving your condition?)
9. Have you ever received special training/tuition because of your special learning needs? If yes: when, how, what kind of training?

Questions relating to self-regulation

1. Tell me something about how you learned English.
2. What kind of tricks/techniques do you apply?
3. What would you like to achieve by reaching a good level of proficiency?/What did you like to achieve by reaching a good level of proficiency?
4. How could you describe your will power?
5. In which areas do you perform well (in connection with studying or working, as it is relevant)? Where is English on the scale?
6. When you are learning English vocabulary items, how do you manage to concentrate on the task for a longer time?
7. While learning (before, after) do you think about how to memorize the material more easily? (e.g., drawing pictures, creating short poems, reading out the material repeatedly)
8. Have you ever discussed with anyone how you can learn more efficiently: at school, in your family, with your friends, anyone else? If yes: What was the outcome of the discussions? (If so, Do/Did the suggestions work?)
9. What distracts your attention while reading?
10. What can you do against it?
11. Does it often occur to you that you do not understand what you have read?
12. When do you think that you understand what you have read?
13. What do/did you do when a task is boring?
14. Which areas of language learning are boring?
15. What do you do if something is very boring?
16. What is more interesting to you?
17. Try to recall one of your English lessons and your experiences in that lesson. What feelings come to your mind? Why?
18. Where and how do/did you like to learn English the most? (on your own/in company, at the desk, with music, etc.)
19. What distracts/distracted you while learning English?
20. Is there anyone who helps/helped you in learning? If yes: Who? Where? How?
21. What do/did you do when you feel/felt you do/did not manage to learn a certain thing?
22. What do you do if you do not understand something in a conversation? In a film?
About grammar?
23. Please list three good and bad traits that characterize you in learning.

Questions with regard to autonomy

1. Do you use English in your everyday life? With who? Where?
2. Did you use to/ Do you use other books besides your course book in order to improve your English? If yes: what?
3. Do you read anything in English on the Internet? If yes, what?
4. Do you watch English-speaking channels, movies?
5. Do you attempt to memorize the new words/expressions? (How well do you usually remember the new things you see there?)
6. How do you arrange your time when it comes to learning English/practising/ retaining your proficiency?
7. How do you decide what and when to learn/practise?
8. Is there anyone who helps you or do you do on your own?