

Supporting learners with special educational needs and disabilities in the foreign languages classroom

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Abstract

Due to misconceptions about the challenges of language learning, foreign languages classrooms have not always been accessible spaces for all learners. This article seeks to address the needs of students with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) in the foreign languages classroom and challenge the notion that this group of students cannot or should not learn languages. Current research tends to focus on specific learning difficulties in language learning, but little research considers the language learning experiences of children with SEND more broadly. Accordingly, this article delineates the advantages of language learning for learners with SEND, drawing on emerging research that shows that second language acquisition is not only possible but positive for many learners with additional needs. It then considers some of the specific challenges that SEND learners may face in the foreign languages classroom before outlining key strategies to facilitate inclusion among this diverse group of learners.

KEYWORDS

inclusion, language teaching, special educational needs and disabilities

Key points

- Learners with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) should not routinely be removed from the foreign languages classroom, but instead should be provided with opportunities to thrive within it. This article discusses the unique importance of foreign language learning for learners with SEND.
- Research evidence suggests that learning new languages is, on the whole, possible—and perhaps hugely beneficial—for children with developmental differences and learning difficulties, but will depend on the circumstances and profile of the individual child.
- The article explores some specific challenges that students with different additional needs might encounter in their foreign languages education, based on the four areas of need outlined in the SEND Code of Practice: communication and interaction; cognition and learning; social, emotional and mental health difficulties; and sensory or physical needs.
- To conclude, the article presents a range of key strategies that foreign languages teachers might implement in the classroom to support learners with different special educational needs and disabilities.

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INTRODUCTION

Learning a foreign language is commonly considered to be a challenging task, and one of the more difficult subjects on the national curriculum in England (Vidal Rodeiro, 2017). Given this reputation, an unsurprising assumption has emerged that it would be unfair to expect children with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) to participate in language learning at school. Although well-meaning, this widespread perception may deny children the opportunity to learn a language and benefit from the myriad advantages that accompany the process (Kontra, 2019; Wight, 2015). While some students with SEND may be withdrawn altogether from the foreign languages classroom, others are likely to be 'physically present but pedagogically sidelined' (European Commission, 2005, p. 5).

In England, 15.5% of students have been identified as having a special educational need and/or disability (Department for Education, 2020), although the figure of children who experience difficulties in learning is likely to be much higher. The SEND Code of Practice (2015) highlights four areas of need to categorise some of the challenges that children may experience: communication and interaction; cognition and learning; social, emotional and mental health difficulties; and sensory or physical needs. It is important to note, however, that while certain learning needs and disabilities may come into one category only, many of the challenges that students with SEND face may extend across different categories. The research on language learning within these categories varies extensively, with a growing body of evidence around language learners with specific learning difficulties like dyslexia (e.g. Grosjean, 2019; Kormos & Csizér, 2010; Nijakowska, 2010), but much less literature on language learning for those with social, emotional and mental health difficulties or with physical and sensory needs.

This article seeks to challenge the notion that children with SEND cannot or should not learn languages. Building on Stevens and Marsh (2005), it argues that there is an ethical imperative to ensure that language learning is accessible to all. After identifying the advantages of language learning specific to children with SEND and some of the barriers they may face, our attention will turn to the ways in which language educators can help to support learners with SEND to make the most out of their language education. Drawing on Florian and Spratt's inclusive pedagogy approach (2013), this article will seek to address both general principles for increasing the participation of students with SEND in the foreign languages classroom and strategies that may support individuals diagnosed with each of the four categories outlined in the SEND Code of Practice, supported by research across international contexts. While the majority of literature focuses on supporting SEND pupils within mainstream settings, where language learning may be more likely to take place, the principles considered here should also be relevant to educators and students in specialist settings. Similarly, although the article is framed by the educational context in England, many of the strategies identified to support children with additional needs in the foreign languages classroom will be applicable across linguistic landscapes.

