



**PedPilot – Self-regulated Learning Guide for Teachers**

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*PedPilots – Supporting Self-Regulated Learning*

**Unit 9.**

**The challenges and barriers to self-regulated learning**

**– WHEN LEARNING DOESN'T COME NATURALLY**



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Our Hungarian-language digital curriculum, designed for independent study, is available on the following website.

<https://pedpilots.jozsefattilaiskola.ro/>





## 9. THE CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS TO SELF-REGULATED LEARNING – WHEN LEARNING DOESN'T COME NATURALLY

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### Introduction

We often speak of self-regulated learning as an ideal state: the learner consciously sets goals, plans their steps, monitors their progress, reflects on their experiences, and then replans. In reality, however, this process is rarely so 'textbook-like'. In everyday life, the picture is much more fluctuating: an enthusiastic start, procrastination, lack of time, wavering self-confidence, unexpected life situations, and days when even the best-laid plans go awry.

The difficulties of self-regulated learning are not the unfortunate by-products of the learning process, but natural parts of development itself. It is through encountering and overcoming challenges that the internal resources – self-efficacy, resilience, perseverance – which sustain the learning process in the long term are developed. As educators, it is particularly important that we recognise these difficulties in ourselves and our students, and treat them not merely as 'problems' but as opportunities for development.

This chapter outlines the typical difficulties that arise during self-regulated learning and helps you, by comparing them with your own experiences, to understand where the process might get stuck, what internal and external obstacles may arise, and how to respond to them consciously. Throughout the text, you will find self-reflective questions that invite quiet, personal reflection – whether over a cup of tea or during a late-night 'I'll just read a bit more' moment.

### Objectives

The aim of this chapter is to:

- provide an overview of the most common difficulties encountered during self-regulated learning;
- help teachers to recognise these obstacles in their own learning processes;





- support personal understanding and the identification of possible solutions through self-reflective questions;
- provide background knowledge to enable teachers to respond more consciously to difficulties that arise when supporting students' self-regulated learning.

### **Time allocated to the lesson unit:**

Recommended for independent study: 2×45 minutes.

The material can also be read in sections; the self-reflection questions at the end of each chapter can be incorporated into the daily routine as 'mini-breaks' of 10–15 minutes.

### **Learning outcomes**

The development of the following teaching competences is prioritised:

- planning pedagogical processes and self-reflection on their implementation (differentiation to promote optimal development, motivation, and extracurricular activities)
- supporting learning (emotional and physical well-being, a calm environment, encouraging independent learning, accepting that mistakes can be made)
- reflective thinking: independent reflection, analysis of learning experiences

### **Teaching materials**

#### **Introduction**

##### **1. Why are difficulties a natural part of self-regulated learning?**

Self-regulated learning is not a linear but a cyclical process. Motivation, attention, time management, emotions and external circumstances are constantly changing. For this reason, it is inevitable that at certain stages the learner – whether a student or a teacher – will feel: 'I can't do this right now'.

The literature often divides self-regulated learning into three main phases: the preparatory phase (goal-setting, planning), the implementation phase (application of strategies, monitoring) and the reflective phase (evaluation, re-planning). Specific difficulties can arise in all three phases. An important message is that the emergence of a difficulty is not in itself a failure, but a signal – information about where in the process it is worth making adjustments.

As teachers, we often place high expectations on ourselves: ‘I should know this by now’, ‘with this much experience, I shouldn’t be putting off my own professional development’. These internal thoughts often reinforce the experience of failure. It is better to view difficulties as natural parts of the learning cycle, which help us fine-tune our goals, strategies and pace.

Reflection questions:

- How do you usually interpret your own learning difficulties: as a failure or as a sign?
- What internal thoughts do you notice within yourself when you hit a snag (e.g. ‘it won’t work anyway’, ‘I’ll do it tomorrow’)?
- Has there ever been a situation where a difficulty ultimately led to a useful change of direction in your learning?

## 2. Typical difficulties in the different stages of the learning cycle


Different obstacles may arise at different stages of self-regulated learning. The overview below helps to organise where and what types of difficulties occur most frequently.

### 2.1. Difficulties in the planning phase

- Vague or overly general goals: “I’d like to understand digital tools better”, “I’d like to further develop my use of differentiation”. Such goals are difficult to translate into concrete steps.
- Too many goals at once: the teacher wishes to develop in several areas, but the time available is limited, which can easily lead to overload and frustration.
- Underestimating available time and resources: planning along the lines of “I’ll catch up during the break” often proves to be an illusion.
- Perfectionism: they won’t get started until there is “enough time”, “all the resources are in place”, or “the perfect idea” has emerged.

These factors often present obstacles right at the start of the learning process. The good news is that most planning difficulties can be alleviated through conscious goal-setting and realistic time management.

