LEARNING FRENCH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE WITH THE HINDRANCE OF DYSLEXIA: IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING STRATEGIES

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This thesis culminates 20 years of education, from university all the way down to kindergarten. In all those years I am grateful to have met Teachers who inspire me yet, to be the best educator I can be, and to support my own students unconditionally. Nary accomplishment would be mine, if not for my family’s support, I could not shine. To my friends who I am fortunate to call my own, I have appreciated all the memories and the second home. To Alec, for four years of love and laughter, I can’t wait for our future and our happily ever after. And finally to mama, for being my greatest blessing, without you as my hero, I wouldn’t have achieved anything.

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INTRODUCTION TO THE RESEARCH STUDY:

In 2009, the Ontario government published the *Ontario’s Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy* policy. This document held a focus on the importance of equity in the classroom, in the task of making education accessible to the wide range of learners in today’s classrooms. As such, modern teachers are responsible for making their teaching and assessment accessible to all students, regardless of background or ability. Accordingly, this research study investigates the ways in which dyslexia, a specific language learning disability, can impact a student’s learning of French as a second or foreign language. More prominently, the study focuses on how teacher strategies and intervention can ameliorate the outcomes of students in foreign language classes who are burdened with dyslexia. Through a qualitative investigation involving two participants with dyslexia, the researcher aims to delineate how the burdens of dyslexia manifest themselves in second language learning, the compensatory strategies utilized by the participants, and the teaching strategies considered effective or unsuccessful by the participants in their schooling experiences. It is hoped that by considering the perspective of students and putting the focus on the person sitting on the other side of the desk, the experiences of students can influence and inform how educators teach.

RESEARCHER’S BACKGROUND:

As a newly hired French Immersion teacher, I have a deep interest in exploring teaching strategies with which I can support my future students. As an individual who studied French as a third language, I can personally relate to the French anxiety that is
prevalent in the modern Torontonian classroom. However, this French anxiety can be hugely augmented when the student has a language learning disability, such as dyslexia. For these students, they often struggle with difficulties at the cognitive level, adding to and worsening their emotional fears. As a future educator, I have the responsibility of supporting these students in particular, who are often expected to be successful at foreign language courses even while struggling with a language learning disability in their native language. With this study, I hope to educate myself and other teachers on strategies that can be implemented in our foreign language classrooms for those students who most need intervention, so that every student in our classroom has an equitable chance to succeed.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

The primary research question explored in this qualitative study is as follows: How can the experiences of students with dyslexia in learning French as a Second Language inform pedagogy for practicing teachers?

Alongside this primary question are the following secondary questions:

a. What are the experiences of students with dyslexia in learning a second language? How have past students in this situation fared and what strategies on their part proved effective?

b. What strategies of language teachers encouraged the success of students with dyslexia in language learning?
II : LITERATURE REVIEW

i. Definition of Dyslexia
Dyslexia is a specific language learning disability which impedes an individual’s phonological, semantic and syntactic understanding of language (Sparks et al, 1991, p.97). According to DiFino & Lombardino (2004), dyslexia results from difficulty in forming adequate phonological representations of the sounds of language, and therefore affects an individual’s ability to manipulate and remember sound and letter sequences (p.391). This language learning disability can then be a severe academic disadvantage.

However, dyslexia need not regarded as solely negative. While it can certainly result in academic and professional hardships to individuals over their life span, there are also reported character-building benefits. James (2008) discusses his personal experience with dyslexia and the advantages that his language learning disability has given him. Namely, he reports his resourceful and industrious nature, developed through a lifetime of compensation. Moreover, James credits his creativity and his ability to rely on listening for comprehension, as well as his capacity for empathy, to his struggles with dyslexia (p.33).

ii. How Dyslexia impacts reading and writing skills
As dyslexia disrupts the phonological, semantic and syntactic understandings of language, it can have severely negative impacts on a student’s ability to read. As Lundberg (2002) describes, individuals with dyslexia suffer from a constitutional weakness of the phonological processing system, which makes it challenging to understand and manipulate alphabetic script (p.174).
Dyslexia also negatively impacts writing skills. A recent study by Morken & Helland (2013) assessed the writing of 13 children with dyslexia, and 28 children without, at age 11 years. The main finding of the study was that dyslexia is not an issue of effort, contrary to notions still held by parents and teachers. Moreover, the researchers note that problems in writing persist even after issues in reading have been addressed (p.131). Namely, an impaired semantic processing method in students with dyslexia can impede the generating of coherent texts and developing of arguments (p.133). Morken & Helland (2013) conclude by naming the learning of successful revision as the most pressing issue; indeed, they found that the dyslexic group of participants revised their texts as much as the typical group, but they produced texts of lower quality and needed more time to write (p.141).

