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Meeting the Needs of Learners with Specific Learning Difficulties in Online and Face-to-Face Language Classrooms: Teacher Beliefs and Practices

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Drawing on communities of practice and social cognitive learning theories, this paper explores language teachers' beliefs, knowledge and practices concerning the provision of high-quality education to learners with specific learning difficulties in various educational settings around the world. The data sample for this paper comprises qualitative data (video-recorded interviews and teaching resources) collected from six teachers working across various educational settings (primary, secondary, college and university) across several geographical areas (Europe, Middle East, and Southeast Asia). Thematic analysis was adopted to analyse the data. The findings suggest that teachers continue to experience challenges in educating learners with specific learning difficulties regardless of the educational setting. Limited opportunities for receiving specialised training in this area have been identified by several teachers as one of the key factors affecting the quality of their practice. The change in the mode of instruction from face-to-face to online was not always reported as negatively affecting the quality of educational provision to learners with specific learning difficulties. Technology-assisted online lesson delivery was seen as being advantageous to learners with some types of learning difficulties. Findings from this paper can be useful to teacher-practitioners and teacher-educators who are interested in improving the quality of language education for learners with specific learning difficulties.

Keywords: second language learning, online teaching and learning, assessment, instructional accommodations, specific learning difficulties, teacher beliefs and practice

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Zadovoljevanje potreb učencev s posebnimi učnimi težavami pri poučevanju jezika na daljavo in v živo: prepričanja in prakse učiteljev

Oksana Afitska in Nur Ehsan Mohd Said

Na podlagi teorij izkustvenih skupnosti in socialnega kognitivnega učenja ta članek raziskuje prepričanja, znanje in prakse učiteljev jezikov v povezavi z zagotavljanjem visokokakovostnega izobraževanja učencem s specifičnimi učnimi težavami v različnih izobraževalnih okoljih po vsem svetu. Vzorec podatkov za ta članek obsega kvalitativne podatke (videoposnetke intervjujev in didaktična gradiva), zbrane pri šestih učiteljev, ki delajo v različnih izobraževalnih okoljih (osnovna, srednja, višja in visoka šola) na več zemljepisnih območjih (Evropa, Bližnji vzhod in jugovzhodna Azija). Pri tem je bila uporabljena tematska analiza podatkov. Ugotovitve kažejo, da se učitelji ne glede na izobraževalno okolje še naprej spoprijemajo z izzivi pri izobraževanju učencev, dijakov in študentov s posebnimi učnimi težavami. Omejene možnosti za pridobitev specializiranega usposabljanja na tem področju je več učiteljev opredelilo kot enega ključnih dejavnikov, ki vplivajo na kakovost njihove prakse. Sprememba načina poučevanja iz dela v živo v spletno izvedbo ni vedno negativno vplivala na kakovost izobraževanja za učence, dijake in študente s specifičnimi učnimi težavami. S tehnologijo podprto spletno izvajanje lekcij je bilo ocenjeno kot koristno za učence, dijake in študente z nekaterimi vrstami učnih težav. Ugotovitve tega članka lahko koristijo učiteljem praktikom in izobraževalcem učiteljev, ki jih zanima izboljšanje kakovosti jezikovnega izobraževanja za učence, dijake in študente s specifičnimi učnimi težavami.

Ključne besede: učenje drugega jezika, poučevanje in učenje na daljavo, izobraževalne prilagoditve, specifične učne težave, prepričanja in prakse učiteljev

Introduction

In today's globalised world, which promotes student diversity and inclusivity, teachers must adjust their practice and continually upgrade their knowledge to educate their students effectively. Teachers' practices are informed by their professional knowledge, beliefs, and environment. All these components are active, dynamic, and fluid; they carry bidirectional influences and create reciprocal relationships and mutual causation between one another (Eun, 2019).

Social cognitive learning theory (Bandura, 1997) and communities of practice learning theory (Wenger, 1998) aid in understanding these relationships better and enable us to examine teacher practices and their underlying motives more thoroughly. The social cognitive learning theory emphasises cognitive processes in human-environment interactions, with 'self-efficacy' and 'outcome expectations' being its two main constructs (Bandura, 1997). In the field of education, the term 'teacher efficacy is used, referring to 'teachers' beliefs of their capabilities to affect changes that improve students' learning, even [in circumstances] beyond teachers' control, such as home environment, intelligence, and other external factors' (Eun, 2019, p. 77).