THE IMPORTANCE OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING FOR ALL LEARNERS

There are several reasons why it is important for children with SEND to access language learning, some of which relate to benefits that can be conferred to all learners, and some of which relate to children with specific learning needs or difficulties. First and foremost, every child has a right to access a balanced curriculum, which includes foreign language learning (Essex & MacAskill, 2020). A key reason for including children with SEND in language lessons is that by not doing so there is an underlying assumption that languages are only for a certain type of student and not for all. By not giving students with SEND access to, or support within, the foreign languages classroom, we are in danger of ignoring the wealth of strengths they bring and precluding them from the opportunity to learn a skill for life. In a similar vein, we know that growing up speaking more than one language is the norm for the majority of world's population (Grosjean, 2010), including those who have additional learning needs or developmental conditions. Normalising multilingualism and language learning in more monolingual countries like England is therefore a high priority, particularly given that almost 1 in 5 primary-aged pupils in England speak English as an additional language (EAL) (DfE, 2018).

Among the more well-rehearsed benefits of foreign language learning for all children is the fact that it develops students' linguistic awareness and knowledge of grammar, including their understanding of sentence structure and vocabulary building, which can be readily transferred to the use of their first language (Tinsley & Comfort, 2012). Speech skills such as stress, volume, pace and intonation can all be enhanced as a result. Bilingualism is also believed to enhance components of executive control, such as working memory (Bialystok, 2011), inhibition, switching and monitoring (Gunnerud et al., 2020). Further, learning a foreign language provides unrivalled opportunities to raise intercultural awareness; celebrating linguistic and cultural diversity may lead to further opportunities to celebrate neurodiversity among pupils too.

This leads us to consider the benefits of language learning that are particularly pertinent to learners with SEND. For children who have challenges with social interaction and communication, such as those on the autism spectrum,

the foreign languages classroom provides myriad opportunities to develop social skills and interact with peers (Stevens & Marsh, 2005). When the emphasis of foreign language learning is placed on developing communicative skills, language learning helps children with SEND to grow in confidence and may bolster their motivation to communicate with others (EC, 2005). Enhanced by appropriate modelling from the teacher, children are arguably exposed to more conversational practice than in any other subject on the curriculum and therefore the potential for social development within the language classroom is indelible. Indeed, a recent study by Digard et al. (2020) found that autistic adults who were learning or spoke more than one language reported a higher satisfaction with their social life.

Along with the social advantages of language learning, there are also benefits that may be less immediately obvious. Learning a foreign language is often considered to be a 'level playing field', as all learners—or at least most—may come to the subject with little or no prior knowledge. For learners with SEND, this provides an opportunity for success in a subject that does not carry connotations of academic failure or difficulty (Asher et al., 1995) and the chance to try something new. Along similar lines, language learning encompasses a range of skills, which means that if a child's difficulty lies in one particular area, they have opportunities to excel in other areas that may go unrecognised in other parts of the curriculum. As such, in the languages classroom learners with SEND may identify particular areas of strength that may otherwise go unnoticed. For example, pattern detection and attention to detail are widely considered as strengths for many children on the autism spectrum (Happé & Frith, 2009), which could support learning vocabulary and grammatical structures in the context of language learning.

Giving learners with SEND access to foreign language education also supports cross-curricular learning, in view of the wide array of topic areas covered. In this sense, foreign language classes can incorporate various facets of the wider curriculum, therefore to lose access to it would be to lose potential prospects to develop in history, geography, science, art, etc. In like manner, there are several opportunities for basic numeracy in the foreign languages classroom (such as time telling, counting, etc.), which could give students with dyscalculia additional opportunities to develop numeracy skills or view numbers in a new context. For children with dyslexia or language impairments like developmental language disorder (DLD), learning a foreign language may well help to support literacy and language development through enhanced metalinguistic competence (Caccavale, 2007; Tinsley & Comfort, 2012). The cognitive advantages of language learning such as improved memory (Bialystok, 2011) and switching (Gunnerud et al., 2020) could also enhance learning across the curriculum.

