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Specific learning differences in ELT



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Introduction

Each language learner is unique and has experiences and personal characteristics that are special and different. The diversity of language learners has long been recognized in the field of second language (L2) learning. However, until recently, the study of language learners with additional needs was at the periphery of both second language acquisition and language teaching pedagogy. Specific learning differences ('SpLDs'), which affect between 5 and 15 per cent of the population (Drabble, 2013), might have a significant impact on how additional languages are learned. Therefore, in order to create an inclusive language learning context and set up effective language teaching programmes, it is essential to understand how students with SpLDs develop their competence in additional languages.

Students with SpLDs can be successful language learners if the role of individual differences in the processes of L2 acquisition is acknowledged and appreciated and if the needs of students with SpLDs are met in an inclusive learning environment. Inclusion means that educational institutions are responsible for initiating changes and 'adapting the curricula, methods, materials and procedures so that they become more responsive' (Frederickson & Cline, 2009, p. 65). An inclusive learning environment requires schools to continuously 'engage in a critical examination of what can be done to increase the learning and participation of the diversity of students within the school and its locality' (Booth *et al.*, 2000, p. 12).

More recently, Hunter (2024, p. 3) has defined inclusive education as not just caring *for* learners, but as "caring *with*" learners. In a truly inclusive model of education, no 'additional support' would be required because instructional materials and task would be presented in accessible formats and assistive technology would be available to all learners. The concept of Universal Design for Learning, which will be discussed in more detail later, embodies these principles and provides a framework within which supportive instruction can be situated (David & Torres (2020) .

Inclusion can also be understood through the interactionist view of disabilities. This view highlights that disabilities might hinder full participation in society because individuals' difficulties interact with barriers in the environment. For inclusion to be successful, these difficulties should be identified, barriers arising from the interaction of these difficulties with the learning environment need to be removed, and, if necessary, appropriate support has to be provided. This can ensure that the most effective language teaching methods are applied in order to ensure the highest level of inclusion in schools.

What are SpLDs?

Why does terminology matter?

SpLDs constitute a type of disability (see, e.g., the UK Equality Act 2010) and the labels used to describe them vary greatly across contexts. In the 5th Edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders of the American Psychiatric Association ('DSM-5') the label *specific learning disorder* is used. In psychological research and legislation, the term *learning disability* is used in Canada and Australia, and *learning difficulty* is used in the UK.

These labels can be important to consider because they shape and express how people think about learning differences, and because the inappropriate use of labels can lead to stigmatization, which might result in the denial and lack of recognition of SpLDs in some contexts. The labels *learning disorder* and *learning disability* are common in the fields of biology, medicine and psychology, where the focus is on examining the exact nature and cause of SpLDs. In the field of education (at least in the UK), individuals are often described as having *specific learning differences*, which reflects the view that if institutions meet the differing needs of students, these learning differences do not hinder successful learning.

Labels are important because they shape and express how people think about learning difficulties, and because any stigmatization might result in the denial and lack of recognition of SpLDs in some contexts.

A similar, more recent social justice perspectives of *neurodiversity* also highlights that individuals vary in their cognitive, affective and social skills and that this diversity needs to be respected. The neurodiversity movement also advocates that rather than expecting neurodiverse people to adapt to their environment, institutions should actively seek ways to remove obstacles to full participation. Another important contribution of this movement is the demand that the voices of neurodiverse people should be heard and their views should be considered when accommodations and changes meant to support them are introduced.

The term *specific learning differences*, which is used in this paper, reflects an interactionist position and helps us describe how processes of language learning are jointly influenced by learners' characteristics and by barriers in the educational system.

How can SpLDs be defined and categorized?

Individuals with SpLDs may have various strengths, such as holistic thinking, outstanding pattern recognition and visuo-spatial skills. They can excel in creative fields and might be very good problem-solvers.

However, people with SpLDs are also characterized by some weaknesses in the areas of:

- working memory (a memory system for the temporary storage and manipulation of information before it is encoded in long-term memory),
- executive functioning (planning, organizing, strategizing and paying attention),
- processing speed, and
- phonological processing.

DSM-5 states that in order to distinguish temporary learning problems from SpLDs, difficulties in learning need to be present for at least six months despite targeted intervention. It is important to recognize that observable difficulties in academic performance might not be visible in early school years and might become apparent in later years when academic demands become higher. They can sometimes manifest only when people start learning additional languages.

DSM-5 outlines the most recent empirically-supported conceptualization of SpLDs, grouping various sub-types of SpLDs such as dyslexia (word-level reading difficulty) and dyscalculia (mathematics disability), under a joint umbrella term of SpLDs (see Figure 1).

This acknowledges the large overlap between these types of learning difficulties. It also creates sub-categories of SpLDs, two of which are particularly relevant for language learning:

- specific learning disorder in reading
- specific learning disorder in written expression

Within SpLDs in reading, DSM-5 distinguishes word-level decoding problems (dyslexia) and higher-level text comprehension problems (specific reading comprehension difficulties). SpLDs in writing comprise problems with spelling, punctuation and grammatical accuracy, as well as clarity and organization of written expression.