Eun (2019) argues that 'the cognitive construal of [teachers'] past performances, situational factors, and their knowledge and skills all influence how much [teachers] will perceive to be capable of [achieving in specific circumstances]' (p. 76). Indeed, when ordinary teachers are placed in educational contexts where they need to work with unfamiliar groups of learners, such as second language learners or learners with specific learning difficulties (SpLD) in mainstream classrooms, their levels of self-efficacy (i.e., their perceptions about their capabilities to educate these groups of learners effectively) as well as their outcome expectations (i.e., judgments about the likely consequences their actions or inactions might produce) may be low. Access to specialised training and resources, as well as ongoing professional support within their educational contexts, becomes crucial in these situations. To help us better understand the beliefs, and practices influenced by beliefs, of teachers who work with learners who have specific learning difficulties, we will draw on Wenger's (1998) communities of practice learning theory, which explores concepts of (teacher) identity, professional and social interaction and practice in (educational) settings that have shared enterprises.

Specific learning difficulties (the term 'disorders' is used in specialised literature) are 'neurodevelopmental disorders typically diagnosed in early school-aged children, although may not be recognized until adulthood' (American Psychiatric Association, n.d.). In this paper, we will use the term 'difficulties' instead of 'disabilities' to highlight the interactional view of disabilities

(in educational contexts) as opposed to the deficit view (in clinical contexts). SpLDs are present in people who experience persistent difficulties in at least one of three areas: reading, written expression, and/or math. In this paper, we will focus on learning difficulties that affect the development of learners' literacy skills (i.e., reading, writing, and speaking).

Dyslexia is the most common type of SpLD. It affects twenty per cent of the population (Shaywitz et al., (2021) and can occur in people with a range of intellectual/cognitive abilities (Rose, 2009, p. 10). The International Dyslexia Association (2002) defines dyslexia as 'difficulties with accurate and/or fluent word recognition, poor spelling and decoding abilities'. These difficulties may lead to 'secondary consequences [which] include problems in reading comprehension and reduced reading experience that can impede growth of vocabulary and background knowledge'.

In second-language classrooms, dyslexic learners require support with the development of all language skills, including communication, not just reading and writing, as per the requirements of The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR, 2001) which is used as a reference document for standardised accreditation of learners' second language proficiency.

Apart from dyslexia, other learning difficulties that are relevant to this paper are dysgraphia (difficulties with spelling, grammar, punctuation, and handwriting), visual and hearing impairments, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). It is common for SpLD to share specific features across them. For example, 'processing speed difficulties occur in both dyslexia and ADHD' (Carroll et al., 2020, p. 19).

Research evidence suggests that poor phonological awareness, among other factors, can affect dyslexic learners' literacy skills (Carroll & Breadmore, 2018; Carroll et al., 2016; Geva & Massey-Garrison, 2013; Pennington et al., 2012). Therefore, recommendations are made for the provision of instructed training for dyslexic learners in phonological awareness to improve their literacy skills (Bus & Ijzendoorn, 1999; Melby-Lervag et al., 2012). Furthermore, guidance for effective education of learners with dyslexia (Inclusion in Europe through Knowledge and Technology, 2015) encourages the use of learner-centred, communication and action-oriented approaches, which account for learners' 'specific characteristics, needs, interests, differences in learning styles [and] the specifics of their natural language[s] and culture[s]' (p. 9).

Furthermore, learning becomes more difficult and teaching more challenging when classrooms include learners with SpLD who come from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. The challenge of addressing the needs of various groups of learners has been long addressed by the introduction

of differentiated instruction techniques into mainstream classrooms (Gavish, 2017; Hemmings & Woodcock, 2011).

