Language Learners with Special Needs

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SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION 31
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Language Learners with Special Needs

An International Perspective

Edited by
Judit Kormos and Edit H. Kontra

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Introduction

JUDIT KORMOS and EDIT H. KONTRA

This edited volume is about language learners with special needs, but more importantly, it is *for* them. When sending out the call for papers, the editors' main objective was to put those language learners into the limelight who endure various disadvantages and are frequently subjected to discrimination because they are different; to disseminate information about learning disabilities and people with special needs in order to make the learning of foreign languages more accessible for all.

By language learning we mean studying another language in order to communicate with members of different linguistic and ethnic groups, and to speak, read and write in a language that is not one's own. In this sense, and with a little exaggeration, we might say that in our globalised world everyone is a language learner: children and adolescents as well as mature adults. Individuals, families and whole communities migrate for economic, social and political reasons, and for them learning another language is a matter of survival. Most children who go to school, and many students who go to college, have to satisfy a foreign language requirement. Graduates wishing to work abroad also study languages, and those who stay in their home countries are likely to have a better chance of getting a good job if they have a working knowledge of a foreign language. 'Use it or lose it', as the saying goes, and people who are long out of school also continue to be language learners in the sense that they need to practice by reading foreign texts or watching foreign TV channels in order to keep up their knowledge. Foreign languages play an important role in our lives, and this is particularly true for people within the European Union. Maintaining political and social relations, mobility in work and education, foreign trade, international companies, projects and cultural events, foreign travel and tourism all require that people have a shared language by means of which they can understand each other.

Many people learn foreign languages with ease and gain as much pleasure from the process itself as from the results. For many others, however, learning a foreign language is a struggle, an endless series of failures and frustrations. Methods and materials usually serve the needs of the majority, and little attention is devoted to discovering the needs of those who could and would also learn a foreign language but need different methods and materials, differently prepared teachers, more guidance and a much more supportive learning environment.

Though not everyone is interested in languages, everybody is aware that knowing a foreign language is a passport to a world 'out there': to knowledge and up-to-date information, to science and technology, to a world of art, literature and culture. If some choose to place their priorities elsewhere, they have every right to do so, but no citizen of any country should be deprived of this valuable tool owing to their different-than-average educational needs. It is therefore the duty of the society of the majority to be aware of those special needs and also to raise the awareness of others; to conduct research that can lead to a better understanding of special educational needs, and to investigate the possibilities of catering to them.

We chose the expression 'learners with special needs' in order to be able to include as many different types of learners as possible: people who have language and learning disorders, those with physical disabilities, and also those who are often considered impaired but who see themselves as members of a linguistic and cultural minority: the Deaf. In our call for papers we opened the gates as wide as possible, and we are pleased to be able to present here a good selection of research papers that cover quite a wide area of disabilities and special needs.

Definitions of Special Needs and Learning Disabilities

The first international consensus document on learners with special educational needs was drawn up by UNESCO in 1994 and is commonly known as the Salamanca guidelines. These guidelines state that 'every child has unique characteristics, interests, abilities and learning needs' and that 'education systems should be designed and educational programmes implemented to take into account the wide diversity of these characteristics and needs' (UNESCO, 1994: viii). In the guidelines 'the term "special educational needs" refers to all those children and youth whose needs arise from disabilities or learning difficulties' (UNESCO, 1994: 5). In line with the Salamanca guidelines, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, representing most European countries, distinguishes between three major groups with special educational needs: students with disabilities (including sensory and motor impairment as well as mental disorders); students with difficulties, representing the group of students with learning disabilities; and those with disadvantages (meaning primarily social and economic disadvantages) (OECD, 2002 – cited in Gordosné Szabó, 2004). Therefore in many countries of Europe, special educational needs (SEN) may involve all kinds of disabilities besides learning difficulties. In the United Kingdom, however, SEN refer only to learning difficulties (1996 Education Action cited in Orton, 2004). In the United States this term is not even used, and students with learning difficulties are called 'learning disabled'.

Learning disabilities (LDs) are difficult to define for two reasons: first they represent an underlying concept that is not directly observable, and second, they are dimensional, that is, they can be placed on a continuum ranging from mild to severe (Fletcher *et al.*, 2007). The first definition of learning disabilities, which dominated the international field of special education up to the 1990s and is still in use in many countries, is based on the discrepancy between students' aptitude, primarily measured with the help of IQ tests and standardised tests of achievement. An example of this conceptualisation of LDs is the Hungarian definition of dyslexia, which states that 'dyslexia is a type of developmental disorder in which students experience difficulties in reading despite adequate intellectual capacities' (translated from Gordosné Szabó, 2004: 112). This definition, however, has come in for serious criticism due to the inherent bias of IQ tests in favour of certain ethnic and social groups and also because it was found to under-identify students with LD (for a review see Fletcher *et al.*, 2007). The main question that arose was: How is it possible to identify LDs that are not due to mental disorders or retardation without reference to intellectual abilities? One possible solution was to introduce the concept of unexpectedness, that is, the common-sense observation that LDs occur despite adequate cognitive skills, appropriate socio-economic circumstances and high-quality literacy instruction. The most recent conceptualisation of learning disabilities views unexpectedness as the student's failure to respond to appropriate and high-quality instruction (Response to Intervention Model – Fuchs & Fuchs, 1998). An alternative definition of learning disabilities was provided by the so-called Intraindividual Differences Model (Kavela & Forness, 2000). In this model learning disabilities are seen as specific impairments in cognitive and neuro-psychological functioning. The model received its name because of its assumption that individuals show variability in cognitive strengths and weaknesses.