iii. The socio-emotional effects of dyslexia
A study by McNulty (2003) reported the life stories of adults who had been diagnosed with dyslexia as children, and emphasized the related emotional experiences that these individuals had experienced. While the participants varied in age, career, gender and background, there were some notable commonalities among them. For instance, McNulty states that by school-age, all participants had experienced issues with self-esteem from struggles and failures at school (p.363). In fact, the “central plots” of these stories were interwoven with the functional challenges that the participants faced, while also endeavouring through significant emotional issues. Many of the participants were able to find a “niche”, either socially or academically, where they experienced success and were able to improve compensation. Many of these niches were athletic in nature (p.373). While some of the participants were able to achieve success in their niche, others are still struggling with linguistically demanding jobs and all have reported
emotional insecurity as adults. Finally, the study notes implications garnered from the personal accounts of the participants; these include the need for students with dyslexia to find a niche in which to experience success, and the need for continued support through adulthood (p.378).

iv. How Dyslexia impacts the learning of a foreign language

According to a study by Simon (2000), one’s skill in three native language codes – phonological, syntactic and semantic – serves as the foundation for learning a foreign language successfully (p.157). This is called the Linguistic Coding Hypothesis, and may be explanatory of why certain people are particularly strong at learning languages – they have strong linguistic skills in their native language. Therefore, it follows that if one has weak linguistic skills in their native language, these weaknesses will then transfer to the foreign language. Indeed, Lundberg (2002) is in agreement with this notion, having designed a “model” for L2 learning. In this model, the formation of L2 (a second language) is informed by a phonological support system that encourages learning of vocabulary and syntactical rules. Lundberg argues that performance in L2 is largely based on the individual’s ability to cope with L1, or their native language (p.183).

However, a complication arises in the case of students who have compensated for dyslexia in their first language through hard work, and have not been identified. As Elbro et al (2012) discuss, when these students attempt to learn a new language, however, they experience the same pitfalls of dyslexia that are now exaggerated by a lack of mastery of the language. In other words, students with dyslexia can often self-correct in their mother tongue; however, this process is not feasible in a second language one is only beginning to study (Lundberg, p.178). Therefore, it can sometimes
be challenging for teachers to recognize dyslexia in a second language, particularly if the student has compensated effectively in their native tongue (Elbro et al, p. 172).

The 2000 study by Simon also discusses at length the specific challenges encountered by the author as a student with dyslexia while studying French as a second language, while providing specific examples (pp.169-179). This comprehensive list is particularly helpful to foreign language teachers, especially those teaching French to students with language disabilities, as it highlights ample instances where dyslexia has complicated learning and where the instructor should take special care to teach. For example, Simon (2000) lists the following as common problems encountered by students with dyslexia learning a foreign language: Difficulty making sound/symbol connections, remembering and applying spelling and grammar rules, and drawing on phonological working memory to repeat words and phrases (p.168). She also notes that immersion experiences do not help, as she cannot simultaneously listen for key words to help with comprehension while also analyzing language structure.

v. Strategies for students with dyslexia learning a foreign language:
In her 2000 study, Simon delineates ten suggestions for students with dyslexia studying a foreign language, comprised of strategies which proved useful in her personal experience of learning French. Among these items on the list are being prepared for class by reading material beforehand, using English to explain and learn grammatical concepts, making course content personally meaningful by supplementing class notes, and to engage in plentiful practice by use of computer drills, for example (p.180).

Meanwhile, Kirby et al (2008) discussed the self-reported learning strategies of college and university students with and without dyslexia, drawing links between those strategies and reading ability. The results found that students with dyslexia reported a
greater use of time management strategies and study aids, and less use of the ‘selecting main ideas’ strategy and ‘test taking’ strategies (p.93). Interestingly, the researchers also found that university students with dyslexia reported a deeper approach to learning than their counterparts without dyslexia (p.94). This result suggests that reading difficulties can push a student into two directions - first towards an attempt at deeper understanding and the use of study aids and time management strategies; then, towards shallow learning and test-taking strategies because of the abundance of tasks at hand and the lack of resources (p.94).

vi. Teacher Strategies to support foreign language students with dyslexia:
   a. How teacher belief about dyslexia impacts pedagogy
   A study conducted by Hornstra et al (2010), examined the attitudes of 30 regular education teachers toward dyslexia, which were determined using both implicit and explicit measures. The researchers also examined the achievement scores for 307 students (p.515). As would be suspected, the implicit measure proved to be a more valuable predictor of the achievement of students with dyslexia than the explicit, self-report measures. The researchers found that there was an indirect association between teacher attitudes and student achievement. In other words, low teacher beliefs would result in low expectations, which would then lead to stigmatization, differential treatment, and finally, lower achievement (p.516). Thus, teacher expectations with respect to academic ability can exert small but significant effects on student achievement (p.516). Fortunately, the effect of negative implicit teacher attitudes were significant only in the specific domain in which the student experienced difficulties. Thus, the teachers sampled in this study had low expectations for spelling, for example, but not math in the students with dyslexia. However, as schools
are reaching for inclusive classrooms, this statistical evidence should be instructive for educators to identify their own biases and the potential power these can have on student achievement.