However, to date, research that unpacks how differentiated instruction can be used with SpLD learners, and how teachers could be better supported with effective implementation of this technique in SpLD contexts remains scarce (Hoover & de Bettencourt, 2018; Reddig et al., 2021). Specifically, research showed that mainstream teachers, who participated in pre-service and in-service training courses, were insufficiently prepared for the application of suitable and effective inclusive educational strategies in classes with SpLD learners (Forlin & Sin, 2017; Gavish, 2017; Hoover & deBettencourt, 2018). Moreover, teachers believed that limited access to appropriate resources had hindered them from developing the right attitude, beliefs, and understanding of SpLD learners' needs, which are crucial for becoming inclusive experts (Forlin & Sin, 2017). Fisher (2013), in her study to investigate the extent of general education teachers' preparation in primary schools, included teacher-participants who worked with learners with special educational needs in the general classroom. The teachers managed learners with a) autism, b) language or speech disorders, c) SpLD, and d) emotional disabilities. Using a multiple-method quasi-experimental design, Fisher applied an original instrument called the General Educators Preparedness for Inclusive Education among 52 third-, fourth-, and fifth-grade teachers in south Mississippi in the United States. The quantitative data demonstrated that general education teachers were mostly uncertain about their preparedness to accommodate the requirements of special needs learners. However, of the four special educational needs, teachers considered themselves to be better prepared in assisting learners with SpLD than those with autism, language/speech disorder, or emotional disabilities. Meanwhile, the qualitative data indicated teachers' lack of belief in handling learners with exceptionalities in the mainstream or general education classroom.

Teachers also noted that having more practical hands-on experiences, opportunities for collaboration with special education personnel, and assistance with instructional materials' development were a part of their expectations to help them successfully accommodate the needs of learners with SpLD in their classrooms (Fisher, 2013). Other studies have also indicated an increase in teachers' self-efficacy when they took the initiative to proactively accommodate the needs of their SpLD learners (Hoover & de Bettencourt, 2018). This initiative, in turn, led to teachers developing a good rapport with their SpLD learners and to creating positive relationships with them (Reddig et al., 2021).

Furthermore, research indicates that collaborative efforts between general education teachers and special education teachers can lead to the establishment of productive and successful learning environments for these learners. Olson et

al. (2016) researched 12 educational personnel (school administrators, special education teachers, and general education teachers) in order to gather their views on how they defined and provided access to students with severe disabilities in the general education curriculum. The data were collected via questionnaires, interviews, observations, observation reflections, and artefacts. The findings revealed that the school personnel construed multi-dimensional interpretations of access for learners with severe disabilities to the general education curriculum. The interpretations informed complex educational practices, with 'shared responsibility' for the provision of support across various educational levels and roles being identified as one of the core units of practice.

With regard to the best location for access, the school personnel believed that the general education context would benefit learners with disabilities the most. Access to general education classrooms entails access to general education teachers who are considered content experts. As such, the teachers were expected to transcend the regular role of curriculum and content experts and to learn to perform tasks that were traditionally completed by special educators through differentiation, accommodations, and modifications.

In a more recent study by Reddig et al. (2021) that examined special and general education teachers' perceptions of culturally and linguistically diverse students with disabilities, 13 teachers from three urban high school settings were interviewed in a focus group to obtain their perceptions of the academic performance of students with mild disabilities in an inclusive setting. The main findings include the positive attitude and acknowledgement of sufficient collaboration of special education and general education teachers in which the general/mainstream education teachers displayed respect towards the special education educators and accepted them fully in the classroom. The study also reported the practice of team teaching, which (despite the term's meaning) mainly involved the general education teachers getting advice from the special education teachers.

This paper, thus, aims to contribute knowledge to the strand of the ELT field concerned with the exploration of second language teachers' perceptions and practices (teaching, assessment, and use of instructional resources) while working with learners with SpLD. It also aims to provide insights into how teachers' practices change when the medium of instruction shifts from face-to-face to online learning mode. Thus, the three research questions informing this paper are:

1. What are the second language teachers' beliefs about educating learners with specific learning difficulties, including their self-perceived readiness to work with this group of learners?

2. What are the second language teachers' actual and/or reported practices (teaching, assessment, and selection of instructional resources) in classes including learners with specific learning difficulties?
3. Has the shift to that online mode of teaching delivery had any impact on their practice? If so, what was the impact?

Method

The study reported in this paper adopts a small-scale qualitative research design. Its data is comprised of 45–60-minute long video-recorded interviews with six TESOL teachers, samples of lesson plans and teacher-devised or adapted materials for SpLD learners.

Participants

The participants for this study were recruited using a convenience population sampling method. Each researcher drew on their own professional contexts and links within them to approach potential appropriate participants for the study.