LDs include dyslexia and other difficulties related to various literacy and academic skills. LDs have been categorised in many different ways (for a review see Fletcher *et al.*, 2002), and here we will present the most recent and empirically best supported classification, proposed by Fletcher *et al.* (2007). LDs can affect three main domains: reading, mathematics and written expression. Reading disabilities can be further subcategorised into reading disabilities manifested in word recognition and spelling, which are commonly called dyslexia, and into reading disability affecting global comprehension and reading disability primarily causing problems in the fluency and automaticity of reading. Mathematics disabilities are also known as dyscalculia; students with this type of LD have difficulties in performing arithmetic operations. Disabilities in written expression, which involve problems with handwriting and composition, have also been found to exist independently of reading disabilities (e.g. Abbott & Berninger, 1993). The different types of LDs affecting various domains of academic performance can be present both in isolation and in combination in any individual student. Moreover, LDs might also co-occur with attention deficit disorder and attention hyper-activity disorder (ADHD), which in themselves are not classified as learning disabilities but as behavioural disorders.

The causes of learning disabilities have been widely researched in the past hundred years, and a large number of theories have been proposed to account for what lies at the heart of the most common LD: developmental dyslexia. In one of the most widely held views, the cause of reading disorders is phonological processing deficit (Frith, 1985; Liberman & Shankweiler, 1985; Stanovich, 1988), which primarily involves difficulties with speech perception and sound-discrimination (for a review see Joanisse *et al.*, 2000). This view has recently been challenged as a number of children identified as LD were found to have no deficit in sound-discrimination, but in comparison with non-LD students, they were slower in processing auditory stimuli (Snowling, 2008). Snowling (2008) reported a series of studies that showed that although most students with LD have phonological processing problems, they frequently exhibit symptoms of visual processing difficulties, attention deficit and language impairment. This finding is in line with the experiences of specialists working with LD students who often find that these students have varying strengths and weaknesses. Since the cause of dyslexia seems to be some kind of language disorder, more specifically receptive language disorder, it is often difficult to distinguish dyslexia from specific language impairment (SLI), which is a failure in oral language development that also causes problems in reading and often co-occurs with phonological processing deficit (Tallal *et al.*, 1988). Recent research, however, has shown that children with SLI tend to have more global speech perception problems than dyslexic learners (see e.g. Joanisse *et al.*, 2000). Nevertheless the difficulties students with SLI experience in learning how to read and spell in their L1 are similar to those of students who merely have phonological deficit, that is, dyslexia in the narrow sense (Kamhi & Catts, 1986). Since the literacy problems of SLI and dyslexic children are analogous, both groups are regarded at risk of LD and therefore have special educational needs both in L1 and L2 instruction.

Individuals with sensory or motor impairments do not by definition have LDs, but, in the broad sense of the term, they too have SEN which must be catered to, for otherwise the right of these learners to equal opportunities in education is violated. On 13 December 2006 the General

Assembly of the United Nations adopted by consensus the 'Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities', which has been signed by 101 nations (United Nations, 2007) including those represented in this volume: the United States, Canada, Hungary, Norway, Poland and the United Kingdom. This document makes detailed recommendations for measures that should be taken to ensure the realisation of full and equal participation of disabled people in education. Besides dealing with individuals with physical disabilities, the articles of the Convention contain specific recommendations about the education of those with visual and hearing impairment. The agreement emphasises the facilitation of the learning of Braille and sign language, and urges signatory states to educate teachers with appropriate awareness of disabilities and to provide adequate training in the use of techniques and materials to support people with disabilities, and to also employ teachers who live with disabilities themselves.

The inclusion of the Deaf among people with disabilities is a highly controversial issue. Those who are born or who grow up without the faculty of hearing identify themselves and want to be recognised by others as members of a minority, that of the Deaf with a capital 'D', who are not bound together by a medical condition but by a shared language and culture. Members of the Deaf community resent being called *hearing impaired* and being pitied as victims (Lane *et al.*, 1996). They refuse to be considered imperfect copies of hearing people and have as little desire to 'become hearing' (Ladd, 2003: 37) as black people under oppression have to become white or women who suffer discrimination to become men. Deaf parents take pride in having Deaf children who can inherit the language and culture of the community and help keep it alive.

The struggle of the Deaf for acknowledgement as a language minority is far from over. Oralism, 'the educational system imposed on Deaf communities worldwide during the last 120 years which removed Deaf educators, Deaf communities and their sign languages from the Deaf education system' (Ladd, 2003: xviii) is still alive and continues to play a dominant role in most countries of the world. Deaf communities differ from other linguistic minorities in the crucial role that education plays for them. According to a rough estimate, 90% of Deaf children are born to hearing parents (Ladd, 2003), which means that the place where the majority of Deaf children can be naturally socialised into Deaf culture is not the family but school, where they can also acquire the natural language that is fully accessible for them: their national sign language (Lane *et al.*, 1996).

The editors of this volume share this cultural-linguistic view of Deafness and include the Deaf in this book not as disabled people but as people who, as learners of foreign languages, have special educational needs which have to be recognised and appreciated by schools, teacher training institutions and educational policy makers as well. They identify with the goals set by the UN Convention: to ensure 'that the education of persons,