

# INTEGRATING STUDENTS WITH SPECIFIC LEARNING DIFFERENCES IN THE EFL CLASSROOM

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**Abstract:** Within the EFL context, teachers' awareness of inclusive methods undoubtedly contributes to ensuring the successful integration of students with specific learning differences (SpLD). While several studies have examined special needs students' EFL learning problems, the topic of mainstream language teachers' awareness and implementation of the possible methods that are recommended for use with SpLD learners has not been thoroughly examined. The aim of this study is to start filling this gap by exploring teachers' awareness of the possible approaches to teaching special needs students in mainstream primary schools and the application of special needs techniques and principles in their daily language teaching practice. A small-scale qualitative study was carried out using lesson observations and interviews as instruments for data collection. An inductive approach was utilized for data analysis. The findings show how the participating teachers integrate students with special needs in their regular EFL classes. In all observed lessons the teachers provided a supportive classroom environment, used *multisensory language approaches*, but rarely utilized any *differentiated classroom instruction*. Pedagogical implications include that primary school teachers should be aware of methods and practices that can be successful in integrating students with learning differences in regular EFL classes

**Keywords:** inclusive education, students with specific learning differences, teaching English as a foreign language

## 1 Introduction

Due to the spread of integrative/inclusive education in Hungary (Csányi, 2001, 2007), primary school teachers today often find themselves in a new type of challenging situation in the English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom. It is still a relatively new phenomenon that a student with some kind of special need such as dyslexia, autism, hearing or visual impairment is present in the foreign language (FL) classroom and has to be involved in the language learning activities. The difficulties that these students experience when learning a foreign language have been reported extensively, and include the lack of age appropriate literacy skills, weak verbal memory, or other difficulties (Kontra et al., 2015; Kormos, 2017; Kormos & Csizér, 2009; Kormos & Kontra, 2008; Kormos & Smith, 2012; Schneider & Crombie, 2003). Although EFL teachers in Hungary are not specifically trained for teaching students with a wide range of abilities and for integrating students with special educational needs (SEN) in the EFL lesson, they are expected to do so. This situation raises the question whether and to what extent EFL teachers are aware of the different methods that can help them cope with the task and how this is evidenced in their pedagogical practice.

Including students with different needs in mainstream education can range from the simple physical presence of SEN students in the classroom, to their full inclusion according to their needs and abilities (Csányi, 2001). There are two terms in use – *integration* and *inclusion* – that describe essentially two different types of educational settings on the same continuum. On the one hand, *integration* is about admitting special needs learners into the existing mainstream classroom settings. *Inclusion*, on the other hand, refers to the fullest possible participation in mainstream classrooms; the classroom is improved and redesigned in such a way that it can accommodate the needs of all learners. The Hungarian literature uses both terms, often interchangeably; however, Csányi (2007) points out that there is no real inclusion in Hungarian schools and that the integrative setting characterizes most Hungarian schools. Although the terms *integration* and *inclusion* can be distinguished clearly, in line with Hungarian conventions, these terms will be used interchangeably in the rest of this paper.

In Hungary, Act 79 of 1993 on Public Education, National Assembly of the Republic of Hungary (1993) (Magyar Köztársaság Országgyűlése, 1993) laid the foundations for the inclusion of SEN children in mainstream schools. The National Act of Public Education (2011) and the 32/2012 Ministerial Decree (EMMI, 2012) serve as the coordinating framework for the organization of inclusive education for students with special needs. The 32/2012 Ministerial Decree on the teaching of students with SEN (EMMI, 2012) promotes the realization of SEN students’ “integration and equal access to activities” (EMMI, 2012, Annex 2, Section 1.5). According to the law, mainstream institutions that strive to integrate special needs students are eligible for extra funding, which acts as an important incentive.

Although there has been some research regarding inclusive education and its implementation in Hungarian schools (Csányi, 2001, 2007), studies that focus on integration or inclusion in the FL classroom are hard to find. In order to fill this gap, I have decided to explore the situation by conducting a small-scale qualitative investigation in mainstream primary schools. Observations of primary school English language classes and interviews with teachers were carried out in two primary schools, one in Budapest and one in a small town near the capital. The investigation aimed at exploring the situation at the school level by getting insight into the participating teachers’ awareness of approaches to implementing inclusive education as well as into their pedagogical practices. Although this study focuses on English language teachers, the results may be of interest to teachers of other languages who may face similar challenges in integrating students in their language classes. In the following, first the research background will be outlined, and then the research method will be introduced. Finally, the results of the study will be presented and discussed.

## **2 Background to special needs students**

### **2.1 From SEN students to students with learning differences**

In the literature, the term Special Educational Needs (SEN) is defined as follows: “A child has special educational needs if s/he has learning difficulties that require special educational provision” (European Commission, 2005, p.7). Definitions for students who encounter problems in their learning processes have evolved chronologically from students with *learning disabilities*

to *learning difficulties*, and finally to *learning differences*. While *disabilities* referred to some sort of deficiency on the part of the student, the use of the term *differences* has removed the negative connotation and emphasizes that all learners are unique and have distinct ways of acquiring knowledge (Kálmos, 2011).