Table 1

Participant profiles

Teacher	Region and Country	Education phase[2]	Gender	Years of teaching experience	Formal SEN[3] Training	SENCo[4] Responsibility
Adam[1]	Middle East Bahrain	Primary	Male	14 years	Yes	Yes
David		Secondary	Male	18 years	Yes	No
Aina	Southeast Asia Malaysia	Primary	Female	11 years	No	No
Nazim		Secondary	Male	15 years	Yes	No
Kamila	The UK England	College	Female	10 years	No	No
Christina	Europe Germany	University	Female	15 years	Yes (basic)	No

Note. [1]Teachers' real names were substituted with pseudonyms; [2]Educational phase on experiences from which the interviewees were drawing; [3]Special Educational Needs and [4]Special Educational Needs Coordinator.

When the participants were identified, detailed research information sheets and consent forms were shared with them for closer familiarisation with the research procedures and objectives and for form signing, by which participants consented to participate in this study. In some cases, invitation letters were sent to educational establishments to fulfil their internal administrative procedures

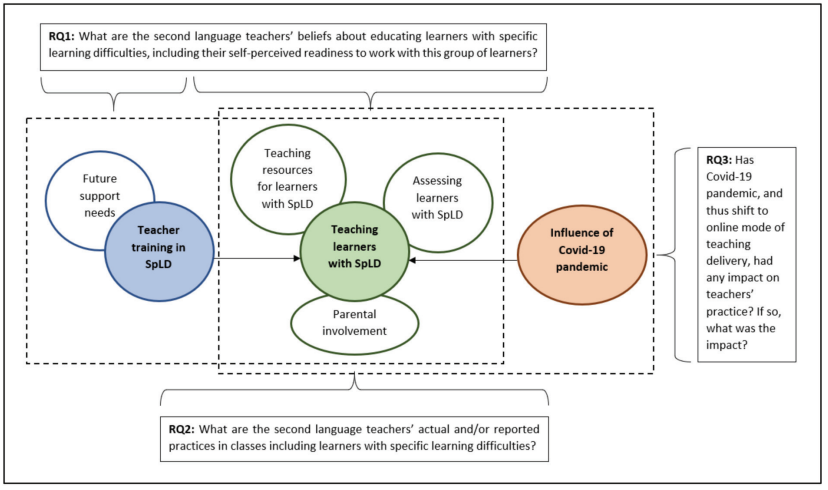
for participation in academic research. The research project obtained full ethical approval from the lead university prior to its commencement. Participants from four geographical locations were recruited for this research: Europe, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia. Their details are outlined in Table 1. All participants needed to have fulfilled the following criteria: (1) be a second-language teacher, (2) work with learners with specific learning difficulties or those believed to have specific learning difficulties (in some contexts, it is still uncommon and/or difficult for parents to get formal acknowledgement/accreditation of their children's SpLD condition), (3) work in either primary, secondary, college or university levels of education. Teacher participants were not required to have formal training in working with learners with SpLD prior to participation in this study.

Research procedure

The study was conducted remotely due to social restrictions imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020–2021. Each teacher participant was interviewed once using either Skype or the MS Teams interactive platform. Following the interviews, teachers were encouraged to share samples of their lesson plans and teaching materials adapted to the needs of SpLD learners with the researchers. Teachers with SENCo (Special Educational Needs Coordinator) responsibilities were also encouraged to share samples of their SpLD training materials with the research team. Three core themes and four sub-themes were identified as target areas for analysis, with each theme/sub-theme aligned to a particular research question (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Research framework



Instrument

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect the data. The questions were grouped thematically to facilitate data analysis at a later stage. All interviews were transcribed verbatim for analysis and blindly coded by members of the research team. The rate of inter-rater coding reliability was 92%. Figure 2 gives an overview of the guiding questions used for teacher interviews.