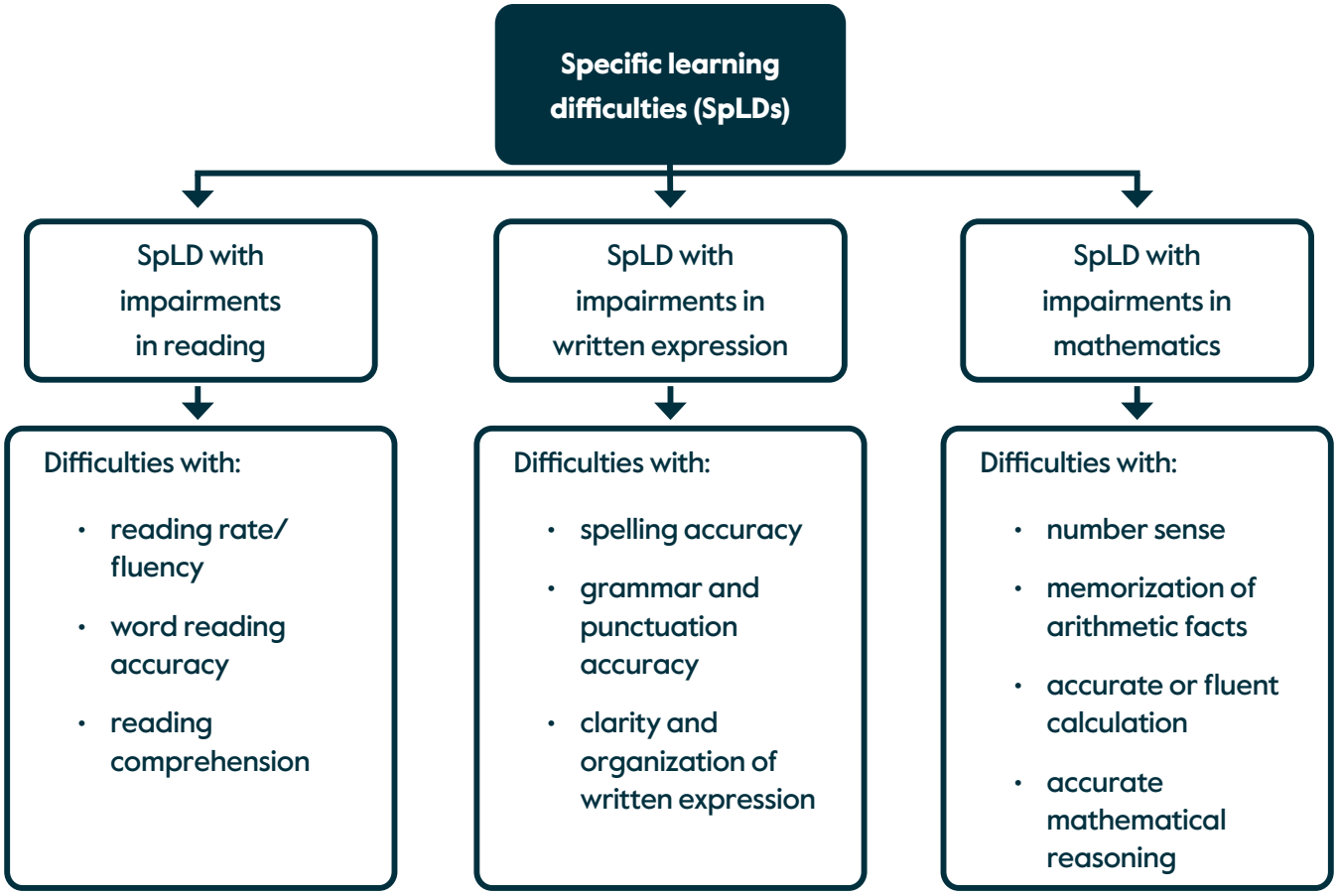


Figure 1. An empirically supported conceptualization of SpLDs (following DSM-5 (APA, 2013))

In some countries (e.g. the UK), Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is also considered to be an SpLD. In DSM-5 it is classified separately and is listed under neurodevelopmental disabilities, but its description is immediately followed by SpLDs to signal their overlapping features. As the name suggests, the two major features of ADHD are inattention and hyperactivity. ADHD can also be the cause of learning and literacy-related difficulties.

An additional type of neurodiversity which is sometimes grouped under SpLDs is autistic spectrum disorder (ASD). Individuals with ASD tend to experience difficulties with social interaction and communication. The main features of ASD might include difficulties in managing conversations, sharing interests and emotions and establishing and maintaining social relations; difficulties in understanding of figurative and non-literal language use; and using gesture and other means of non-verbal communication.

Individuals with ASD might resist changes in their routines and may experience significant distress when alterations to their regular activities occur. Additionally, they may exhibit hypersensitivity to sensory stimuli, including sounds, textures, colors, and smells.

What are the causes of SpLDs?

One of the most well-established hypotheses for the cognitive causes of reading-related SpLDs, such as dyslexia, is the Phonological Deficit Hypothesis (Stanovich, 1988), which attributes a central role to phonological processing problems—more specifically, to impaired phonological awareness. Difficulties with phonological awareness can manifest at the level of syllabic knowledge (the ability to identify and manipulate syllables) and phonemic knowledge (the ability to divide words into sounds, and to differentiate and manipulate sounds). An additional cause of reading difficulties is slow naming speed (Lovett et al., 2000). The speed of naming a word depicted by a picture (see Figure 2) is a reflection of individuals' ability to access, activate, and encode words under time pressure.

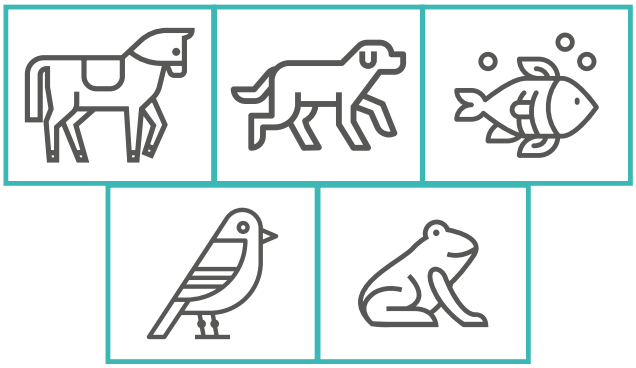


Figure 2. A simple picture chart can be used to determine how quickly a learner can name words under time pressure.