In line with this recent development, Kormos and Smith (2012) use the expression specific learning differences (SpLD) for a wide range of students with special needs, such as dyslexia, dyscalculia, autism spectrum disorder (ASD), attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and Asperger's syndrome, which entails difficulties with social interaction. The authors emphasize that the above listed conditions often co-occur in various combinations. Students with dyslexia, for instance, tend to have problems in sustaining attention and are frequently diagnosed with ADHD. Each SpLD student, however, not only has weaknesses but different strengths as well. While there are different kinds of difficulties SpLD students face, and students with different needs respond differently to instructional practices, there are some inclusive approaches which may prove helpful for all of them.

For the purposes of this study the definition of students with specific learning differences (SpLD) will be adopted including both students with specific learning differences in the sense Kormos and Smith (2012) use the term, and students with specific learning difficulties as defined in the Hungarian Act of Public Education (2011) and the 32/2012 Ministerial Decree on the teaching of students with SEN (EMMI, 2012). These Hungarian regulations apply to individuals who are classified as SEN students with psychological developmental disorders such as dyslexia or dyscalculia, and also to those who face difficulties in integration, learning or behaviour, but do not classify as learners with SEN. According to the provisions of the law (EMMI, 2012, Annex 2, Section 1.5), all special needs students whose learning differences are not considered severe are included in mainstream education.

## 2.2 Teaching methods recommended for SpLD learners

Language teachers integrating SpLD students into their EFL classes can make use of methods and materials used by special education teachers in the L1 and can also apply the approaches and techniques specifically developed for teaching foreign languages to SpLD learners. Most of the available sources focus on dyslexic students who, however, often demonstrate additional problems such as dysgraphia, dyspraxia, ADHD, ASD, or even hyperacusis (i.e., a painful hearing disorder when the individual perceives sound of low intensity as uncomfortably loud; cf. Baguley, 2003).

A well-known method successfully applied in remedial programs is Meixner's Method of Dyslexia Prevention and Re-education (1993) known as the *Meixner Method*. It offers a complex phonetic-analytic-synthetic speech therapy procedure for overcoming the problems caused by dyslexia in developing reading skills in the first language. This method is based on, among others, the principles of learning in small steps and providing a supportive atmosphere. The step by step approach allows learners to progress at their own pace and a supportive atmosphere guarantees that students are constantly motivated and their efforts are rewarded instantly.

Another remedial method widely used in compensatory programs in the first language was developed by the Austrian psychologist, Brigitte Sindelar. Sindelar's method (2001) focuses on the tracking and then the improving of those cognitive abilities the dysfunction of which causes the occurrence of a learning disorder. The therapy includes cognitive development exercises in attention, visual/auditory perception, background-shape visual/auditory differentiation, visual/auditory memory, inter-modality, seriality and space orientation. The techniques and principles of the Meixner (1993) and the Sindelar (2001) methods have been found applicable to developing the FL skills of students with various SpLDs (Sarkadi, 2008).

The first and most well-known researchers of foreign language learning with special needs, Sparks and Ganschow (Sparks et al., 1998; Sparks, 2009), claim that SEN students' FL learning difficulties can be overcome provided they are taught with the multisensory structured language (MSL) approach. The core of the MSL approach (Sparks & Miller, 2000), initially developed for the teaching of Spanish but later tried out with other languages, lies in the direct, explicit, and step by step teaching of phonology/orthography, sound-symbol relationships, syntax, morphology and the multisensory practice of structures and vocabulary. The multisensory practice builds on the strengths of SpLD students by using their visual, auditory, kinaesthetic and tactile skills simultaneously to enhance their learning (Sparks et al., 1998, p.242).

Similarly, Schneider and Crombie (2003) also acknowledge the significance of step by step instruction and paced presentation by the teacher. This means that the teaching material is broken down into small units and carefully structured, presented and practiced at the SpLD student's own special needs pace. The authors assert that regular consultations with SpLD students and the teaching of metacognitive skills are also effective in responding to the needs of SEN students in the mainstream EFL classroom. Teachers foster student learning by explaining directly why certain structures or expressions are used the way they are. Thus, metacognitive strategies help all students become more conscious learners and regular consultations provide more opportunities for practice and revision.

In a more recent publication, Kormos and Smith (2012) summarize the fundamental principles of teaching languages to SEN students and also claim that "[...]the main differences between teaching languages to learners with an SpLD and students with no learning difficulties lies in the importance of explicit teaching of linguistic structures, slower pace of progress and frequent revision" (p.129). They specifically promote the use of visual aids, such as flashcards (see also Schneider & Crombie, 2003), which may be particularly helpful for teaching vocabulary (p.134). Technological devices, the Interactive Whiteboard as well as Information & Communications Technology (ICT) offer effective ways to teach vocabulary and grammar items in a multisensory way. The authors also claim that personal space may be vital for some SEN students; students with ADHD or Asperger's syndrome may need a designated place they can flee to in case the classroom becomes too overwhelming for them.