b. Support for early intervention:
A recent study by van der Leij, A. (2013) investigated the efficacy of the early intervention strategy in the Dutch Dyslexia Program. Specifically, the investigator explored whether children at familial risk of developing dyslexia could be positively influenced by training phoneme awareness and letter sound awareness during the pre-reading phase before formal instruction began in first grade (p.241). By varying intervention in areas such as delivery mode (computer or manual), tutor (semi-professional or parent), location (school or home), van der Leij (2013) was able to statistically establish that early intervention programs are effective. Trained familial risk children outperformed their untrained counterparts in phonological awareness and letter knowledge (p.242); moreover, less of the trained FR students developed reading failure than untrained counterparts, though the rate was still higher than in children without dyslexia (p.246). The investigator concludes that intervention for children with familial risk of developing dyslexia should start early and be prolonged, ideally targeting the whole process of reading acquisition (p.252).

c. Use of a multisensory pedagogy (The Orton-Gillingham ARK method)
The 1991 study by Sparks et al. discusses the Orton-Gillingham method: a multisensory, structured language approach which teaches phonology directly and explicitly. The OG method is a highly structured step-by-step approach that endorses teaching small morsels of material at a time and presenting that material in a multisensory format (p.106). The “multisensory” approach translates into having the
student’s auditory, visual, and kinesthetic – AVK – pathways engaged simultaneously; thus, the student is hearing, seeing, and manipulating the language at the same time. In this way, the AVK method is providing additional forms of input, allowing the student to compensate for deficiencies (p.107). For example, if a student has a weakness in auditory processing, material presented in an AVK format allows that student to not have to rely solely on auditory information; instead, the student is offered that material visually and kinaesthetically as well.

Sparks et al (1991) continue to suggest that the OG approach should go beyond teaching sounds and pronunciation; instead, it should also be used to teach students phonology, grammar, semantics, and oral and written language (p.107). Furthermore, there are certain rules that should be followed when an instructor is utilizing the OG method. First, the class should be taught exclusively in the foreign language, only resorting to the mother tongue when dealing with particularly difficult grammar concepts. Next, there must be frequent review, as well as a consistent emphasis on simultaneous writing and pronunciation. In this way, students can see, hear and do the language. Finally, an OG lesson should be well-defined in its structure, with clear daily activities (p.107). A sample lesson overview is given, starting with 10 minutes of teaching phonology and syntax, followed by 10 minutes each of blackboard drills, oral sound drills, vocabulary training, and reading and communicative activities (p.107). In this way, an OG lesson is exploiting a student’s skills in all of reading, writing and speaking.

d. Other strategies for foreign language teachers as recommended by learners with dyslexia
In her 2000 study, Simon lists recommendations for instructors on how best to instruct students with language learning disabilities (p.182). Among these, she notes teaching how to learn by asking successful students to share their study strategies, and providing multisensory support similar to that discussed in the Orton-Gillingham method. She also notes that developing charts, dialogues and songs, and dictation exercises are a good way for students to see the language. Meanwhile, students also respond well to incentives to speak the foreign language and having compensatory grading procedures (submitting a video instead of writing an exam, for example). Lastly, Simon notes that the teacher should make learning the foreign language an attainable goal. Among these strategies is the implicit need to be an encouraging and accommodating teacher.

Meanwhile, there are also pedagogical suggestions encapsulated in the 1991 study by Sparks et al. Mainly, the authors discuss instructional practices that bring the grammar out from the book, in order to make it meaningful for students. This can be achieved in numerous ways. For example, “acting out the language” during a lesson about negatives could be assigning each student a part of the phrase – subject, verb, noun, ‘ne’ and ‘pas’ – and instructing them to rearrange themselves in the order that these parts of speech would appear (p.110). Teachers are also recommended to teach vocabulary with the help of visuals, to help students with dyslexia to see what they are pronouncing and writing (p.110). Finally, Stark et al (1991) is an advocate for the incorporation of communicative activities in the foreign language classroom, whereby the teacher and students communicate in the target language while going back and forth between verbal and written exercises (p.111).
i. DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The data collection for this study will take form of interviews with graduate students who have met the criteria for participant selection; namely, that they have been diagnosed with dyslexia, and that they have some experience teaching others in a formal setting (as a student teacher or teaching assistant). The interview questions will be formulated to fall under the study’s two sub-questions, in the hopes that when transcribed, the data will be able to answer the principle research question.

The first sub-question is as follows: “What are the experiences of students with dyslexia in learning a second language? How have past students in this situation fared and what strategies on their part proved effective?”. The interview questions corresponding to this sub-question are related to the past schooling experiences of the participants, the strategies they developed to compensate for their dyslexia, and the affective experience of having dyslexia:

1. If you could describe your experiences with dyslexia using just one word or sentence, what would it be? Please explain.
2. As an adult, do you feel dyslexia still has the same effect on you now as it did when you were a child in school?
3. Did you have to learn a second language at school? (Example – French)
4. If so, how was your experience learning a second language? Was it harder than learning to read and write in your native language? If so, why?
5. I read in my research that many students with dyslexia are able to learn how to compensate for it – is this accurate for your life? You have achieved a lot of academic success – how were you able to do so while having dyslexia?