Additional causes of SpLDs include a smaller working memory capacity and a shorter phonological short-term memory span, which explains why people with SpLDs tend to find it difficult to keep several pieces of verbal information in their short-term memory (Jeffries & Everatt, 2004) (see Figure 3).

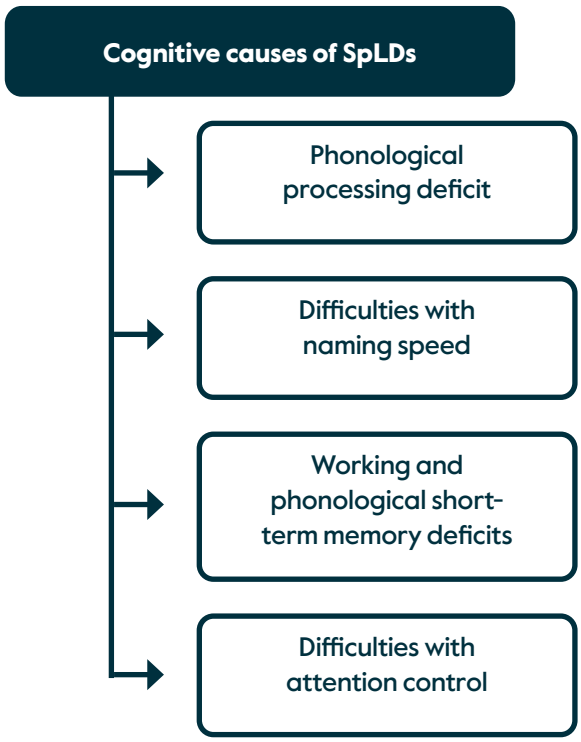


Figure 3. Cognitive causes of specific learning difficulties

How can SpLDs be identified in multilingual speakers?

It is not always straightforward to identify which students are making slower progress in learning a new language because of SpLDs, and it may seem a challenging task to disentangle SpLDs from first-language (L1) interference or low level of language proficiency.

The process of assessment should start with a phase of observation, during which teachers collect information about the students' performance, as well as their strengths and weaknesses. In addition to the use of checklists, observations and screening tests, this phase also needs to involve self-assessment by the students themselves. Based on the outcomes of the initial assessment, teachers would need to have to take steps for addressing the students' difficulty by means of changes in the classroom and appropriate support.

If these steps lead to no improvement in the learners' progress, further assessment procedures are recommended. Information from other teachers and parents might be collected and formal standardized tests can be administered to ascertain whether the students' difficulties are due to some type of SpLD. This is the point where school-based assessment should ideally be followed up by diagnosis made by a specialist (see Figure 4).

It may seem a challenging task to disentangle SpLDs from first-language interference or low level of language proficiency.

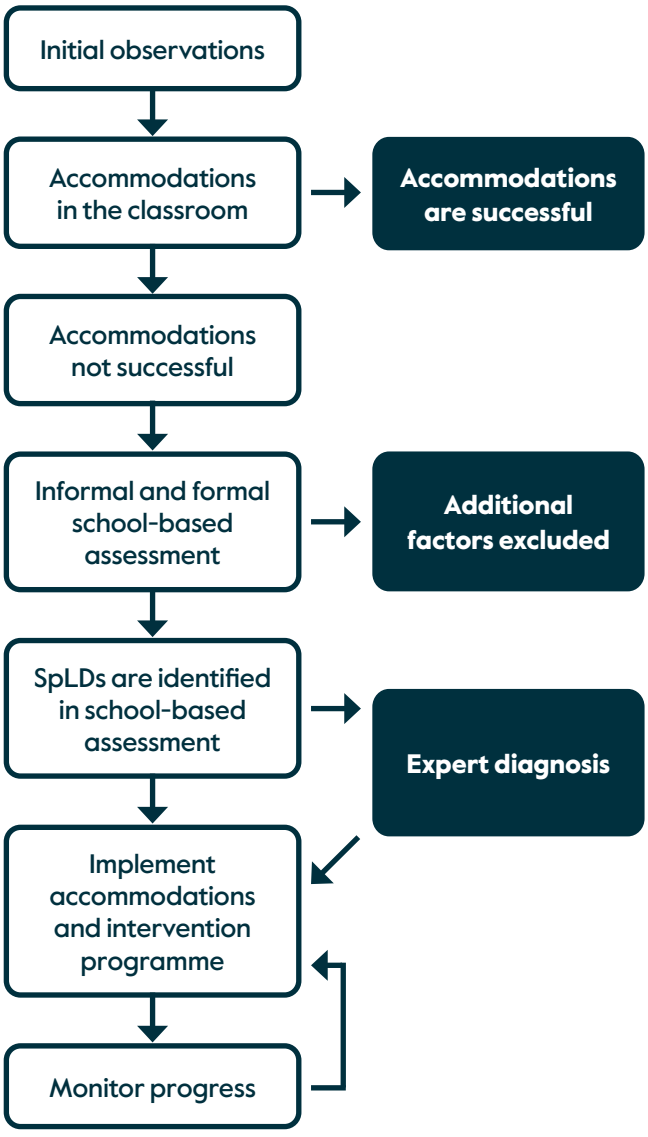


Figure 4. The process of identification of SpLDs

The available evidence suggests that it is wrong to assume that the formal diagnostic assessment of SpLDs is impossible for students who are not fully proficient in the majority language or the language of education (for a review see Geva *et al*., 2019). Even in the case of learners who have had limited exposure to the target language in classroom settings, some tests that use learners' L2 can yield relevant information (e.g. tests of phonological awareness). Although it is helpful for the assessor to be familiar with the learner's L1, a lot of information can still be gleaned without this knowledge by carefully observing *how* the learner performs the task in their L1.