In addition to the application of specific teaching methods and techniques, the use of differentiation is essential in integrating SpLD learners. Differentiating instruction means accommodating students' individual needs in class (Tomlinson & Allan, 2000). The three main areas where teachers can differentiate are the following: *content*, that is, what students learn; *process*, the activities through which they learn; and *products*, namely, what they produce and how students are assessed according to their needs (Tomlinson & Allan, 2000). For example, teachers

may differentiate in *content* by presenting ideas through both auditory and visual means. One example that neatly illustrates the essence of differentiating in *processes* is that teachers can use worksheets on the same topic, but at different levels. Differentiating in *products* offers students various options to create different pieces of work, for example, from writing a letter to developing a mural with labels.

Moreover, Tomlinson also claims that the learning *environment* is an additional field where teachers can differentiate (2003, p.37). Thus, effective methods of differentiation may include identifying classroom management procedures such as the pacing and grouping of the participants (individual, pair or group work). When the teacher plans differentiation of time in class, pacing can be used to meet students' individual needs; students who spend more time on a task do not hold back those who finish early. Individual, small group, and whole class arrangements also allow students to interact with each other in different roles. Teachers also support learning by creating a positive environment (Tomlinson, 2003).

Pfiffner et al. (2006) address the basic principles of teaching children with ADHD; however, most of these principles are more widely applicable. Giving short and clear instructions, addressing problems promptly, offering rewards for appropriate behavior, proposing incentives to keep learners on task, giving immediate feedback on negative behavior, or providing more frequent intervals between activities are basic principles that may benefit not only students with ADHD, but all other SpLD learners.

Ultimately, teaching English to SpLD learners does not require a whole new method or approach as current EFL methodology itself offers several well-established ways for teaching English to students with learning differences. An insightful combination of the different methods and techniques may lead to higher levels of FL attainment on the part of students with SpLD. In the next section I will focus specifically on what information we can obtain from research in Hungary about teachers facilitating the FL learning of SpLD students.

### **2.3 Teaching EFL to SEN students in Hungary**

In Hungary, research conducted by Kontráné Hegybíró & Kormos (2007; see also Kormos & Csizér, 2009) underlines the importance of being familiar with FL teaching methods to accommodate SpLD students in an integrative FL classroom. In their representative survey of 324 primary school language teachers, the authors found that most FL teachers strongly felt the need for more information about dyslexic language learners. The participating teachers did not have sufficient background knowledge about dyslexia and most of them had not received training in using special education methods during their university studies.

In an interview study by the same authors (Kontráné Hegybíró & Kormos 2008; Kormos & Kontra, 2008) teachers with experience in designing courses for SpLD learners recommend a variety of the already mentioned methods and techniques that can be applied in integrative settings: explicit teaching and frequent revision of vocabulary and grammar items, multisensory techniques, step by step instruction, and paced presentation of the material are highlighted in the study. According to the interviewed teachers, the use of these techniques can be enhanced via collaboration with school-based special needs experts. Furthermore, the participating teachers

recommend the introduction of a weekly remedial class in which students with SpLD revise and practice the material in small groups at their own pace. Finally, teacher motivational strategies are stressed. Teachers' positive attitude towards students with SpLD affects the motivational conditions in the classroom and inevitably shapes teaching methods.

Sarkadi (2008) in her exploratory study of a successful dyslexic language learner identifies vocabulary learning problems as one of the most problematic areas. In her case study she provides insight into the successful application of multisensory structured language approaches, explicit phonemic awareness instruction and learning strategy training in a one-to-one tutoring context. Sarkadi (2009) claims that these teaching methods could easily be integrated into mainstream FL instruction.

The book *Diszlexiával angolul. Gyakorlati útmutató nyelvtanároknak* [English in dyslexia: A practical guide for language teachers] (Kontráné Hegybíró et al., 2012) lists five basic principles which should be employed when teaching English to SpLD students: taking a holistic approach, relying on visual representation, providing multisensory practice, making step by step progress, and using differentiated classroom instruction. The activities in the "Materials File" section of the book demonstrate the implementation of these principles in practice.

Tánczos et al. (2011) also advocate multisensory teaching and promote the use of kinaesthetic/tactile movement in the form of project work and the use of objects for vocabulary building. The essence of project work lies in the fact that it provides inspiration for vocabulary learning. The use of real objects such as toys or wooden objects in the classroom allows students to utilize additional sensory information. These objects may be used for memorizing vocabulary or even grammar. Mime and gestures can further reinforce the learning of these vocabulary and grammar items. The guiding principle is that topics and syntax should be linked to a student's existing knowledge and the order of learning progresses from simple to complex, which supplements the kinaesthetic/ tactile perspective.

The above review demonstrates the availability of both theoretical information and some practical advice for teaching FLs to SpLD students in integrated classrooms. Whether teachers utilize the available information is a question that remains to be answered. In the Hungarian context, to my knowledge, only a few studies (Kontráné Hegybíró & Kormos, 2007; Kormos & Kontra, 2008) have yet explored primary school EFL teachers' awareness of the different methods and practices for integrating students with learning differences in Hungary and only a few studies yield insight into what happens in mainstream classrooms. To fill this gap, a small-scale investigation was carried out focusing on how the participating Hungarian primary school EFL teachers cope with the task of integrating SEN students in the EFL classroom. The research question for this study has been formulated as follows: How do participating Hungarian primary school EFL teachers cope with the task of integrating SEN students in the EFL classroom?