Reflection questions:

- What sort of goals do you usually set: general ones or specific ones?
  - Have you ever taken on too many goals at once? What were the consequences?
  - What signs do you look for to realise that your plans are unrealistic for the given period?
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## 2.2. Difficulties in the implementation (monitoring) phase

The most common obstacles during the learning process are as follows:

- Procrastination: thoughts such as ‘I’ll do it when I have more time’ and ‘I’ll just quickly sort something out’ can systematically delay learning activities.
- Divided attention and digital distractions: messages, emails and notifications that constantly break concentration.
- Fatigue, overload: a characteristic of the teaching profession is that studying is often squeezed into the “remaining time” of the day, when energy levels are already low.
- Lack of strategy: the student knows what they need to learn, but lacks a well-developed set of methods for doing so effectively (note-taking, outlining, practice exercises, self-testing, etc.).

During the implementation phase, it helps greatly if the student determines in advance what signs will indicate that they have ‘gone off track’ (e.g. checking their phone every 5 minutes, constantly standing up and sitting down), and consciously refocuses on the task.

Reflection questions:

- When do you usually complete your study tasks during the day? To what extent does this time of day support your concentration?
- What are the most common distractions for you?
- What simple rule could you introduce to minimise interruptions whilst studying?

## 2.3. Difficulties in the reflective phase (evaluation, re-planning)

Obstacles may also arise when concluding and re-planning the learning process:

- Being overly hard on oneself: the focus is on what is missing (“what I haven’t done”), whilst the completed parts are overlooked.
- Underestimating success: “This would be nothing to anyone else”, “What I’ve achieved isn’t a big deal” – as a result, the positive experience is not incorporated into one’s self-image.
- Failure to take the next steps: the learner does not spend time rethinking goals and strategies based on their experiences, so the next cycle begins with the same difficulties.
- Overemphasising failures: a single negative experience (e.g. a failed exam, a difficult-to-understand article) casts the entire learning process in a negative light.



During the reflective phase, it is particularly important that the assessment is balanced: the learner should see what they have achieved, where there is still work to be done, and what they have learnt from difficult situations.

Reflection questions:

- When you look back on a period of learning, what do you notice first: the gaps or the achievements?
- How do you usually ‘wrap up’ learning processes for yourself (e.g. further training, a project, an exam)?
- Do you have any habits that help you reflect on your own development (e.g. brief notes, a list, a conversation with someone)?

### **3. Internal barriers: beliefs/views, emotions, self-assessment**

Self-regulated learning is not just a matter of techniques and strategies. It is strongly influenced by the internal beliefs and emotions with which we view ourselves and learning.

Common internal barriers:

- Fixed mindset: “I’m no good at this”, “I don’t understand statistics”, “digital tools are too complicated for me”. These statements limit learning commitments.
- Low self-efficacy: the learner feels that no matter how much energy they put into learning, the outcome is uncertain or depends on external factors.
- Anxiety, pressure to perform: paradoxically, the ‘prohibition of failure’ increases the likelihood of making mistakes and reduces the scope for experimentation.
- Inner critic: constant, harsh self-criticism that undermines rather than builds motivation.

Working on internal barriers is a longer process, but it is already a big step if the learner notices the kind of phrases they use when talking to themselves and begins to consciously refine them (“I don’t understand yet”, “I can improve with practice”).

Reflection questions:

- Which characteristic ‘internal statement’ do you hear most often in a learning situation?
- Which of these support your learning, and which hinder it?
- If you were to say the same thing to a friend or student that you usually say to yourself, would you do so in the same tone? If not, how would you rephrase it in a more supportive way?

### **4. External barriers: time, roles, environment**



Most teachers do not learn under ‘ideal’ conditions. They must find time for their own professional development amidst lessons, family responsibilities, administrative burdens and other obligations. External barriers to self-regulated learning include:

- Lack of time and time constraints: learning is often pushed to the end of the day, when energy levels are low.
- Role conflicts: teacher, parent, family member, colleague, project partner – each role comes with its own set of expectations.
- Physical environment: cramped spaces, distracting noises, no permanent ‘study corner’ where one can get into the right mindset for work.
- Digital overload: due to constant online presence, learning content can become blurred with other digital stimuli.


Most external obstacles cannot be completely eliminated, but they can be partially managed through conscious decisions: setting aside micro-time blocks, taking on a more realistic workload, and making small adjustments to the learning environment (e.g. turning off notifications, setting a fixed study time slot).

Reflection questions:

- What external circumstances are currently making your learning the most difficult?
- Which of these do you have some – even partial – control over, and which do you not?
- What are two small but realistically achievable changes you could make to make your own learning environment more conducive to learning?

## **5. Changing your attitude towards difficulties – first steps**

Completely eliminating difficulties is not a realistic goal – and perhaps not even desirable. What is far more important is how we view these obstacles and how we respond to them. From the perspective of self-regulated learning, three approaches are particularly important:

- Awareness: I recognise what is happening to me and what kind of difficulty I am facing.
  - Acceptance: I am not ashamed of my difficulties, but treat them as a normal process.
  - Responding in small steps: I do not want to change ‘everything at once’, but rather set out small, concrete steps.
- 



The aim of this chapter is not to provide a detailed intervention programme, but to help you gain a clearer understanding of your own learning difficulties – and in doing so, you have already taken half the first step towards managing them. In the following chapters (e.g. the sections on the stages of self-regulation or on supporting self-regulated learning), you will find specific tools that you can use to build on these insights.