6. If so, what specific strategies do you use to compensate for dyslexia?

7. My research describes “issues of self-esteem” as being prevalent in individuals with dyslexia, stemming from struggles and failures at school. Is this something that you can relate to?

8. I read that students with dyslexia often find “niches” (often athletic in nature) where they were able to experience success. Did you personally experience this?

9. One of the studies I read on adults with dyslexia states that many of them have linguistically-heavy jobs and still experience insecurity as adults. Would you agree with that statement?

   The second sub-question is as follows: “What strategies of past teachers encouraged the success of students with dyslexia in language learning?”. The interview questions relating to this sub-question corresponds to specific strategies used by past teachers that the participants found particularly useful or helpful:

10. Can you think of any strategies that your past teachers used which helped you as a student with dyslexia?

11. Conversely, can you think of particular teachers and strategies that they used which were NOT helpful to you, or even damaging, as a student with dyslexia?

12. If you could go back and inform your past teachers on what kinds of strategies and support they could give you and other students with dyslexia, what would you advise them to do?
13. One of my studies talks about the Orton-Gillingham system of teaching language. In a nutshell, it teaches small packages of information at a time, in a way that engages visual, auditory, and kinesthetic pathways in the student at the same time. As a student with dyslexia, would this be helpful to you? Would it have been helpful to you as a child?

14. Is there anything else about your experience as a student with dyslexia that you would like to share / think is important for teachers to know?

ii. PARTICIPANTS

The participants in my study are graduate students who were diagnosed with dyslexia, and who have engaged in a form of teaching in their recent past. The first participant is a graduate student in a teacher education program at a large Canadian university. The second participant is a Ph. D candidate at another large Canadian university, studying engineering. Both participants were diagnosed with dyslexia as children, and were selected for the large degree of compensation they were able to develop, as evidenced by their high levels of academic achievements and their selection of linguistically-heavy areas of study and careers.

iii. ETHICAL REVIEW PROCEDURES

Participants will be fully informed of the research project and the extent of their participation well in advance of scheduled interviews, by way of formal consent letters. I will be available by email and Skype to respond to any questions or concerns the participants may have. The interviews will be scheduled at the students’ respective schools, or will be arranged on Skype. Before their respective interviews, I will provide each participant with a copy of consent form, which they will be required to read and sign before continuing with the interview. Participants will be informed that they will be
kept anonymous throughout the research process and only referred to by a pseudonym in the research project. Each interview will be recorded using a digital recording device. The transcriptions of each interview will be sent to each of the respective participants; they will have full rights to add, remove or elaborate on anything said. The participants will also be told that they will be informed of the completion of the research project and will receive a copy of the finished project if they so desire.

iv. LIMITATIONS
The limitations in this study lie in the small sample size of participants, and in the breadth of the literature review. The literature review itself will be a reflection of the capacity of just one individual in a Master's program in which this thesis is just one of many other courses of study. The researcher cannot hope to search the literature with a fine-toothed comb, in the way that a team of researchers would be able to do. Therefore, while every effort will have been made to ensure that the literature review published in this thesis is expansive and completely representative of already existent published data, the researcher acknowledges that it may have holes. However, on a positive note, these holes are likely to be little, as the extensive review done so far has offered consistent themes that have been incorporated in this thesis.
Chapter 4: Data Analysis

The data collected in this study yielded five overarching themes that were common in the testimonies of the two participants. The first theme was the affective impact of Dyslexia, which varied in degree between the two participants. Related to this was the second theme of Dyslexia in adulthood, and how each of the participants had managed to cope with their learning disability in their daily adult lives. The learning of French as a Second Language was the third overarching theme, with both participants having studied the foreign language for a number of years. The fourth theme involved the role of the family and parental support in the experiences of both participants. Finally, the last theme centred on implications for teaching practice.

i. The affective impact of Dyslexia

Both participants described their experiences with dyslexia with the same word: “frustrating”. This frustration appears to stem from the issues with communicating their knowledge at school. Both participants mentioned difficulties with relaying the content they understood. Moreover, there were also difficulties in decoding text in books and word questions, with these being hallmarks of the dyslexia condition. Furthermore, frustration also grew from the sheer time constraints of completing their work, with each participant reporting that they needed significantly more time to complete their homework and research throughout their academic careers. As Participant B describes, “There was a period in middle school when I legitimately didn’t do any work. I had a teacher in middle school tell me that he didn’t think I would finish high school… I attribute almost all of that to the dyslexia. It was just too stressful, I just wouldn’t do work, I refused. I couldn’t understand why I wasn’t performing”.