A combination of L1 and L2 assessment tools is recommended in order to gain a comprehensive overview of students' difficulties (Alderson *et al*., 2015). For children below the age of 10, these tools should assess phonological awareness, naming speed and working memory (Farnia & Geva, 2013). In later years, overall language comprehension ability and phonological short-term memory should also be measured. Information collected through diagnostic tests should be complemented by observational data, interviews with teachers and parents and the students themselves.

Although it is helpful for the assessor to be familiar with the learner's first language, a lot of information can still be gleaned without this knowledge.

If teachers lack resources and institutional support, some simple tasks can be used to identify potential signs of SpLDs.[1] These include:

- Asking the learner to read aloud in their L1 and observing whether they stumble or struggle;
- Asking the learner to read in their L1 and then check what they can remember from what they just read;
- Asking the learner to write for 10 minutes in the language they feel most confident using and noticing how quickly they can produce text, as well as any issues around handwriting, pen control and spatial awareness in the text layout;
- Showing pictures of objects and asking them to name them in their L1 and observing the speed and ease with which they retrieve the words (for more detailed suggestions see Kormos & Smith, 2023).

Finally, it is important to point out that although the information value of certain diagnostic instruments such as tests of phonological awareness can diminish with age, SpLDs do not disappear across the lifespan. The severity of their impact can change as a result of early intervention and the teaching and learning environment can be better adapted to their needs.

1 For further diagnostic resources that can be used by teachers, see Smith (2015a, 2015b).

What effect do SpLDs have on learning additional languages?

First language skills are an important foundation for L2 learning. This explains why students with SpLDs often face challenges in learning additional languages. For example, the *Linguistic Coding Differences Hypothesis* assumes that the fundamental cognitive reasons for low achievement in L2 are similar to those factors that can explain L1 literacy problems (Sparks & Ganschow, 1993). And similarly, according to the *common underlying processes framework*, reading development in both monolingual and bilingual children is influenced by a key set of individual difference variables (Geva & Ryan, 1993). One such variable is phonological decoding, or using the sounds of a language to process spoken and written texts. Research on reading across a variety of languages and writing systems demonstrates that this skill plays a key role in reading in any language (Perfetti *et al*., 1992). For example, if a learner has good phonological decoding skills in English (which uses the Latin alphabet), this will help them when it comes to reading in their L2, even if this uses a different alphabetic system (such as Arabic or Greek).

A number of research findings indicate that dyslexic-type difficulties in L1 literacy (such as phonological processing) tend to be associated with L2 reading comprehension difficulties. Both Norwegian (Helland & Kaasa, 2005) and Hungarian children with an official diagnosis of dyslexia (Kormos & Mikó, 2010) were found to have lower L2 reading achievement than non-dyslexic children. Research in Canada (Geva *et al*., 1993), in Scotland (Crombie, 1997) and in the United States (Ganschow & Sparks, 2001) also established that L2 learners with dyslexic-type difficulties experienced challenges in L2 reading (for a more detailed overview see Kormos & Smith, 2023).

However, not all students with L1 literacy-related difficulties have weaker L2 reading skills. A recent study with children in Slovenia (Kormos *et al*., 2019) revealed that less than half of young learners with official dyslexia identification belonged to the weak L2 reader group. Li *et al*. (2022) conducted a study with Chinese L2 learners of English in an English-medium school, which revealed that learners identified as having text comprehension difficulties in their L1 Chinese did not necessarily face the same level of challenges in comprehending texts in L2 English. One of the explanations for these findings might be that different types of SpLDs frequently co-occur and can have different degrees of severity. This can result in substantial variation with regard to the cognitive abilities underlying L2 learning, and hence in a continuum of language learning difficulties.

It is also important to consider similarities and differences between the L1 and L2 writing systems, as they might have differential effects on the difficulties L2 learners experience in reading.

Students with SpLDs might not only find reading in another language challenging, but they might perform below their peers in other components of English language proficiency, including grammar, vocabulary, writing and listening skills (Kormos, 2017). Both students with SpLDs and their teachers report that a high number of encounters and many practice opportunities are needed for the successful memorization of words (Kormos & Kontra, 2008). Language learners with SpLDs might also experience difficulties with the acquisition of L2 grammar and they tend to find it challenging to extract the

patterns and regularities of grammar without guidance from the input. Therefore, they often report that they prefer explicit explanations of syntax, morphology and spelling.

Different types of SpLDs frequently co-occur and can have different degrees of severity. This can result in substantial variation with regard to the cognitive abilities underlying second-language learning.

With regard to understanding spoken L2 texts, the nature of the problems that students with SpLDs experience depends again on their phonological processing skills, phonological short-term memory and oral language comprehension ability in their L1. In a number of studies, learners with an official diagnosis of dyslexia who showed less serious phonological processing problems and no associated oral language processing difficulties did not exhibit problems with L2 listening skills (Helland & Kaasa, 2005; Kormos & Mikó, 2010). However, findings from additional research indicate that learners who experience phonological processing difficulties in their L1 often achieve lower scores on L2 listening comprehension tasks (e.g., Crombie, 1997; Eberharter et al., 2023; Geva & Massey-Garrison, 2013; Kosak-Babuder *et al*., 2019).

There also exist significant differences between the written production and writing processes of students with SpLDs and their peers with no SpLDs. Students with SpLDs tend to have difficulty with:

- spelling (e.g. confusing the spelling of similar sounding or looking words, such as 'right' and 'write');
- punctuation (e.g. forgetting to use full stops at the end of a sentence);
- selecting the appropriate word for the given context with accurate meaning (e.g. confusing the meanings of 'remember' and 'remind'); and
- the monitoring of syntactic accuracy and the coherent expression of their ideas (Ndlovu & Geva, 2008, Łockiewicz *et al*., 2020; Sehlström *et al*., 2023)

In addition to cognitive abilities, the affective characteristics and reactions of L2 learners also influence the processes of L2 learning. Motivation, language learning anxiety, self-confidence and self-esteem are among the concepts that are particularly important to consider in relation to language learners, and particularly those with SpLDs. Students with SpLDs might face considerable challenges in L2 learning and, consequently, they might be at risk of losing their motivation (Kormos & Csizér, 2010), might experience foreign language anxiety (Piechurska-Kuciel, 2008) and often have low self-esteem and self-confidence (e.g., Sehlström *et al*., 2023). These negative emotional factors might further aggravate the difficulties of language learners with SpLDs. If these emotions are not given sufficient attention and if the instructional environment is not inclusive, given a choice, students with SpLDs might decide to opt out from learning an additional language altogether (Figure 5).