Figure 2

Guiding questions for teacher interviews

No	Question
1.	Do you have any special training in working in SpLD context?
2.	How many learners with SpLD do you have in your class? What type(s) of SpLD do they have?
3.	What activities do learners with SpLD tend to find the easiest in your second language classes?
4.	What activities do learners with SpLD tend to find the most difficult/challenging in your second language classes?
5.	How do you know/notice that learners are struggling with one or another activity or aspect of it? What do you do to help them?
6.	How do you assess the SpLD learners' knowledge of second language?
7.	Which resources / materials do you use in your second language lessons with SpLD learners?
8.	Do you use any additional (self-created / self-found) resources? How effective are these resources?
9.	Would you want any other resources to be available to you? If so which?
10.	Do you set up second language homework to your class / SpLD learners? How do you decide what material to give as homework?
11.	Do you check homework of SpLD learners at the next lesson? How?
12.	How do you see the role of parents/peers in helping learners with SpLD with their second language homework? Would you want parents/peers to be involved at all?
13.	How/to what extent?
14.	How important/helpful do you see group work / peer-work for SpLD learners in the classroom?
15.	Have your practices of working with SpLD learners been affected by Covid pandemic? If so, how?

Results and discussion

Teacher experiences and beliefs

The first research question aimed to explore TESOL teachers' beliefs about educating learners with specific learning difficulties and the extent of their self-reported readiness to work with this group of learners. The findings revealed that all interviewed teachers had a positive attitude towards educating learners with SpLD, despite some not having received formal training in this. Kamila noted that, in the beginning, it was difficult for her to identify learners

with SpLD despite her having a degree in a related subject area. However, over time she became skilled at doing this, identifying SpLD learners even prior to records about their needs being shared with her via the institutions' formal channels. Teachers' positive attitudes, however, were not universal. Teachers noted that some of their colleagues would prefer not to have SpLD learners in their classes, while others would teach them but would do it the same way they teach the rest of their students, pretending that SpLD learners did not have any special needs. Other teachers felt that they should not teach this group of learners since they had no training in SpLD.

> *Many teachers feel they are not trained for that area [SpLD]. They've got this presumption that it's like a very specialist area and if I haven't got a qualification I can't do anything* (Adam, 15/09/2020, 16.00–16.11).

> *Teachers don't always come forward with the student who's got [SpLD]. They might just try to see it out, or they might take action to try to sort of hide that up, so they do not always come to us voluntarily* (Adam, 15/09/2020, 15.04–15.10).

The use of avoidance strategies and the expression of negative attitudes by teachers may be due to many factors. Some teachers might not know what the distinguishing features of cognitive and physical behaviours of SpLD learners are. In the Malaysian National Curriculum for schools, for example, there is no differentiation between the teaching of non-SpLD and SpLD learners. Nazim noted that, in his context, teachers were required to teach SpLD learners using a mainstream learner curriculum with the same evaluation rubrics and learning objectives for SpLD and non-SPLD learners. Other teachers might be able to identify SpLD learners in their classes but not know how to address their needs due to limited or no training in SpLD instruction. Yet other teachers might be willing to learn about the teaching of SpLD learners but might not have opportunities to do this.

> *Sometimes teachers generally might not notice the difference. I've had had like, for example, we get teaching assistants. A teaching assistant has made an observation about a student that the teacher hasn't noticed himself. And I've gone into the class and I've been really surprised that, why did the teacher not notice this? How is this coming to me from the teaching assistant? So you can get some people where they just don't notice* (Adam, 15/09/2020, 16.26-16.52).

Interestingly, Kamila, Christina, and Aina reported having self-educated themselves about SpLD learning and teaching. Some drew on their professional knowledge obtained as part of their bachelor's degrees; others reported attending short voluntary SpLD training sessions provided by their institutions, and yet others admitted searching the internet in the hope of finding answers to their questions. Having received initial training only in mainstream English education, Aina was nonetheless later required to teach SpLD children. She admitted that she had to acquire sign language from her learners:

> *When I was assigned to my first school and realising that I had no prior training in Special Education, I learnt from YouTube but later took the opportunity to spend time with the pupils after school to learn from them. They were my first mentors before a group of teacher trainees came along who helped me when I had questions related to sign language... I felt embarrassed at first when the pupils were better at signing than me but in my second year of teaching I caught up and improved tremendously* (Aina, 14/10/21, 17.48-21.15).

Despite the current fragmented provision of SpLD training in many institutions, it is encouraging to see that in some educational settings, shifts are starting to take place for better provision of systematic and continuous SpLD support as part of in-service teacher training.

> *I feel we're making a lot of progress. I mean, in terms of us in the region, I know that other [second language teaching]centres looked at us, and they're taking our example, which shows that we're making some progress* (Adam, 15/09/2020, 16.26–16.44).