Participant B comes from an American schooling background, and therefore had a different experience with dyslexia than his Canadian counterpart, Participant A. His frustration stemmed in part from a lack of a diagnosis until his adulthood, but also his lack of willingness to partake in Special Education. This participant quotes that he would have “died” from the “embarrassment” of being classified as a Special Education student, and therefore intentionally thwarted every assessment he’d been given since the second grade. As such, while his teachers were aware that he had deficits in reading, he was not properly diagnosed until his university years. As a result, he did not receive any accommodations at school and was largely left to struggle on his own in linguistically-laden subjects. This same participant also reports negative social implications of dyslexia, quoting a difficult experience in middle and high schools and periods where “no one liked” him.

Part of Participant B’s testimony deals with the issue of stigma with learning disabilities. He quotes that he has not even informed his supervisor about his dyslexia, as he does not want “to be seen differently”. He reports a fear of having the diagnosis “colour the way people see” him. He further acknowledges that it is challenging for typical peers, and teachers, to understand the difficulties of having a learning disability when they have not personally experienced it.

ii. Dyslexia in Adulthood

Both participants report that dyslexia has a noticeable impact on their lives as adults, though to varying degrees. While Participant A reports that she is now able to “read by sight” and that she is largely unaffected by her dyslexia on a daily basis, Participant B notes that he encounters linguistically-laden tasks every day that require
disproportional amounts of effort on his part. In fact, up until trying a text-to-speech software, Participant B noted that reading scholarly journals and attempting linguistically-laden textbook-based courses at university were almost “impossible”.

The participants in this study both chose to study and work in linguistically-heavy fields. Participant A elected to become a teacher, enrolling in a Master’s level graduate program. Her experiences with reading and completing the heavy workload are largely positive. She reports compensatory strategies of using typing in lieu of writing, and substantial preparation beforehand for any assignments or projects. Meanwhile, participant B is a PhD candidate studying Chemical Engineering. Amidst the myriad of scholarly journal articles and research he has to read and conduct, he reports having difficulty in keeping up with the same pace as his colleagues. In fact, he explains that prior to using a text-to-speech software, his pace of reading was two to three times slower than typical peers, even those who had no knowledge in the specialized content.

Interestingly, both participants also enjoy the work of teaching others. However, in this context, the burden of dyslexia continues to show. Participants A and B each report having to prepare beforehand, by either practicing exactly what they will write on the board or read aloud to the class, and by completing all the solutions to practice sets beforehand. As described by Participant B, the additional stress of having to perform before an audience (i.e. a class), results in a further decreased ability to comprehend written texts, and he often avoids writing on the board altogether.

Even with these challenges, each of the participants reports an enjoyment of teaching. It seems that their struggles with school have propelled them to help students with difficulties of their own. As Participant B notes, there is that “moment of
understanding”, when he is able to explain something in such a way so that the student really understands it and does “not have to memorize” it. In this way, it seems that both participants use their backgrounds and personal struggles to identify with their students.

iii. The learning of French as a Second Language

Each of the two participants engaged in learning French as a Second Language, but each had varying experiences with some overlapping themes. Participant A reports an extreme difficulty with spelling, and calls herself “useless” with this aspect. She also notes that speaking French was much easier than reading or writing in the second language. Participant A studied French until the twelfth grade, although she acknowledges that she has lost much of her proficiency and would often “fake headaches” in order to avoid going to class.

Notably, both participants refer back to their language skills in their native language of English. They describe that the deficits, such as those involved with spelling, experienced in their native language carried over to their experiences with learning French as a second language.

Interesting, while Participant B also reports a severe difficulty with spelling in both English and French, he elected to study the language for three years. Indeed, he was able to learn enough of the language to be as or even more proficient than some first year university students studying French. To achieve this level of proficiency, Participant B reports countless hours of devotion to learning French. He quotes: “Here’s the thing, I was a math and science guy. And I would spend maybe half an hour every night on my math and science. The rest of that five hours was reading history, reading English, and memorizing French. And that just seems like an incredible waste to me. Like that wasn’t
my focus and I could have done so much more, had I not had that burden”. In other words, while he was eventually able to achieve a certain proficiency in French, Participant B states that learning a second language was a significant burden on his time and his efforts, which was incongruent with his interests and focus of study.

iv. The role of family in the school experience

The support from parents with regard to dyslexia varied in both participants. Participant A noted that her parents were extremely supportive. She notes that because her father has dyslexia, he and her mother were able to be supportive in a large way. She quotes, “My dad also has dyslexia so he taught me a lot of ways to deal with it to help me in school. I guess I had the benefit of very supportive parents at home that understood my dyslexia”. In this way, Participant A was able to have a parental figure who personally identified with her difficulties and taught her compensatory strategies.