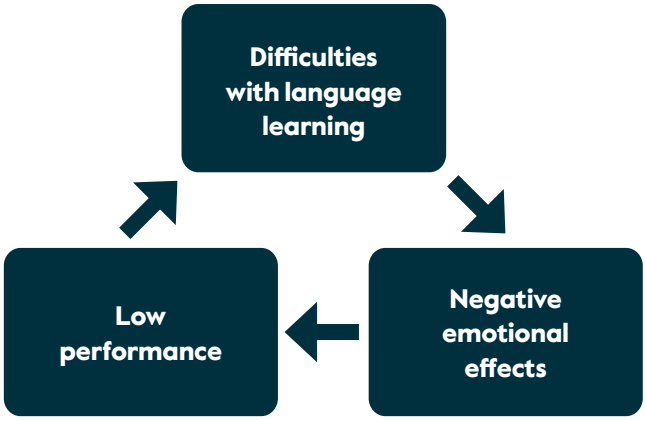


Figure 5. The vicious circle of negative emotional effects of SpLDs on language learning

Practical tips for creating an inclusive environment

The first step in any instructional context is to create an inclusive environment where every possible action is taken to meet the needs of the diversity of students, including those with SpLDs. Inclusion is a process and not an end state, and it begins with the analysis of the barriers within the school and the educational system and policies that can hinder the participation of all students. In inclusive schools, diversity is welcome and seen as a resource rather than an obstacle to learning.

Schools need to make all the required arrangements to meet the diverse needs of different types of learners. Inclusion should be seen as a continuum along which educational systems make persistent efforts to enhance accessibility (Norwich, 2007). To illustrate, inclusion can have varying degrees in terms of **academic**, **social and cultural participation**, **location** (a separate school with links to an ordinary school vs. same learning group) and **curriculum and teaching** (different educational pathways vs. same goals but adjusted teaching approaches).

The Dyslexia Friendly School initiative in the United Kingdom (British Dyslexia Association, 1996) proposes a number of principles and practices to ensure that schools become inclusive and SpLD-friendly). These include:

- accurate identification of students' strengths, weaknesses and needs;
- regular assessment of students' progress and adjustment of targets and teaching methods based on this progress;
- opportunities for students to work in a variety of groupings;
- enhancing students' self-regulation skills, confidence and self-esteem;
- fair assessment of learning outcomes;
- co-operation with parents (where relevant);
- teachers' awareness of SpLDs;
- teachers' knowledge and skills in implementing appropriate literacy intervention programmes and providing classroom support.

In inclusive schools, effective support is provided to students with SpLDs. In order to achieve this, there is a need for strong co-operation among teachers, parents, students and the local community. In an inclusive context the curriculum can be flexibly adapted and teachers are free to adjust and vary their teaching methods to meet the needs of all students (UNESCO, 2012).

Inclusion is a process and not an end state. It begins with the analysis of the barriers within the school and the educational system and policies that can hinder the participation of all students.

For successful inclusion, it is not only important to understand and remove existing barriers to learning, but to create an environment where these barriers might not even exist. This aim is embodied in the concept of *Universal Design for Learning*, which helps to ensure flexibility in the context of education that allows accessibility to the curriculum and educational materials for all learners (Rose & Meyer, 2002). There are three main principles:

1. We should give learners different opportunities and choices for how they access information; for example, by how they perceive the information (visually, as in reading, or aurally, as in listening).

2. Multiple means of action and expression should be offered when students practise what they learned or demonstrate their knowledge in tests. These different means for expression can involve physical action, or choices between writing and speaking.

3. We should use different ways of engaging students, arousing their interest, maintaining their motivation and helping them with regulating their own learning, i.e. with appropriate learning strategies.



The three main principles of Universal Design for Learning can be further sub-divided into nine themes (see Figure 6). Following these can greatly contribute to enhancing the accessibility of the curriculum and instructional materials and ensure equitable treatment in education. However, it is important to acknowledge that truly universal design might not exist. No matter how flexible goals, materials, methods and assessment are, there will always be students who will need different kinds of assistance in the learning process.

1

1 Provide options for perception

- Offer ways of customizing the display of information
- Offer information through multiple channels (e.g. visual and auditory)

2 Provide options for language

- Clarify vocabulary and symbols
- Clarify syntax and structure
- Support text comprehension
- Illustrate through multiple media

3 Provide options for comprehension

- Activate or supply background knowledge
- Highlight patterns, critical features, big ideas, and relationships
- Guide information processing, visualization, and manipulation
- Maximize the opportunity to transfer and generalize knowledge to new contexts

2

4 Provide options for physical action

- Vary the methods in which students respond to a task
- Minimize physical barriers
- Optimize access to tools and assistive technologies

5 Provide options for expression and communication

- Use multiple media for communication
- Use multiple tools that help students to express themselves
- Offer graded support and differentiated feedback

6 Provide options for cognitive control of behaviour and reaching goals (executive functions)

- Guide appropriate goal-setting
- Support planning and strategy development
- Facilitate managing information and resources
- Enhance capacity for monitoring progress

3

7 Provide options for recruiting interest

- Optimize individual choice and autonomy
- Optimize relevance, value, and authenticity
- Minimize distractions (e.g. noise)

8 Provide options for sustaining effort and persistence

- Make learning goals explicit and attainable
- Vary demands and resources to optimize challenge
- Foster collaboration and community
- Increase mastery-oriented feedback

9 Provide options for self-regulation

- Promote expectations and beliefs that optimize motivation
- Facilitate personal coping skills and strategies
- Develop self-assessment and reflection

Figure 6. Principles and sub-themes of Universal Design for Learning (based on CAST, 2022).