### 3 Research methods

The research question lent itself to using a qualitative approach. The reason for conducting a qualitative investigation is not to produce generalizable results (Creswell, 1998), but to gain

knowledge and understanding from doing the research or from reading the study, which should be transferable to similar situations in similar contexts (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). Within the qualitative paradigm, the selected method of data collection was lesson observations with follow-up interviews. Consequently, two semi-structured data collection instruments, an observation sheet and an interview guide, were constructed and used with a convenience sample of three primary school teachers.

### 3.1 Participants

The investigation was intended as a pilot study for a larger project and due to its small scale and short time frame it pursued convenience sampling (Creswell, 2009). Two schools were contacted: one in Budapest, the capital of Hungary, and another in a small town 30 kilometres northeast of Budapest. These schools were chosen because of the different types of SpLD students enrolled in them based on information from acquaintances from work. The metropolitan primary school is situated in a socio-economically advantageous part of Budapest. At the time of data collection, 625 pupils aged 6 to 14 years attended the institution. The school premises provide a modern working environment for teaching and learning. Teachers have access to computers or laptops together with a projector in the classrooms. The other primary school is situated in the green suburban part of a small town. The staff of 49 teachers are responsible for 650 students. The classrooms are in average condition, equipped with blackboards, but the classroom where the observation took place also had an Interactive Whiteboard (IWB) installed.

Altogether three groups of 6th grade students were observed in the two schools. The three groups were relatively small. They were of mixed abilities with 20-30% of the students having learning differences. Group 1 in Budapest consisted of 11 students including three with SpLD. Two of them had behavioural problems, and the third had been diagnosed with a mild form of attention deficit disorder (ADD). In the field of foreign language learning, they were experiencing difficulties especially with vocabulary learning.

Group 2 in Budapest also consisted of 11 students. There were two students with SpLD. One of them had a behavioural problem and the other was diagnosed with ADHD and hyperacusis. In the field of foreign language learning, they both experienced difficulties not only in learning vocabulary, but also in reading comprehension as per information from the head teacher. Group 3 in the small-town school consisted of 12 students and included three with SpLD. One of them was mildly autistic. The other two students both had difficulties in mathematics and Hungarian grammar. The difficulties they experienced in the first language transferred into their foreign language learning. According to the language teacher, these students experienced difficulties especially with applying grammatical rules in practice.

The three EFL teachers, one female and two males, were aged between 33 and 52. They were selected for maximum variety: one of them had 33 years of teaching experience, another had 18 years and the last one only five years. In terms of their degrees, two of them possessed a Masters, while one of them had a Bachelor's degree with teaching qualifications. In order to maintain their anonymity, from this point onwards the three teachers will each be referred to with a pseudonym: Viktor (53), Robert (40), and Andrea (33), respectively.

### 3.2 Instruments

The observation schedule was devised as part of the research. In the preliminary phase, two EFL groups were observed using a published observation checklist (McDonough & McDonough, 1997) consisting of basic categories used by the teacher such as teaching material and technical equipment, pace, and grouping format of the participants (individual, pair or group work). These were complemented by rubrics for the teacher's motivational strategies, anxiety reducing strategies, applied multisensory techniques, methods of differentiation, and any further practice that seemed relevant from the point of view of integrating SpLD students. Using the experience gained during the two preliminary observations the design of the instrument was refined and finalized.

The post observation interviews had the aim of exploring the teachers' awareness of their methods and their practices for integrating students with learning differences. The interview guide was reviewed by one of the tutors of the author's PhD program, and piloted with the help of a PhD student of the same program. The interview guide consisted of 12 questions and focussed on two main areas: (1) the students' difficulties and the challenges entailed in dealing with integrated learning groups, and (2) specific teaching methods and materials. The content interview questions were preceded by some relevant background questions. Both the observation schedule and the semi-structured interview guide were constructed in Hungarian, but in the results and discussion section the interview data are cited in the author's translation. The main data sources were supplemented with field notes on the two schools, the observed student groups and electronic messages from the participating teachers for triangulation in order to cross-check data from different sources and enhance the trustworthiness of the findings.

### 3.3 Data collection

Great care was taken to resolve ethical issues as regards data collection. The headmasters of the participating schools were contacted to gain permission to carry out the research project on-site. After contacting the headmasters, the dates for the observations and interviews were arranged with the teachers. Altogether seven observations followed each other in November and December 2016. One mathematics lesson and a Hungarian grammar lesson were observed to gain some general information about what type of instruction students received and what methods worked with the SpLD students outside the context of the EFL classroom. Later, altogether five English lessons were observed: two groups on two occasions and one group on only one occasion.

The nonparticipant observations were combined with follow-up interviews of an average length of 30 minutes conducted in Hungarian and recorded with the permission of the participants. The interview transcripts together with the observation data and the field notes yielded a rich set of data of almost 10,000 words.

### 3.4 Data analysis



The aim of the analysis was to explore teacher awareness of views on integration and integrative practices emerging from the interviews and reflect on them in light of the data derived from the observations. In analyzing data from both sources, an inductive approach was taken based on Maykut and Morehouse (1994). The cyclical process of analysis ensured continuous revision of emerging topics and categories until the grouping of the most salient themes was reached. Four larger topics were identified each describing a feature of how three Hungarian EFL teachers cope with the task of integrating SEN students in the EFL classroom, which will be discussed in the following section.