Meanwhile, Participant B noted a substantially different experience. He reported that his parents were largely reluctant to have him “labeled” with a learning disability, and that they hindered assessment experiences for him. Furthermore, he notes that his success in school was due to intrinsic motivation rather than parental motivation. He quotes, “They didn’t care how successful I was at school, whatsoever. They straight up told me that if I didn’t want to go to school, that was okay. They started telling me that probably first or second grade and then all the way through! Like seriously, they were completely okay with whatever I wanted to do. There was never any pressure on me to succeed”. However, while they didn’t pressure him to be the best student at school, they did offer support in other ways. For one, they enrolled him in a private school that afforded him excellent teacher-to-student attention. They also attempted to teach
Participant B how to read, and his multiplication tables. Describing their efforts, he quotes, “And they would get really upset about it, they’d like cry. And mom used to have this thing, she used to quiz me on the way to school, with flash cards. And I’d say, I don’t know, I just have no idea. And she’d say we’ve been doing this for the last month, how could you not know? And she’d get really upset. She just thought I wasn’t trying”. In other words, while his parents did not place exceptional academic demands on him, they did try to support him in whatever ways they knew how, and experienced frustration when he was not able to learn typically.

v. Implications for teaching

Many insights on pedagogy arose from the interviews with both participants, and these intersected under five umbrellas: i) the impact of teacher belief and high expectations; ii) the value of individual attention, considering personal learning style, and compassionate teaching; iii) the design of inclusive assessments; and iv) the use of technology.

i: The impact of teacher belief and high expectations:

The first insight that emerged was the importance of teacher belief and high expectations. Participant B was particularly adamant on this aspect, describing a middle school teacher who informed him that he did not think he would be able to graduate from high school. While he believes this teacher was simply trying to motivate him or “scare” him into doing work, this strategy was not effective. In fact, this approach was in contrast with teachers that came after, who upheld high expectations for Participant B, and in whose classes he was able to rise to expectations and achieve excellence.
Participant A also shares her insights on how a teacher’s beliefs can be important. She states that “patience is key for teachers when helping students with or without any sort of learning disorder like dyslexia. The student could want to give up or just assume that they are generally “bad at reading” or “bad at writing” or “bad at math” altogether, but these kinds of generalizations can be very dangerous. I made these generalizations as well, and it took me years to get them out of my head. It is important for a teacher to never let them get in a student’s head in the first place. Teachers need to show students their strengths and make accommodations for their weaknesses to help them succeed”. With these remarks, Participant A acknowledges the role of teacher belief in the development of a student’s self-esteem. As she notes, high teacher expectations can lead to positive outcomes for students, by helping the student to have positive self-concept and to achieve success.

Finally, with respect to teacher beliefs, Participant B notes that it is important for teachers to be investigative about their students’ success. He quotes that it is crucial that teachers not assume that a student is “not smart enough to figure it out”, but rather, that there is an underlying reason for their deficits in academic performance. Most of all, both participants note the danger of assuming that students with dyslexia aren’t putting in enough effort. As Participant B notes, “Everybody just thought if I had tried harder, that I’d be able to do it. It's not even close to a question of effort. There’s no amount of trying that could have done it.”
ii: The value of individual attention, considering personal learning style, and compassionate teaching:

A second insight that arose was the value of individual attention. Participant B acknowledges that the individual attention he got from his private school background was immensely helpful. He was able to clear up any questions immediately, instead of having to read and reread texts on his own. Having continually available teachers ultimately saved him substantial amounts of time, as comprehending questions and texts was the basis for much of his academic struggles.

Along these lines, a difference in teaching style must also occur. Participant B shares that he wasn't able to learn long division until he learned it in high school, with polynomials. The difference in teaching method, memorization versus explanation of how things work, made all the difference in his understanding. Indeed, Participant A corroborates his insistence on avoiding memorization, describing an instance in the fourth grade when she had tried to memorize all of the spelling test words: “...and I memorized all the words, how they were spelt and what they looked like -- the way the letters faced. My mom quizzed me and I was getting the list perfect, but then the test was postponed two days. I failed the test when we wrote it two days later, I forgot all the order of the letters and most of how they looked like in the words.” Therefore, as can be understood by their experiences, both Participant A and B report that the use of memorization is not an effective teaching strategy for students with dyslexia.
Individual attention and adjustment of teacher style seem to link to one important theme: compassionate teaching. Both participants describe teachers who took the time to “check in” with them, and who inconspicuously supported them in the classroom, both academically and emotionally. Participant B notes that his best teachers “knew how I was doing, and was able to, when I wasn’t doing well, pull me aside”. Similarly, Participant A also discusses examples of individualized, compassionate teaching. “I had a teacher who told me what paragraphs I would be reading out loud in class the day before, so I could practice that night. When we went around reading paragraphs from the book, she chose me for the ones she had told me the night before. The rest of the class saw it as random, so I was able to save face and not struggle with the words in front of everyone. It allowed me to participate and decreased my anxiety”. In sum, both participants are able to link positive learning experiences with compassionate teachers.