The interview data has also revealed that, in many educational contexts, it is still common for teachers without formal SEN training and SEN coordinators to perform in-house diagnostic observations and assessments to identify learners with SpLD, as many SpLD learners continue to come to schools without formal certification of their condition. In light of this fact, providing specialised training and raising teachers' awareness about the effective education of SpLD learners becomes even more paramount.

The findings presented above echo findings obtained by other scholars working in the field of teacher education and teacher cognition. Kormos and Kontra (2008) interviewed a group of Hungarian second-language teachers, special education teachers and speech therapists and found that teachers,

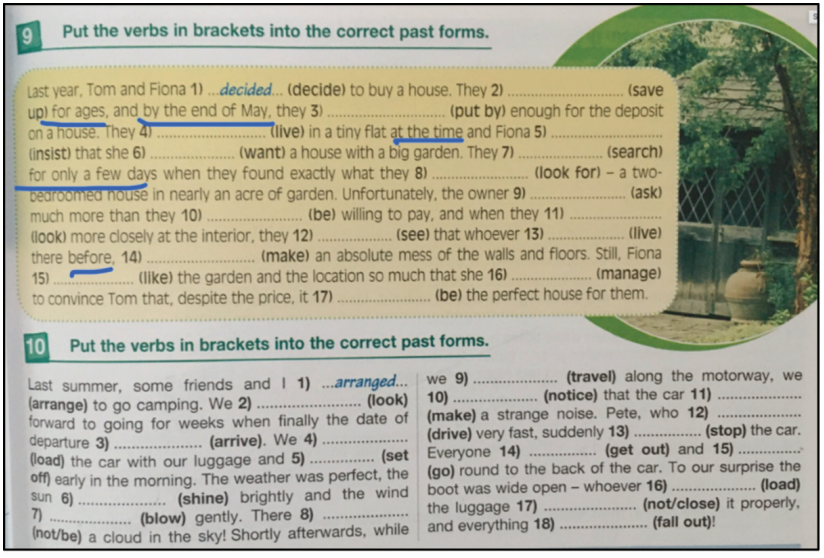
regardless of their professional roles, believed that dyslexia was an influencing factor affecting all aspects of SpLD learners' second-language learning experiences, and not only those concerned with the development of their spelling and reading skills. Despite these findings in many other, less specialised educational contexts, teachers of SpLD learners do not always know how to teach them effectively and how to integrate them into their classrooms (Kormos et al., 2009). This lack of professional knowledge among teachers, together with the lack of support from educational settings, leads to increased rates of anxiety in learners with SpLD, their unwillingness to engage with second language learning process and negative attitudes towards it (Csizér et al., 2010; Kormos & Czizer, 2010). On the topic of the importance of professional teacher development courses, Nijakowska (2014) notes that 'successful inclusive teaching needs to be *underpinned by a solid knowledge base* about the nature of [SpLD]. Only by understanding the cognitive, emotional and social issues associated with SpLD can teachers make *informed pedagogical decisions* and effective adaptations in their teaching, and form positive attitudes to inclusive teaching practice' (p. 107; our emphasis). In recent years more professional development courses have become available for teachers working with learners with SpLD. A recent study by Kormos and Nijakowska (2017) investigated teachers' beliefs and perceptions about their use of inclusive educational practices with dyslexic students. The findings revealed that teachers who engaged meaningfully with the course by either completing more tasks in it or by posting more comments demonstrated increased post-course self-efficacy beliefs and reported lower levels of worry about the implementation of inclusive language teaching practices, respectively.

Teaching practices

Our second research question examined teachers' contemporary practices concerning the education of learners with SpLD in mainstream TESOL classrooms. In terms of teaching practices, teachers reported using various accommodations to account for their SpLD learners' diverse needs. Drawing on her experience of working with learners with dyslexia who often misspell words, have difficulties with pronunciation, and issues with reading comprehension, Kamila noted that she would expand texts' reading times, enlarge texts' font if necessary and highlight certain parts in texts to help students pay specific attention to their specific parts (Figure 3).