## 4 Results and discussion

In the following, the results of the analysis will be presented according to the most salient themes that emerged from the data: (1) Integration; (2) Differentiation; (3) Applied multisensory structured language approaches; and (4) Provision of a supportive atmosphere. Data extracts are cited in the author's translation. Parenthetical codes identify the participant by their pseudonym initials, refer to the data source as I for interview or O for observation, and indicate the location of the segment in the interview transcript.

### 4.1 Integration

The interview data revealed that the FL teachers of the project had not received any professional training in teaching students with SpLD. Although noticeably more students are being diagnosed with some learning differences in the participating schools than before (TAI,160–162), each of the three teachers reported that they lacked confidence in teaching pupils with learning differences. This is in line with previous teacher reports that also noted feelings of inadequacy when teaching SEN students (Kontráné Hegybíró & Kormos, 2007).

It seems that the interviewed language teachers do not feel trained to cope with the difficulties of students with learning differences: “Not at all” (TAI,104–105) was Andrea's answer, when asked directly to what extent she felt prepared. Nevertheless, Andrea also stated that experience and cooperation with developmental teachers helped. She argued that “[...] It would be highly important to make professional help accessible for everybody” (TAI,110–111). Her views and reported practice about integrating students with differences were clearly shaped by the cooperation that she had maintained with her developmental teacher colleagues, which echoes the findings of previous studies (Kontráné Hegybíró & Kormos, 2007; Kormos & Kontra, 2008).

The participating teachers claimed that they had received information about each of their SpLD students from the parents, head teacher or the headmaster. These teachers were aware of the unseen hurdles their SpLD students were facing. Therefore, there was no need for them to have the ability to recognize or identify students with learning differences or any other special needs symptoms. Nevertheless, the participating teachers felt that it was their duty to integrate these children in the EFL classroom.

The task of including learners with SpLD in any integrated classroom is extremely

challenging. When the Hungarian grammar lesson was observed to see what type of instruction students received and what methods worked for the SpLD students in the mainstream integrated first language environment, it was found that the techniques and principles of the Meixner (1993) and Sindelar (2001) methods, for instance, the principles of learning in small steps, were not applied during the lesson. The teacher dictated sentences to the students for almost the full length of the lesson. The observation data revealed that none of the well-known remedial techniques of Meixner or Sindelar designed to remedy first language difficulties were employed to include students with SpLD in the integrated first language classroom.

In order to integrate students with SpLD in the EFL classroom, the language teachers of this project tried to find suitable activities for the students in the lessons. Viktor's goal to include these students in his regular EFL classes was realized by familiarizing learners with the target language through *fact files*; using country specific information on food and travel. He encouraged one of his ADHD students to initially read only the first section of the reading passage because in English texts the first paragraph usually indicates what the rest of the text will be about. He created opportunities for everyone to practice the vocabulary items in context by asking students to speak about their own travel experiences. Although the use of technological devices (Kormos & Smith, 2012) also has great potential to support the inclusion of SEN students and to facilitate the learning of vocabulary and grammar items, and Viktor had an IWB at his disposal, he did not employ ICT tools during the classes observed.

Robert and Andrea, in contrast, did use ICT in the classroom as a means of integrating students with SpLD. Robert advocated the use of ICT for making classroom instruction more effective by varying activities and making new language items more accessible, and not only for struggling students: "I try to use digital equipment in due measure and season English lessons" (TRI,154–155). Andrea used the IWB and reinforced the use of outside classroom activities through online *quizlet* cards that let students see and listen to new language items simultaneously: "They prepare them at home[...]there are such flash card packages that they produce on their own, they upload them online, I will correct them and upload the corrected version" (TAI,54–56). In short, the use of the IWB provided an opportunity even for the reserved students with SpLD to be included in the lesson.

My analysis of both the reports of the participating teachers and the observation data showed that integrating students with SpLD in the EFL classroom is a demanding task. While these teachers have never participated in any professional training, their methods seem to follow the advice given in Kormos & Kontra's (2008) study. In their view, teachers who accept students with learning differences and gain an insight into their difficulties, will be able to make an informed decision on the use of the suitable teaching methods with the right tasks and activities for students with SpLD.

#### **4.2 Differentiated classroom instruction**

All three participating teachers of this project seemed to agree on the importance of using differentiated classroom instruction to integrate students with SpLD in the EFL classroom. The great challenge for the teachers of mainstream EFL classrooms is to take into consideration the individual needs of the different students. Viktor regarded it as self-evident that "the teacher sees

the differences between learners and what methods should be applied to attract students' attention to studying" (TVI, 10–11). When Viktor practises vocabulary learning, writing or reading tasks with his students, he claims to observe the principles of differentiation by granting special needs students enough time to progress at their own pace:

It is not at all certain that a student who is struggling with learning differences will be able to go as far as a good student. The student should measure himself against himself and should work at his own level and reach as high as possible. Later on, he may be able to reach a higher level, but he needs more time. A student like him needs more time to attain a higher level. (TVI, 14–18)

Robert also explained his way of understanding differentiation and reported how he had taken the student's individual needs into consideration: "I have a student who needs more time to finish the tasks. A paced learner. Naturally, I provide more time for him, at the same time I try to motivate the student to catch up" (TRI, 34–36). Robert claims to use differentiation by giving the student more time to meet his student's individual needs, which is in line with what Tomlinson (2003) recommends: pacing is one of the possible methods of implementing classroom differentiation. Allowing more time for students with SpLD is an effective way to ensure progress in their learning process.