Finally, both participants advocated for the need for teachers to honour the personal learning styles of their students. Interestingly, both participants are kinaesthetic learners. For Participant A, this manifested in her becoming a physical education teacher. For Participant B, he acknowledges that he learns best by doing. Specifically, when learning French vocabulary, he would use cue cards by reading, saying it aloud, and writing simultaneously. He notes that the writing, the ‘doing’ stage, was essential for him comprehending and retaining the information. It seems that from the testimonies of both participants, teachers should cater to more learning styles than linguistic and numerical. Teachers
should also be mindful that different students will have different responses to adversity. In the case of both participants, the challenges they faced with dyslexia ultimately motivated them to devote themselves to academic excellence. However, not every child with dyslexia will respond with the same self-confidence and ardour.

iii: The design of inclusive assessments:

A third insight is the use of inclusive assessments. Participant B notes that many teachers create test items that are wordy and include superfluous information. Unknowingly, this superfluous information is “just more to sift through” as Participant B describes, and students with learning disabilities have to spend significantly more time decoding the meaning. Participant B also notes that the use of point form would also have been immensely helpful in assessments. Meanwhile, Participant A also acknowledges that sifting through information during tests is an onerous task for an individual with dyslexia. As she quotes, she would “highlight each section of the directions as I was working on them, and then cross them out when I completed it. I used this strategy all through high school and even into university to make sure I didn’t miss a step in word problems or assignment instructions. I also found that re-organizing instructions into a checklist also was a useful strategy for me when I had longer lists of instructions”. Another aspect of inclusive assessment is allowing students with dyslexia and other learning disabilities to have more time. Both participants note that being allowed more time would have been immensely helpful in their academic experience. Altogether, it may be a more equitable approach to design
more inclusive assessments that accommodate for decoding difficulties that students may have.

iv: The use of technology:

A fourth insight gleaned from the interviews is the use of text-to-speech software. Participant B only discovered this type of software in his university years, and he acknowledges that had he had this resource during his elementary and secondary school years, he could have avoided countless hours of struggling with linguistically-laden courses. Using a specific technology called “Balabolka”, he is able to listen to texts while simultaneously reading them, therefore helping with his reading fluency. Along these lines, Participant A also advocates for the use of technology. Specifically, she suggests replacing pen and paper with a keyboard. She mentions that by disabling the spell and grammar check functions, teachers can still assess their students’ spelling and grammar, while also offering them an accommodation that minimizes confusion with letters.
V: DISCUSSION

Conclusions

The primary research question of this study asked how the experiences of students with dyslexia in learning French as a Second Language can inform the teaching strategies for practicing educators. Two sub-questions arose from this primary question: the first addressed the personal experiences and strategies of students with dyslexia, while the second addressed the teaching strategies found effective or unsuccessful by these students.

The key themes reflected in the research and interview questions were also found to be overarching themes in the literature. The first theme present in both literature and research questions had to do with the affective experience of dyslexia. While both of the participants in the study had many negative descriptors, such as “scary” and “inescapable”, the prevailing adjective used was “frustrating”. In fact, both participants used “frustrating”, “frustrated”, and “frustration” numerous times throughout their interviews. This idea supports the negative affective experience described by McNulty (2003) in a study describing the life stories of adults with dyslexia. In this study, while the adults varied in career, age, and educational background, each of these individuals experienced negative affective effects from struggling with dyslexia, as well as issues with self-esteem stemming from failures at school (p.363).

The second theme discussed in this study and the literature involved the adult lives of the participants and the compensatory strategies that they had found useful. Firstly, the experiences of Participant A support the notion made by Morken and Helland (2013) that even while reading can improve, writing will continue to be an area of
persistent weakness (p.131). Participant A notes that she can largely “read by sight” in her adulthood, while writing still causes discomfort, particularly writing in front of her class on a blackboard. Indeed, while dyslexia has a differing impact on each of the participants in this study, both reported relying on certain compensatory strategies to account for their academic success. Many of these compensatory strategies are congruent with those discussed by Simon (2000), including preparation for classes and evaluations beforehand, supplementing class notes, and devoting significant time to practice (p.180). Adding to this body of research are some compensatory techniques used by the participants in this study in their daily lives, such as use of a keyboard in lieu of writing, and the use of a text-to-speech software for reading everything from emails to scholarly journals.

The third prevalent theme involves the burden of dyslexia specifically in second language learning. According to a study by Simon (2000), the level of skill in the native language serves as the foundation for foreign language learning, explaining how certain individuals can be adept at language learning in general and can become bilingual, trilingual, or even polyglots. Furthermore, a 2002 study by Lundberg discusses that performance in the second language is largely based on the performance in the native language (p.183), and that any deficits in the native language will be carried over to the foreign language. Indeed, both participants corroborated this notion, specifically using the example of spelling. In fact, both participants claimed to be “useless” when spelling in English, and related that directly with the “impossible” task of spelling in French. The difficulties encountered by both participants in spelling is further support for the ample list of specific areas where students with dyslexia find difficulty in second language
learning, as proposed by Simon (2000), of which remembering and applying spelling and grammar rules are near the top of the list (p.168).