THE FEASIBILITY OF SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING IN THE CONTEXT OF SEND

Having made the case for why children with SEND should be given opportunities to learn foreign languages, it is important to also address the feasibility of such a task. Given the paucity of research focused on foreign language learning for those with SEND, instead we must draw on the literature looking into whether children from bilingual families who have additional learning needs or formal diagnoses such as autism, ADHD or dyslexia, can be raised as bilinguals. Just as arguments persist in educational circles around withdrawing learners with SEND from language classrooms, so too do questions arise in clinical settings about the feasibility of bilingualism for children with SEND from multilingual families (Lim et al., 2019).

Despite assumptions that bilingualism may exacerbate any challenges that the child faces in their home language, evidence suggests that there are no detrimental effects of bilingualism for children with communication and neurodevelopmental conditions (Uljarević et al., 2016). For example, it is increasingly established in research that it is possible for children with dyslexia (Grosjean, 2019), autism (Dai et al., 2018), DLD (Boerma & Blom, 2020), and hearing loss (Guiberson, 2014) to grow up as bilinguals, with some studies suggesting advantages in doing so (Bunta et al., 2016; Howard et al., 2021a; Tsimpli et al., 2017). It is, nonetheless, important to note that if the child's difficulties are with linguistic processing, communication and interaction, these are likely to be present in both (or all) of their languages (Garraffa et al., 2019). Taking the example of the feasibility of bilingualism for autistic children (Howard et al., 2021a, 2021b), educational practitioners and parents both suggest that a child on the autism spectrum may benefit from more time to acquire a second language compared to non-autistic peers, and suggest that for some children a more monolingual approach may be appropriate. With this in mind, we can conclude from the research into specific learning difficulties and developmental conditions in bilingual populations that learning a second (or perhaps third) language is certainly possible, but will depend on the circumstances and profile of the individual child. These findings may well apply too to children from monolingual families who are starting to learn a language for the first time in the foreign languages classroom, with the important and obvious caveat that children who only access a new language in a classroom setting will have far less linguistic exposure than those being raised as bilinguals in the home setting.

CHALLENGES FACED BY LEARNERS WITH SEND IN THE FOREIGN LANGUAGES CLASSROOM

Having considered why children with SEND should learn languages and research indicating the feasibility of such a task, our attention turns to some of the challenges faced by language learners with SEND. The first challenge is ensuring that learners with SEND have the same access to the foreign languages classroom as those without SEND. Language lessons are often one of the first subjects from which children with SEND are withdrawn, because of perceptions of the subject as difficult. Given the narrow requirements of GCSE language examinations in England, students with SEND are often dissuaded from taking a formal foreign languages qualification, and, as a result, their language education often stops at age 14. Indeed, according to a 2020 British Council survey, 62% of teachers reported that students with SEND were less likely than previously to be taking a language GCSE (Collen, 2020). For this reason, lower expectations and negative assumptions of students with SEND pursuing languages can have a detrimental effect on learners' motivation (Kontra, 2019; Stevens & Marsh, 2005). Alongside reduced access to foreign languages education, students with SEND often have negative experiences of language learning due to feelings of failure (Csizér et al., 2010) and incongruities between the task being set and the support available (Meiring & Norman, 2005).

There are also challenges presented by language learning that are specific to each of the four areas of need identified by the SEND Code of Practice. For students with primarily communication and interaction difficulties, learning a foreign language may appear to be an evidently difficult task. Such difficulties may manifest themselves in the foreign languages classroom when students are participating in pair or groupwork; difficulties with turn taking or pragmatic language use might provide specific barriers to foreign language learning.