Andrea explained her way of differentiation to include special needs students in class as follows:

[...] fundamentally I think we need to do the same as with the other children, they need to take part in class and do their homework, work the same way, but we need to pay attention to differentiating in all areas and help them. (TAI, 237–239)

Her special needs students may not receive an easier exercise on the same topic during the lesson, yet they receive help when they experience difficulties with a task and need focused attention right away. Andrea is confident about the use of differentiated classroom instruction, which is one of the five principles Kontráné Hegybíró et al. (2012) suggest for learners with differences.

Differentiation can take place with regards to *content*, *process*, *product* (Tomlinson & Allan, 2000) and *environment* (Tomlinson, 2003). The three teachers' actual practice in terms of developing skills and competencies was mainly characterized by vocabulary teaching, reading aloud, listening comprehension and translation to Hungarian. However, hardly any evidence of differentiated classroom teaching was seen in the observed classes in terms of *content*. Teachers did not provide students with distinct lists of vocabulary to cater for individual needs. Only Andrea differentiated in content, process, and product to some extent with the help of outside classroom activities through the use of *quizlet* cards. This activity allowed students to prepare for class at their own level and receive individual attention. Classroom differentiation in *process* was also limited. None of the teachers gave students different tasks on the same topic in class, although Andrea assigned a different workload to different learners according to their own abilities: Some student tasks only involved preparing word cards, while others involved asking students to produce sentences with a set of new words.

As for *learning environment*, that is, classroom organization of the classes observed, the most prevailing grouping procedure was the whole class discussion and individual work, while

neglecting pair or group work. Although Andrea planned some pair work activity for the lesson, it did not happen during her class due to a shortage of time. She was sorry that pair work or group work could not be observed thoroughly:

I do not always group the same way, I vary them. Weaker students receive such tasks that they are good at. Thus, other students can see that there may be areas where they are weaker, but there are fields in which they perform well, and these tasks are delegated to them; these students can become team leaders. (TAI,294–297)

Robert used some differentiated classroom instruction in terms of classroom organization. It should be noted that he differentiated to a certain extent in his teaching: students were instructed to form pairs with the person sitting next to them, which gave students the opportunity to work with the foreign language at their own level. Pair work enabled these students to practice the use of future tense in a safe place, which accommodated some students' individual needs.

All three teachers acknowledged the value of *differentiated classroom instruction* in the EFL classroom to integrate special needs students in integrated classrooms. Yet, they differed in the extent to which they thought they were using the method in class and in the extent to which they did indeed use differentiated classroom instruction. Instances of differentiation were seldom observed during the lessons, and were only noted when teachers provided additional time for special needs learners to finish a task – even with those teachers who underlined the importance of differentiated classroom instruction.

### 4.3 Applied multisensory structured language approaches

Interview data unveiled information that all three teachers were aware of some possible methods to be used in the integrated EFL classroom apart from differentiated classroom instruction, such as the use of drawing. Miming and acting out were also listed by the participating teachers to integrate special needs students in EFL classes. In his interview, Robert described the different techniques he was using in his pedagogical practice: “We draw a lot, we do a lot of acting; we perform things. I do not say the meaning of words instead we act them out. We use a lot of mime and I gesture a lot” (TRI,152–154). Robert’s reported practice is in line with the recommendations on the use of MSL approaches and kinaesthetic/ tactile movement for vocabulary building by Tánčzos et al. (2011).

Multisensory teaching approaches are comprised of the direct, explicit, and step by step teaching of grammatical structures and vocabulary through the simultaneous use of visual, auditory, kinaesthetic and tactile skills (Nijakowska, 2008,2010; Schneider & Crombie, 2003; Sparks et al. 1998). Kormos and Smith (2012) add that linguistic items are highly structured and frequent revision sessions are most effective. In order to include students with SpLD in her English classes, Andrea employs MSL techniques and uses an IWB to facilitate vocabulary learning during the class. The special needs learner “[...] sees the word, hears it and can associate a picture with each expression, which may help in the recall” (TAI,51–52). This technique can make learning language items more effective, as vocabulary learning seems to represent a major challenge in FL learning not only for students with dyslexia (cf. Sarkadi, 2008; Schneider & Crombie, 2003), but also for many other learners with SpLD; combining MSL methods and ICT helps teachers work more efficiently in an integrated context.

Viktor also used MSL approaches to cope with the integration of students with SpLD in mainstream English lessons: “I turn to the class intentionally so as to make sure that they do not only hear but see the way I say the words. It is conscious” (TVI,37–38). Thus, he is using different techniques such as demonstrating or drawing to facilitate special needs students’ learning process in class. The layout of the blackboard, including drawings, is visible on the pages of students’ exercise books. Students appreciate the use of visual aids: “[...] they enjoy when I draw” (TVI,58). Viktor explicitly noted that these techniques were well-received not only by students with SpLD, but by the rest of the learners as well.