An area not found to be prevalent in the literature with respect to dyslexia and second language learning involves the influence of family in a student’s experience. While briefly mentioned in the study by McNulty (2003), this study found that the type of parental support given to each of the participants contributed to drastically different experiences with dyslexia. Namely, while Participant A was able to learn directly from her father, who also has dyslexia, Participant B’s educational experience seemed to be negatively impacted by parents who refused to acknowledge his language learning disability. In other words, Participant A seems to have come from a home where her dyslexia was accepted and openly discussed, whereas Participant B seems to have had the opposite prevailing perspective in his household.

**Implications**

I: Implications for Practice:

The second sub-question of the research question involved the specific instructional strategies that the participants found effective in their academic experiences. Related back to and supported by the literature, many implications for teaching practice can be garnered from these testimonies.

The first insight that became evident through the experiences of both participants in this study, was the importance of teacher belief and high expectations. Both participants noted a more positive academic experience when they had teachers who held the same high expectations for them as for their peers. Indeed, this idea is corroborative of those in the 2010 study by Hornstra et al. which found student
achievement was higher in situations with high teacher belief (p.515). Hornstra et al. (2010) found that low teacher beliefs resulted in stigmatization and differential treatment, which then indirectly led to lower student achievement (p.516). Indeed, this idea of stigmatization was found to be highly important in the experiences of Participant B. In fact, in order to avoid stigmatization, he intentionally thwarted every opportunity he had to be formally identified as having dyslexia, thereby contributing to years of struggling with dyslexia on his own, without accommodation.

The second, crucial insight with respect to teaching practice was the need for a change in teaching style for those teachers instructing students with dyslexia. Both participants reported the importance for individual attention from their teachers, for their teachers to check in often with them and to address any questions promptly, and for their teachers to offer inconspicuous support. All of these ideas are related to compassionate teaching, and are supported indirectly by the literature. For instance, specifically addressing teaching style, Sparks et al. (1991) discusses the Orton-Gillingham method, which incorporates auditory, visual, and kinesthetic ways of knowing when teaching language (p.106). Indeed, both participants in this study were highly interested in this method of teaching, and relate it back to their own preference for kinesthetic learning. Moreover, Simon (2000) discusses different ways that teachers can take the language out of the book and allow the students to “see” and “act out” the language (p.182). Altogether, both of these studies discuss the importance of teaching students with dyslexia in a different way, of engaging their various ways of knowing and learning instead of relying on traditional methods of reading, memorizing, and writing.
Finally, assessment is an integral part of teaching practice, and here too accommodations can be made to benefit students with dyslexia. Namely, both participants report the benefits of using technology in the classroom, or typing rather than writing manually. They suggest that teachers can make assessments with point-form questions, so students with dyslexia have less to sift through. Lastly, the use of a text-to-speech software in linguistically-laden subjects can help minimize the significant time commitment of students with dyslexia to their homework. Indeed, the incorporation of inclusive assessments is a notion supported by the 2000 study of Simon, where she discusses the use of “compensatory grading procedures” in lieu of a traditional test (p.182). Her suggestions of offering students the choice, to make a video instead of writing the test, for example, support the participants in this study and their suggestion for inclusive teaching and assessment.

Altogether, the experiences of both participants were instrumental in achieving this study’s purpose of delineating how dyslexia can impact a student’s academic and social experience in learning a second language, and how second language teachers can implement effective instructional and evaluation strategies to better support their students with dyslexia. Armed with the implications for practice as discussed by the literature and corroborated by this study, second language teachers can truly become compassionate teachers who will help every child in their classroom succeed.

II: Limitations and Implications for Further Research:

The main limitation in this study was the small sample size of just two participants. While these two participants were exemplary subjects who fulfilled all of the
requirements for selection (diagnosed with dyslexia, learned French as a Second Language, and had teaching experience of their own), the generalizability of the findings in this study would be vastly improved with a larger sample size. Furthermore, while the two participants in this study had their own unique experiences with dyslexia, they also came from similar backgrounds, ethnically and from a socio-economic standpoint. Once again, a larger and more diverse sample of participants would provide findings that are more compelling and generalizable.

An important question that arose from conducting this research involves the stigmatization of students labeled with “dyslexia”, or other learning disabilities. Indeed, the affective aspect of dyslexia seemed to have been largely influenced by the fear of stigmatization in both of the participants in this study, and as a future educator, I am keen to find an optimal balance in my classroom where students who have particular needs can be equitably served, while also maintaining their self-esteem and self-regard. Another area of great interest to me is the role of the family in a student’s experience with dyslexia. The two participants in this study, while coming from similar backgrounds, experienced very different levels of parental support at home. While both were able to successfully cope with their dyslexia and achieve success academically and professionally, future studies comparing the life stories of students coming from more diverse home situations would be deeply interesting.
REFERENCES