Figure 3

Accommodation in a language coursebook for SpLD learners: highlighting for better focus and comprehension



9 Put the verbs in brackets into the correct past forms.

Last year, Tom and Fiona 1) ...*decided*... (decide) to buy a house. They 2) ..... (save up) for ages, and by the end of May, they 3) ..... (put by) enough for the deposit on a house. They 4) ..... (live) in a tiny flat at the time and Fiona 5) ..... (insist) that she 6) ..... (want) a house with a big garden. They 7) ..... (search) for only a few days when they found exactly what they 8) ..... (look for) – a two-bedroomed house in nearly an acre of garden. Unfortunately, the owner 9) ..... (ask) much more than they 10) ..... (be) willing to pay, and when they 11) ..... (look) more closely at the interior, they 12) ..... (see) that whoever 13) ..... (live) there before, 14) ..... (make) an absolute mess of the walls and floors. Still, Fiona 15) ..... (like) the garden and the location so much that she 16) ..... (manage) to convince Tom that, despite the price, it 17) ..... (be) the perfect house for them.

10 Put the verbs in brackets into the correct past forms.

Last summer, some friends and I 1) ...*arranged*... (arrange) to go camping. We 2) ..... (look) forward to going for weeks when finally the date of departure 3) ..... (arrive). We 4) ..... (load) the car with our luggage and 5) ..... (set off) early in the morning. The weather was perfect, the sun 6) ..... (shine) brightly and the wind 7) ..... (blow) gently. There 8) ..... (not/be) a cloud in the sky! Shortly afterwards, while we 9) ..... (travel) along the motorway, we 10) ..... (notice) that the car 11) ..... (make) a strange noise. Pete, who 12) ..... (drive) very fast, suddenly 13) ..... (stop) the car. Everyone 14) ..... (get out) and 15) ..... (go) round to the back of the car. To our surprise the boot was wide open – whoever 16) ..... (load) the luggage 17) ..... (not/close) it properly, and everything 18) ..... (fall out)!

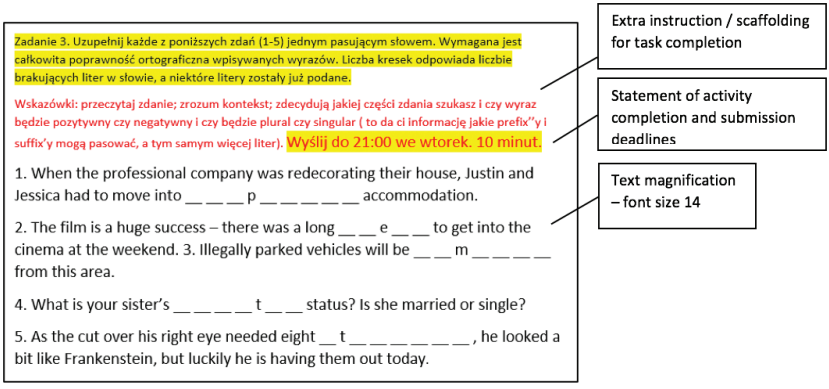
For writing activities, she would break texts for summarising down into shorter paragraphs and offer learners synonymous expressions to help them express themselves more freely and clearly in writing. For speaking activities, Kamila would allow her dyslexic learners to use prompt cards, encourage them to rehearse their spoken texts or share these texts with her for informal checking and feedback prior to the class. She would also support her learners' listening comprehension by allowing learners to listen to a spoken text several times, noting that this practice would be adjusted accordingly if learners were preparing for formal exams. Furthermore, in the interview, Kamila mentioned stretching her dyslexic and dysgraphic students to take notes during her classes, noting that they could do them on a computer if that were helpful to them. Where computers were not available to support writing activity, Kamila would encourage her dysgraphic students to write in capital letters. Despite this activity being time consuming, Kamila said that it helped her considerably in decoding and comprehending her learners' written work, which otherwise could have been incomprehensible in many places. Another issue that Kamila raised in her interview relates to difficulties that dyslexic students have in lessons where they acquire subject-specific content through the medium of a second language. This is a challenging situation for any learner, let alone for a learner with dyslexia. Kamila commented:

> *Dyslexic students struggle with their ability to understand terminology. There are more words [on one page] than [should be] allowed for them not to understand [in order to comprehend the text], then they are learning a language [in addition to learning the subject matter] and they don't really understand what the meaning behind it is. So, it's a much more slow process for them than for everybody [else]' (Kamila, 25/09/2020, 25.25-22.57)*

Adam echoed Kamila's practice and highlighted the importance of explicitly teaching phonics to dyslexic students through the use of pure sounds and employment of effective instructional techniques, such as Engelmann's direct instruction approach.