Reflection questions:

- If you had to sum it up in one sentence: what is the most common difficulty you face in your self-regulated learning?
- What small step could you take as early as next week to alleviate this?
- Whose support and encouragement would help you to actually take this step?



## Supporting materials

### Appendix 1 – Personal ‘obstacle map’ – template

Instructions for use:

In the table below, list one specific learning situation at a time! Fill in the internal (thoughts, feelings) and external barriers, then formulate a small, realistic first step that will help alleviate the difficulty in question!

Learning situation / topic	Internal obstacles (thoughts, feelings)	External obstacles (time, environment, roles)	How do I respond now?	Possible first steps

### Appendix 2 – List of positive, supportive internal statements

Instructions for use:

The following statements can help reframe thoughts such as “I can’t do it” or “It won’t work anyway”. Choose the ones that sound authentic to you and rewrite them in your own words!

#### When planning

I can’t see the full picture yet, but I can start small.

I don’t have to sort everything out at once; it’s enough to clarify the next step.

I set realistic goals, taking my time and energy into account.

I have the right to simplify things and take on less.

#### When executing

Right now, I’m focusing solely on this one task.

If my mind wanders, I can gently bring myself back to the task.



You can make progress even in small steps; it doesn't have to be perfect.

Every 5–10 minutes of work brings me closer to my goal.

### When reflecting

I have the right to acknowledge what I've already achieved.

Mistakes are signals, not judgements about me.

I can look at what I've learnt from this situation – not just what didn't work out.

I can be both critical and compassionate towards myself at the same time.

My own sentences:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

### Appendix 3 – Sample timetable for self-regulated learning

Instructions for use:

The weekly planner below helps you to schedule short, pre-determined study blocks. Indicate on which days, during which time slots, and on which specific tasks you would like to work. It is better to plan several short blocks (e.g. 20–40 minutes) rather than infrequent but very long ones.

Days	Time slot (e.g. 7.30– 8.00)	Study task / Topic	Comments (energy, distractions, reward)
Monday			
Tuesday			
Wednesda y			
Thursday			

Friday			
Saturday			
Sunday			

At the end of the week, it's worth taking a moment to reflect:

- Which day did you manage to stick to your planned blocks the best?
- What helped with this?
- What would you change for next week?

**Check-up tasks**

**Collection of self-reflection questions**

Instructions for use:

You can use the questions below for individual self-reflection. Choose a few of them at the end of each learning period and write short answers to them!

**1. Why are difficulties a natural part of self-regulated learning?**

How do you usually interpret your own learning difficulties: as a failure or as a sign?

My answer: \_\_\_\_\_

What internal thoughts do you notice within yourself when you get stuck (e.g. 'it won't work anyway', 'I'll do it tomorrow')?

My answer: \_\_\_\_\_

Has there ever been a situation where a difficulty ultimately led to a useful change of direction in your learning?

My answer: \_\_\_\_\_

**2. Typical difficulties in the different stages of the learning cycle**

What sort of goals do you usually set: general ones or specific ones?

My answer: \_\_\_\_\_

Have you ever taken on too many goals at once? What was the outcome of this?



My answer: \_\_\_\_\_

What signs do you look for to realise that your plans are unrealistic for the given period?

My answer: \_\_\_\_\_

When do you usually complete your study tasks during the day? To what extent does this time of day help you concentrate?

My answer: \_\_\_\_\_

What are the most common distractions for you?

My answer: \_\_\_\_\_

What simple rule could you introduce to minimise interruptions whilst studying?

My answer: \_\_\_\_\_

When you look back on a period of study, what do you notice first: the gaps in your knowledge or the results you've achieved?

My answer: \_\_\_\_\_

How do you usually 'wrap up' learning processes (e.g. further training, a project, an exam)?

My answer: \_\_\_\_\_

Do you have any habits that help you reflect on your own development (e.g. brief notes, a list, a conversation with someone)?

My answer: \_\_\_\_\_

### 3. Internal barriers: beliefs, emotions, self-assessment

Which characteristic 'internal voice' do you hear most often in a learning situation?

My answer: \_\_\_\_\_

Which of these support your learning, and which hinder it?

My answer: \_\_\_\_\_

If you were to say the same thing to a friend or a student that you usually say to yourself, would you say it in exactly the same tone? If not, how would you rephrase it in a more supportive way?

My answer: \_\_\_\_\_



#### 4. External obstacles: time, roles, environment

What external circumstances are currently making your learning the most difficult?

My answer: \_\_\_\_\_

Which of these do you have some – even partial – control over, and which do you not?

My answer: \_\_\_\_\_

What are the two small but realistically achievable changes you could make to make your own learning environment more conducive to learning?

My answer: \_\_\_\_\_

#### 5. Changing your attitude towards difficulties – first steps

If you had to sum it up in one sentence, what would you say is the main difficulty you face in your self-directed learning?

My answer: \_\_\_\_\_

What small step could you take as early as next week to alleviate this?

My answer: \_\_\_\_\_

Whose support and encouragement would help you actually take this step?

My answer: \_\_\_\_\_





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