Observation data of actual teaching practices revealed that teachers made use of multisensory language approaches. Viktor drew extensively on the blackboard and elicited answers from the whole class. During one class, Viktor was drawing on the board to explain the difference between words *cap* and *hat*, when one of his students with SpLD, diagnosed with ADHD, started to fidget and make some noise. In order to grab his attention again and include him in the work of the group, Viktor elegantly lifted his spectacle-case, pretended that it was a remote controller and turned down the student’s volume. As a result, the student paid attention to the teacher again.

Andrea also drew a great deal and she held her arms together to mime the wings of a bird with kinaesthetic movements. Furthermore, she illustrated the meaning of new expressions such as the word *leaf* by pointing to a tree decoration on the wall of the classroom. As for Robert, when he was explaining how students can construct an offer with the help of *will*, he wrote the sentence *I’ll get it* on the blackboard. To make the explanation more efficient, he underlined it in red and finally, bolded it with white chalk.

Thus, the presence of multisensory structured language approaches was visible in the observed foreign language classes, which shows evidence of potential latent awareness of MSL approaches. Both auditory and kinaesthetic channels were employed to help students better understand words and concepts, for example looking at the IWB and listening to pronunciation during Andrea’s class.

Their views differed regarding the issue of explicit or implicit classroom instruction. Andrea and Viktor insisted that learners with differences should be taught syntax and grammar directly and explicitly, which is in line with the literature (Sparks & Miller, 2000), whereas Robert maintained that his learners should deduce the rules on their own: “I have a student who is very slow to reach a conclusion. I wait for him and try to pay attention to the others” (TRI,34–35). Robert’s words clearly demonstrate that he would expect students to work out the rules of grammar on their own. His approach is in line with the principles of communicative language teaching, which emphasizes the importance of implicit instruction of grammar items, but not with the methodologies suggested for SEN students. Kormos and Smith (2012), for example, recommend teaching grammatical items directly in line with the MSL approach.

All three teachers drew extensively on the blackboard. Moreover, the use of the IWB was observed in Andrea’s teaching practice which allowed students to see and listen to new vocabulary items simultaneously, and Robert favoured the use of role play activities. While teachers were utilizing auditory, as well as kinaesthetic, channels to help students better understand vocabulary

items, during the interviews none of the teachers listed these techniques consciously as multisensory structured language approaches to be used for students with learning differences. Neither their views about methods, nor their reported practice were supported by a firm methodological background.

#### 4.4 Providing a supportive atmosphere

The problems that students with special needs face in the integrated EFL classroom are well documented (Kormos, 2017; Kormos & Csizér, 2009; Kormos & Kontra, 2008; Kormos & Smith, 2012; Schneider & Crombie, 2003). It has been found, however, that providing a supportive classroom environment benefits students with SpLD (Kormos & Smith, 2012, p.79), encourages them to more actively participate in the activities during the foreign language lesson, and ensures that they are continually motivated (Meixner, 1993). Teacher motivational strategies can contribute to a better integration of students with SpLD in the EFL classroom.

All three teachers were observed to provide a supportive atmosphere during the lessons in line with the literature (Tomlinson, 2003), and they confirmed the importance of both a non-intimidating atmosphere and teacher motivational strategies in their reports (Kormos & Kontra, 2008). Most importantly, Viktor's teaching practice was characterized by tolerance, patience and understanding towards students with individual needs. Viktor managed to introduce learners to the target language culture by linking the topic of transport in Great Britain to students' own travel and learning experiences. He rewarded students with praise for their contributions. The strategies Viktor used were in line with the recommendations made about teacher motivational strategies by Kormos & Kontra, (2008). As the authors point out, teachers' positive attitude towards students with SpLD influences the motivational conditions in the classroom and thus shapes teaching methods. Viktor was committed to students and was motivated to teach his students English.

Above all, Viktor's concept about the importance of a non-intimidating learning environment in EFL teaching was reflected in his attempt to comfort a student who had not done his homework and grew increasingly distressed upon realizing it in class. Viktor handled the situation effectively and highlighted that "[...] it is vitally important to see the human in the learner. He is fallible as well, isn't he?" (TVI,75–76). In addition, he explained that this learner had not forgotten the homework because he was busy with other things, but due to the heavy workload in other subjects: reprimanding the learner would not have helped. However, the student will remember to do the tasks for the following class.

Similar to Viktor, Andrea also created a supportive classroom atmosphere in line with Meixner's recommendation (1993), where a supportive atmosphere does not merely refer to a non-intimidating environment, but to a classroom where students are constantly motivated and their efforts are instantly rewarded. Andrea's teaching practice particularly emphasized that it was fine to make a mistake and that this was part of the process of language learning. She did her best to involve all her students, even an autistic learner, with the help of equipment by capturing and sustaining student attention. She was observed to use an Interactive Whiteboard (IWB), which conformed to her stated belief regarding her teacher motivational strategies:

[...] It is the area where students can be motivated, as it was possible for you to observe this, the IWB helps

a great deal...also in the vocabulary learning of weaker students the quizlet page can help with digital word cards. The student sees the word, hears it and can associate a picture with each expression, which may help in the recall. (TAI,49–52)

Andrea confirmed that technological devices, the Interactive Whiteboard and ICT offer effective ways to teach vocabulary and grammar items in a multisensory way in line with Kormos & Smith (2012).