Difficulties that fall within the cognition and learning category of the SEND code of practice can also pose some significant and obvious barriers to language learning. For example, students with specific learning difficulties like dyslexia may find phonological and orthographic processing more challenging (Ho & Fong, 2005), along with difficulties with vocabulary acquisition and comprehension (Ellins & Porter, 2005; Nijakowska, 2010). Poorer short-term and working memory can also impact upon learners' ability to access a foreign language (Schneider & Crombie, 2012). This range of difficulties may inevitably lead to lower levels of motivation. Kormos and Csizér (2010), for instance, found that dyslexic children held more negative attitudes towards foreign language learning than their non-dyslexic peers.

Although perhaps less associated with specific learning difficulties in MFL, social, emotional and mental health difficulties could present problems for students in terms of anxiety in speaking the foreign language in front of peers or wanting to participate in interactive tasks. Given the associations between language learning and risk-taking (Connor, 2017), foreign language anxiety may be heightened in children with existing social, emotional and mental health difficulties as well as those with speech and language difficulties (Kormos, 2020). With regard to sensory or physical needs, hearing impairments may pose a challenge to students' access to listening tasks in the foreign languages classroom and opportunities for students with visual impairments to learn languages may be restricted depending on the resources, support and equipment available. It is acknowledged, however, that while students with physical disabilities may require practical accommodations to ensure their language learning experience is accessible and equitable, students with cognitive, linguistic and learning difficulties are more likely to benefit from a more inclusive pedagogy in order to succeed in the foreign languages classroom.

STRATEGIES FOR SUPPORTING LEARNERS WITH SEND IN THE FOREIGN LANGUAGES CLASSROOM

With the potential challenges posed by language learning to students with SEND in mind, our attention now turns to how such challenges may be mitigated or overcome. Dismantling the barriers that prevent inclusion can be a time-consuming and arduous process, particularly when those barriers are systemic. However, understanding the individual needs and learning profile of the child will be crucial to supporting their interaction in the languages classroom. [Table 1](#) outlines strategies for language learners categorised by the four areas of the SEND Code of Practice (2015). Florian and Spratt argue that inclusive pedagogy encourages 'an open-ended view of each child's potential to learn' (2013, p. 122). As such, use of the strategies outlined in [Table 1](#) should be prefaced by a recognition that inclusive pedagogy should extend the scope of what is ordinarily available to all pupils (Florian, 2015), rather than explicitly providing 'something different to that which is provided to the majority' (Florian, 2015, p. 13). In this way, the strategies presented may well be of benefit to all learners, with particular pertinence for the inclusion of students with special educational needs and/or disabilities.

It is important to note that the strategies suggested in [Table 1](#) will not all be effective or will not always be effective for an individual learner, which again highlights the need to know the unique learning profile and motivations of the student. Instead, these strategies aim to dovetail with Florian's inclusive pedagogical approach (2015); that is, they

TABLE 1 Strategies for learners with SEND in the foreign languages classroom.