Universal Design principles might also be applied for the design of language teaching materials. Ideally, the appearance of materials should cause as little visual stress as possible because learners with SpLDs may find it difficult to focus on too many items at once. Some useful tips include:

- The materials on a page should appear uncluttered and easy to navigate.
- When working with visually overcrowded text book pages, L-shaped pieces of card to frame the task/ info being focused on can be used (Figure 7).
- It is important to ensure that the text is large enough and in a font type and size that the learner can easily read. Many learners with a SpLD prefer sans serif fonts and larger spaces between words and lines. There is, however, no scientific evidence that shows that certain font types or font sizes would significantly facilitate reading comprehension for people with SpLDs.
- It is also often recommended that the text should not be printed in black against a white background, but again no empirical research evidence exists underpinning this other than reported preference from students with SpLDs.
- The addition of audio-visual material, illustrations, pictures, mind-maps to accompany written texts can be helpful for students with SpLDs. However, care needs to be taken not to overcrowd the page with excessive visual information.
- The use of multi-media tools such as watching videos with subtitles or allowing students with SpLDs to simultaneously read and listen to texts also has the potential to enhance,text comprehension (Kormos *et al.*, 2019).

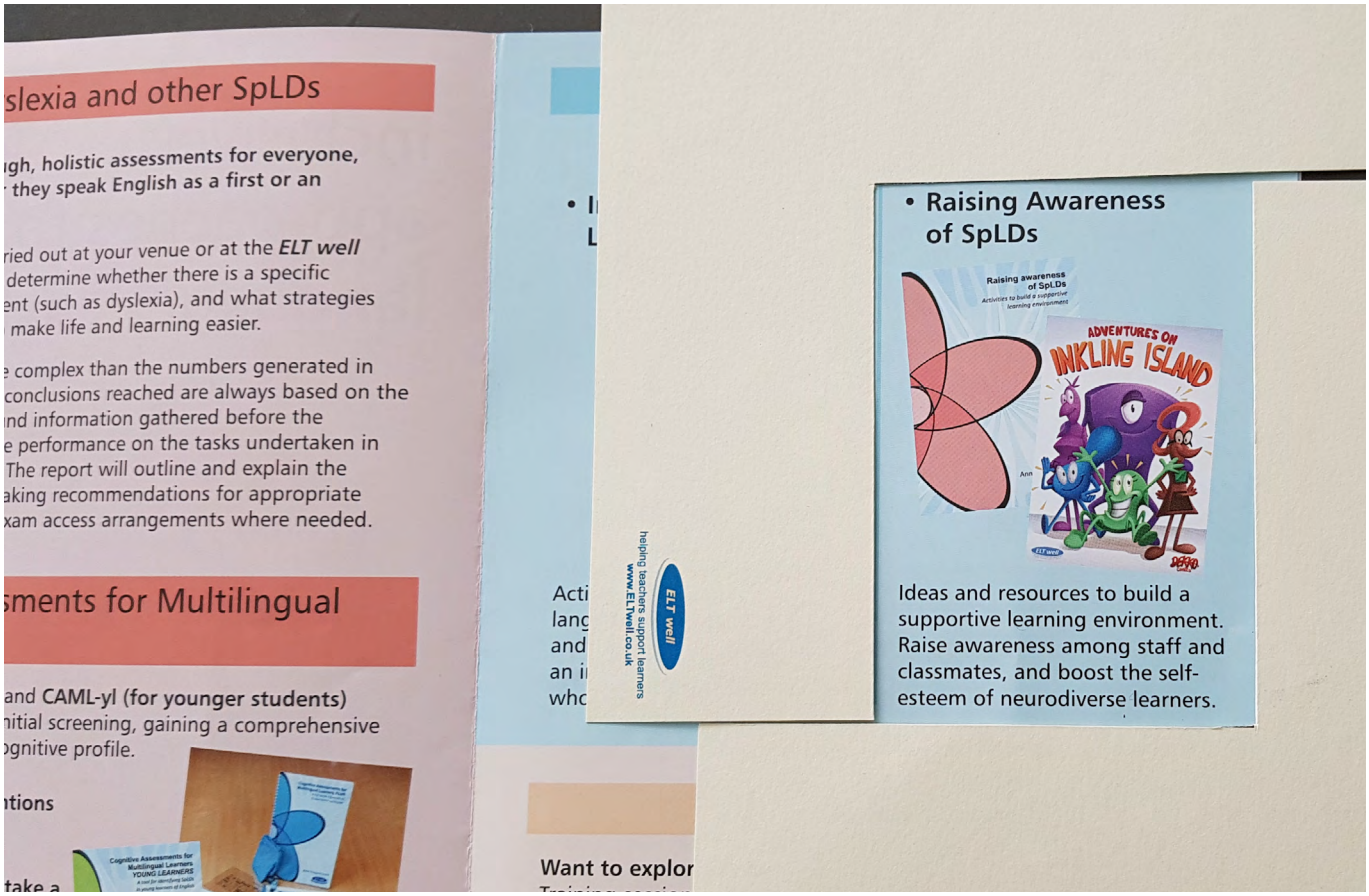


Figure 7. Use L-shaped pieces of card to focus attention on one element of a visually-crowded page.