Robert developed a good relationship with the learners as well. Not only did the idea of a positive atmosphere appear in Robert's class, but it was worded explicitly in the interviews:

I do my best to make them feel at home. I try to be playful. I make efforts to increase their level of comfort, and I pay special attention not to notice the countless mistakes they make (since numerous mistakes are made in the course of language learning) when this is not about that. (TR1,135–138)

Robert also uses teacher motivational strategies. Robert even had his own reward system of *likes* and *dislikes* in place based on the like and dislike buttons/ thumbs up and thumbs down icons teenagers use to express their preferences on social media. On the one hand, students who completed their tasks without syntactical and grammatical mistakes received stamped likes on their assignments. On the other hand, those students who had not completed their homework assignments, earned dislikes in their exercise books. Robert offered rewards to keep learners on task – in line with one of the basic principles of teaching children with ADHD recommended by Piffneret al. (2006).

The analysis of the data led to the conclusion that the participating teachers' behaviour was strongly linked with their positive attitudes towards students with learning differences. The supportive attitude towards these students and the methods the teachers use to motivate students resulted in their positive learning attitude and motivated learning behaviour. Both motivating teacher behaviour and creating a supportive classroom atmosphere play a key role in integrating students with SpLD in the EFL classroom in line with Kormos and Kontra(2008), who also recognized the value of teacher motivational strategies and of a non-intimidating atmosphere.

## 5 Conclusion

This study explored three EFL teachers' awareness of the different methods and practices for integrating students with learning differences and intended to provide a deeper understanding of how the participating EFL teachers cope with integrating students with SpLD in a regular EFL classroom. The interview and observational data indicated that the task of integrating students with SpLD presents a great challenge for the EFL teachers. The three participating teachers lacked formal training in teaching students with specific learning differences in the integrated classroom. Nonetheless, all three teachers managed to cope with including students with special needs in their regular EFL classes to a certain extent. As a matter of fact, several of their teaching methods and classroom techniques were professionally employed. All three of them managed to provide a supportive classroom environment to create optimal conditions and motivate SEN students in the EFL classroom, and although they used *multisensory language approaches*, they rarely utilized any *differentiated classroom instruction*.

The three teachers claimed to use differentiated teaching methods in class and they were aware that *differentiation* is an essential element of classroom instruction to integrate SEN students in the EFL classroom, but the actual practice revealed that the use of differentiated classroom instruction was limited during the lessons, mostly confined to providing extra time to those who were behind due to their SpLDs. Although teachers applied *multisensory structured language approaches* consciously or unconsciously in their practices, the participant teachers were not fully aware of these effective approaches as these were barely expressed in their views on methods or in reported practices. Thus, participating teachers were aware of some pedagogical practices to be used to integrate students with SpLD, but increasing awareness on the methodological background of *multisensory structured language approaches* might further improve the pedagogical practices of EFL teachers.

With regard to concrete accommodations and support provided for students in need, we can conclude that the participating teachers help special needs students' progress. These teachers allow learners with SpLD more time to complete their tasks during the lessons, use multisensory language approaches combined with ICT, and apply several motivating techniques to take the individual needs into consideration. The three teachers' attitudes have a considerable impact on the motivational conditions in the classroom and shape teaching methods, which echoes the findings published by Kormos et al.(2009), as does the patience and understanding that characterizes the teachers' pedagogical practices.

While a qualitative study never aims for generalizable results (Creswell, 2009), it does explore whether the insight that the research paper gives can be transferable to similar situations. Any teacher may potentially encounter SEN students similar to those which the research participants have in their classrooms. Consequently, the insights of this study are transferrable to teaching situations within which teachers teach SpLD students in similar EFL contexts. With appropriate support and accommodations, these students can be better integrated in mainstream EFL classrooms.

The study has certain limitations. A more prolonged observation of the teachers' pedagogical practices would have enhanced the trustworthiness of the research findings. Although this is a small-scale study, it has several useful implications for language pedagogy. The findings of the study are expected to enrich our understanding of teachers' awareness of methods and practices to integrate students with learning differences in regular EFL classes. It will also contribute to the literature since there are few studies providing insight into teacher awareness of methods and integrative teaching practices and how teachers cope during the EFL lessons. Furthermore, the results of the study raise teachers' awareness about teacher views underpinning their teaching practice regarding SEN students. The study aimed to give a deeper insight into teacher awareness of methods and integrative teaching practices and how teachers cope with SEN students during the EFL lessons. Further research would be needed to obtain a more detailed picture of how teachers deal with these students to establish some tendencies. The findings may also have important implications for EFL teacher education in general. The results indicate that teachers did not feel that they had been trained to meet the needs of the integrative classroom environment. Thus, effective training methodology courses or other training opportunities should be designed for practising teachers, like those available for teacher trainees, where materials can be shared and the application of *differentiated classroom instruction* and the benefits of *multisensory structured language approaches* can be discussed.



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