Area of difficulty as classified by SEND code of practice (2015)	Strategies
Communication and interaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establishing and reinforcing clear routines with target language use (Connor, 2017) • Assign roles within the classroom to structure interactions (TDAS, 2009) • Plan opportunities for social interaction including group and pair work rather than speaking in front of the class (Connor, 2017; Deane, 1992) • Careful and sensitive consideration of grouping for collaborative work (Deane, 1992) • Clear and short instructions in the target language, reinforced with visuals (TDAS, 2009). • Provide ample opportunities for oral and aural practice (Connor, 2017) • Provide ample processing time before students are expected to respond (Wight, 2015) • Use technology to increase learner motivation and engagement (Campigotto et al., 2013)
Cognition and learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitate encoding and decoding skills (Schneider & Crombie, 2012) • Recycling small amounts of language (Pachler et al., 2009) • Support development of meta-cognitive and meta-linguistic skills (Schneider & Crombie, 2012) • Encourage learning strategies such as visual organisers and mnemonic devices for learning vocabulary and grammar points (Skinner & Smith, 2011) • Frequent review and repetition (Swanson & Sachse-Lee, 2001) • Multi-sensory techniques (Joy & Murphy, 2012; Schneider & Crombie, 2012) • Avoid copying from the board where possible (TDAS, 2009) • Encourage students to colour code different word groups to improve metalinguistic awareness (Skinner & Smith, 2011) • Explicit phonological and syntactic teaching (Skinner & Smith, 2011; Wight, 2015) • Facilitate use of online dictionaries to search for vocabulary (Meiring & Norman, 2005)
Social, emotional and mental health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage rehearsal of language output in small groups or individually using technology (EC, 2005) • Establish an encouraging, safe and non-threatening language learning environment (Connor, 2017; Pachler et al., 2009) to mitigate anxiety • Consistent positive reinforcement and praise (Kontra, 2019; Pachler et al., 2009) • Incorporating students' interests into teaching and learning materials (EC, 2005) • Provide indirect rather than direct correction to alleviate foreign language anxiety (Tsiplakides & Keramida, 2009)
Sensory and/or physical needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Caption and subtitle video content (Hockly, 2016) • Establish norms for levels of noise in the room (Connor, 2017) • Provide opportunities for learners with hearing impairments to read audio content (Hockly, 2016) • Provide accessible materials for students with visual impairments (TDAS, 2009) • Where possible, provide additional support from teaching assistant or support worker (Lewin-Jones & Hodgson, 2006) • Adopt multi-sensory approaches to support engagement and learning (TDAS, 2009)

cater to individual needs of students without stigmatising or singling them out. Collaborating with the student by offering choice and allowing them to direct their learning independently where possible is also likely to maximise the efficacy of the strategies selected (Brennan et al., 2021). Consulting the student's individual education plan (IEP), if they have one, and discussing effective strategies with other educators who support them are also important steps in creating an inclusive and effective foreign languages classroom for all learners.

CONCLUSION

Language learning is not only possible for children with SEND but may yield myriad and unexpected benefits. It is important that children are not routinely removed from the foreign languages classroom (Ayres-Bennett & Carruthers, 2019; Wight, 2015), but instead are provided with opportunities to thrive within it. Some of the suggestions made in this article have sought to address 'the current fundamental mismatch of curriculum provision and policy aspiration' (Essex & MacAskill, 2020, p. 444). It is no longer good enough for students to be included physically, while their needs are left unmet (MacAskill, 2016). There is a pressing need for greater collaboration in both research and practice in order to improve the experiences of students with SEND in the foreign languages classroom. From a research perspective, further research is needed that takes into account the specific experiences of children with particular diagnoses or learning needs in relation to language learning (Essex & MacAskill, 2020). In particular, there is a dearth of research into the language learning experiences of children with social, emotional and mental health needs and those with particular sensory and physical needs. Lessons could, and should, be learnt from educators in contexts where multilingualism is the norm in order to better understand the promotion of linguistic diversity

among students with SEND (Wight, 2015). Moving from research to practice, drawing on the insights of parents and special educational needs coordinators and collaborating with staff across the school will no doubt enable foreign language educators to better support the needs of individual students. Providing opportunities for trainee teachers to learn about specific needs their students may have and how to create inclusive language classrooms will also be of paramount importance.

As this article has discussed, understanding the needs and profiles of the individual child is the most effective way of ensuring inclusive practices in the foreign languages classroom. As such, it is also important to remember that some pupils with SEND will also come from multilingual and multicultural backgrounds and may speak English as an additional language. These students' linguistic diversity should be celebrated as an asset rather than treated as a deficit, and particular attention may need to be paid to meeting both their linguistic and educational needs, given the pervasive misidentification of learning difficulties among students who speak EAL (Sanatullova-Allison & Robison-Young, 2016). Opportunities to celebrate diversity in the foreign languages classroom—whether that is neuro-, ethnic, cultural, or linguistic diversity—should be taken wherever possible. This will help to nurture a learning environment where all students feel valued and, in turn, encouraged to make the most out of their language learning education.

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