In contexts where curricula dictate teaching, lobbying for flexibility and applying differentiation techniques can contribute to more efficient inclusion of students with SpLDs. Similar to the three main principles of Universal Design, differentiation can involve giving students choice over the content, process and product of learning. Some useful tips for differentiation include:

- Give different learners different tasks to do with the same text (they can later compare their answers and complete the 'big picture' together);
- Vary/change the mode of response required, e.g. underlining, ordering, marking, etc.
- Use technological devices (e.g. recording explanations or stories so students can listen again);
- Encourage peer support and sharing of notes where appropriate;
- Use flexible work times to help those who work slowly and need extra time to complete assignments;
- Use assignment substitutions or adjustments (e.g. a project instead of an oral presentation, or a spoken vs. a written test);
- Denote priorities on test papers/worksheets by marking them with a symbol in some way, e.g. putting a star next to questions which carry a lot of marks.

Inclusion also entails attending to the specific needs of students and offering relevant adjustments in the classroom for learners with SpLDs. In many cases, minor adjustments in the language teaching process might be sufficient to ensure that these students also fulfil their potential. These adjustments can involve:

- providing outlines of lessons, classroom notes, glossaries, word lists, key points, etc. in a written format for students;
- developing a reading guide, i.e. including comprehension questions to help the student focus on particular pieces of information paragraph-by-paragraph or section-by-section;
- breaking down instructions into smaller steps;
- giving more explicit explanations, demonstrating the task, offering corrective feedback;
- emphasising daily reviews of previous learning;
- bookmarking the point where a student left off in sequential material.

Providing extra activities and materials to allow for additional practice of certain language points is crucial for learners with a SpLD, as it often takes them longer to assimilate new information and transfer it to long-term memory. The key to enabling this to happen is to provide ample opportunities for 'overlearning'—that is, revisiting the same information in different contexts so that automaticity can be developed. This can happen in class or can be set as homework. Digital language learning materials and different language learning apps can be particularly helpful for in- and out-of-class practice for suggestions see Kormos & Smith (2023).

It is also helpful to allow students extended time and additional breaks in the completion of assessment tasks, and to give them support when revising for tests and planning how to accomplish complex assignments. Similarly, teachers can:

- encourage use of assignment books, digital calendars or diaries to record due dates; and
- display/share samples of completed work to show students expectations and help them plan accordingly.

Assistance in developing students' awareness of the learning process and their self-regulation and learning strategies are particularly beneficial for students with SpLDs (Kormos & Smith, 2023).

2 For example, free-to-access digital task bank for young dyslexic learners of English and German can be found at http://engage.uni-miskolc.hu/index.php/self-study-course/

Effective approaches in teaching languages to students with SpLDs

Support programmes

Although creating an inclusive learning environment is of key importance for students with SpLDs, additional support might also be needed to ensure their language learning success. Many of these these supporting activities can be easily applied in regular classroom teaching and are beneficial for all learners, not just those with SpLDs. Some of these instructional techniques might work better or provide additional benefits in small-group contexts or in additional support classes.

At a micro-level, working with the smallest unit of language through **phonological awareness raising activities** can assist in developing students' phonological processing skills, and thereby indirectly contribute to improvements in reading and spelling skills. In these instructional activities, students are explicitly taught how to manipulate sounds and syllables. For example, they practise what we get if we delete the [k] sound from the word 'cat' or reverse the syllables in the word 'carpet'.

They can also practise phoneme and syllable segmentation (dividing words and syllables into sounds), blending (putting sounds together e.g. [l] [e] [t]), deletion and addition of sounds (e.g. delete [r] from the word 'tree' or add [s] to the word 'pit'). Research evaluating phonological awareness raising programmes for Spanish L1-speaking children in the USA has demonstrated its efficacy: young multilingual children who were at risk of developing reading difficulties benefitted from phonological awareness raising activities and their word-level reading skills improved in L2 English (e.g. Leafstedt *et al.*, 2004).

An inclusive environment is beneficial for all learners, not just those with SpLDs.

Another intervention programme is **phonics instruction**, which teaches sound-letter correspondences explicitly and systematically in order to help children develop word-level reading and spelling skills. Studies conducted in Canada with multilingual dyslexic children provided evidence that phonics-based reading programmes can successfully develop L2 phonological processing and reading skills and can reduce the chance of later emerging reading difficulties (Partanen & Siegel, 2013). Similar promising results were obtained in a study with struggling L2 readers in Malaysia (Jamaludin *et al.*, 2016).

Many students with SpLDs demonstrate difficulties in reading comprehension, and therefore, **reading comprehension enhancement programmes** can be particularly helpful in assisting students to overcome their difficulties. One of the key elements of reading comprehension instruction programmes is the development of students' vocabulary knowledge. This is usually done in the form of explicit vocabulary teaching, such as:

- pre-teaching of key words before reading a text;
- providing glossaries within the reading text;
- practice activities on using the taught vocabulary;
- instruction in techniques that help memorization of new words.

The incidental learning of words is also supported through extensive listening and viewing (i.e. watching videos and films). By being exposed to words in a variety of contexts repeatedly, students have more opportunity to learn them than through single or more limited encounters in classroom contexts. Viewing multimedia input with subtitles is particularly helpful because students can see word boundaries and how words are spelled and pronounced at the same time. Computer-assisted tools, such as word games which aim to develop students' vocabulary knowledge through feedback and repetition, and software such as Quizlet, which has learning and test options as well as a multi-media presentation mode, are also beneficial. For measurable gains in knowledge, vocabulary needs to be taught both directly and indirectly, and learners need to encounter words repeatedly in different communicative contexts (Dóczi & Kormos, 2016).

Reading comprehension enhancement programmes also include the explicit teaching of reading comprehension strategies. For example:

- With the help of **questioning/strategy instruction**, students can learn how to pose questions that aid comprehension and monitor understanding, and to analyze text structure and informational content (Berkeley *et al*., 2010). Strategy instruction can be teacher-led and/or peer-mediated.
- In the reciprocal teaching approach, the teacher models the use of various reading strategies, explains these strategies and sets up opportunities for learners to practise the application of these strategies. Teacher support is then gradually withdrawn and peers assist each other.
- Text enhancement training (Berkeley et al., 2010) uses additional text-embedded support such as highlighting main information, keywords and cohesive ties, illustrations and while-reading questions.



Unfortunately, very little research has been conducted that has investigated the benefits of reading intervention programmes for L2 learners with SpLDs. Available research evidence suggests that reading comprehension enhancement programmes need to be intensive and long-term to be effective (Vaughn *et al.*, 2019).

Multi-sensory Structured Learning (MSL)

The most frequently recommended teaching method for students with SpLDs is the *Multi-sensory Structured Learning* (MSL) approach, in which sound-letter correspondences are also taught explicitly and which, as its name suggests, activates different sensory channels (e.g. visual, auditory and kinaesthetic). The MSL approach is highly structured, proceeds in small and cumulative steps and provides L2 learners with SpLDs with sufficient practice and revision opportunities. Its aim is to develop students' phonological, morphological and syntactic awareness. As students with SpLDs tend to find it difficult to learn implicitly from input, they benefit from explicit explanation and from guided discovery activities. The students' L1 should be used as a resource and a supportive tool for L2 learning.

The MSL approach consists of numerous elements that facilitate learning for every student, not just those with SpLDs. It is:

- multi-sensory;
- carefully structured; and
- cumulative;

And it features:

- frequent revision;
- explicit explanation of linguistics structures;
- ample practice; and
- learning strategy instruction.

Information can be learned more quickly and can be better integrated into the existing knowledge system if it is presented through several sensory channels. Limitations on verbal and visual attentional resource pools and working memory can also be overcome if information is presented in multiple modalities (Paivio, 1991). A key attribute of the MSL approach is its direct and explicit instruction of the L2 system, which stands in contrast to communicative language teaching methodologies. However, this does not mean that one should return to traditional grammar teaching methods that concentrate solely on linguistic form without a communicative context. Instead, L2 learners with SpLDs, like all L2 learners, benefit from form-focused instruction that uses guided discovery activities (Loewen, 2011). Research also indicates that more explicit grammar learning activities lead to higher learning outcomes than more implicit methods (e.g. Spada & Tomita, 2010). The efficiency of MSL programmes in developing the L2 skills of language learners with SpLDs has been demonstrated in a large variety of contexts, including the USA, Poland and Switzerland.[3]

3 For a review, see Kormos (2017).

How can teacher education aid the inclusion of language learners with SpLDs?

Inclusion cannot be successful if it is not based on relevant teacher knowledge and skills about diversity, and hence teacher education plays a key role in supporting inclusion. Teachers need research-based content knowledge of basic linguistic concepts (e.g. constructs related to reading such as *phonological awareness*) and SpLDs. Teacher development courses should, however, not focus only on theoretical concepts, terms and definitions, but also raise the awareness of strategies, techniques and skills that teachers need in order to plan and conduct appropriate teaching activities and manage the classroom efficiently.

Teacher development courses also need to foster positive teacher attitudes towards special educational needs, SpLDs and inclusive approaches to education.

Teachers' training needs to allow opportunities for them to apply theoretical knowledge and concepts to practice so that their pedagogical choices are reasonable, well-founded and legitimate. And of course, teacher training programmes should themselves be inclusive and cater for the needs of trainees who might have SpLDs.

Short sessions, such as day-long workshops, can be helpful; but as teachers often do not receive any training on SpLDs in pre-service education, longer face-to-face, blended or online courses are recommended. Teacher training materials and resources are also available on the ENGaGE project website, and a 16-hour free MOOC (Massive Open Online Course) on Dyslexia and Foreign Language Teaching is offered by FutureLearn.[4]

4 See https://engage.uni-miskolc.hu/ and https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/dyslexia.

Conclusion

Even if teachers have not been previously trained on SpLDs and inclusion, there are a variety of ways they can assist their students with SpLDs by making relatively small amendments in their teaching practices. There is increasing research evidence that many of the teaching techniques that promote inclusion and are helpful for language learners with SpLDs benefit everyone. If teachers have relevant background knowledge of what SpLDs are and how they influence second language learning processes, and if they accept and act on the diversity of their students' needs, they can ensure that everyone has equal opportunities for acquiring additional languages. However, it is also important to stress the importance of inclusive educational policies and the provision of institutional support for teachers to achieve this goal.



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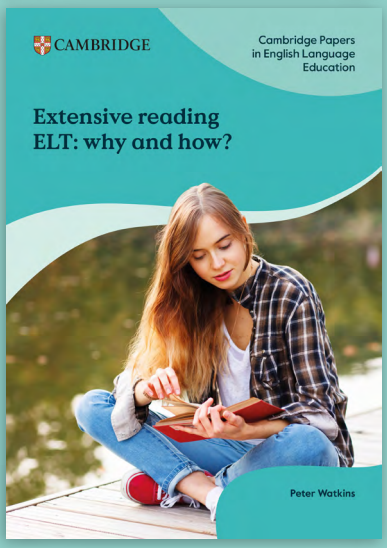
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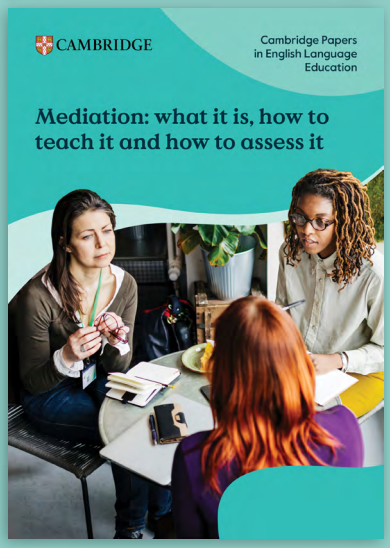
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