Figure 4

Accommodation in a language study book for SpLD learners: text magnification, provision of extra scaffolding for task completion, clear setting of activity timing and submission deadlines.



With regards to teaching language to learners with visual impairments, David noted making enlargements to reading texts, using audio tracks instead of visual clues to provide supportive cognitive stimuli about objects to students (e.g., using a sound of 'something grilling' as a representation of a 'barbeque' image), and significantly increasing amount of teacher speaking time during lessons, despite general ELT advice being in favour for reducing teacher talk time in second language classrooms. David explained that teachers with visually impaired learners need to:

> *[…] think very, very carefully about every single thing that [they] say, and not only things that [they] say, but [also] noises in the classroom, and*

> *positioning, and where people are sitting, and anything unusual that happens in the classroom. […] I found that the best way to do it was to simply have a running commentary from myself of everything that was happening. […] If I did anything on the board I would say 'now I'm going to stand up, and go to the board and I'm just going to draw a table for us to decide where to put these verb forms'* (David, 07/10/2020, 08.46–10.20).

Furthermore, Christina, Adam, and Nazim commented on their experiences working with learners with hearing impairments. Nazim spoke favourably about the use of tablets and group work activities to capture the attention of learners with hearing difficulties. Christina and Adam noted the importance of clear articulation of sounds and careful monitoring of their unobstructed projection to students (such as teachers keeping hands away from their mouths) when teaching pronunciation. Christina also highlighted the importance of agreeing to wear a special microphone that transmits sounds from the speaker (for example, a teacher) to the student's hearing device, which allows them to comprehend and process spoken language. Furthermore, Christina pointed out that teachers need to be aware that learners with hearing implants not only learn a second language through them but also learn how to use their assistive devices to process and understand speech sounds per se (let alone in a foreign language), making this task doubly complex and requiring extra time and patience on the part of both the learner and the teacher. As with visually impaired learners, constant attention to various input channels, such as language production by other learners in class, and their aural echoing was also noted as important for learners with hearing difficulties. Finally, Christina highlighted lip-reading technique as a useful tool for learners who have hearing difficulties in learning second language phonemes as well as in processing their teacher's speech more generally. She said:

> *Clearly enunciating, making the lip movements, wearing lipstick really helped her. Just because the lips were clearer, she could see clearer, or something […] she did a class on pronunciation […] she could see the lip shapes, and we did a lot of work with [me] looking in the mirror and trying to describe, you know, the positions of the tongue and this kind of thing, because she couldn't particularly find out differences between certain phonemes, especially when the German phoneme was similar, so we made a lot more emphasis on the visualising and feeling'* (Christina, 24/11/2020, 10.28–11.49).

With regards to teaching learners with ADHD, David commented that he would give these learners variety of tasks and would do a quick turnover of them to keep learners focused and engaged. For example, when practising handwritten letter formation with them, he would let students trace letter shapes first, then give them the option to colour the letters and then an option to draw. Kamila noted that to support her autistic students, she would encourage them to note down things they would like her to explain in more depth individually. She would also pay specific attention to explaining idiomatic expressions and phrasal verbs to these learners.

All teachers noted the importance of parental support when teaching learners with SpLD. However, some teachers highlighted that parents did not always come forward to support their children in learning, believing that this was the responsibility of their teachers and schools.

> *Some parents will say something like 'you are a teacher - you do it'. My child is there, everything should happen at school […] If I see that the parent can't really participate in his or her child's learning process, I usually ask my students to send me their homework* (Kamila, 25/09/2020, 18.49–22.17).

Teachers named four ways in which parents could support SpLD students in learning: (1) go over an upcoming lesson's content, such as reading a text or exploring a visual, with the student prior to the lesson, (2) help a student rehearse or practise their answer to a particular task prior to the class, (3) monitor student's timely completion of homework tasks in small blocks, or (4) act as a connecting link between a student and a teacher by sharing student's belatedly completed work with the teacher outside of lesson's time. Interestingly, Adam noted that sometimes parental support could become a disruptive rather than supportive resource to learners' education, particularly when parents do not follow the instructional approach used by the teacher:

> *I don't feel it's always that useful, especially not at the literacy level. Because what often happens is when [learners] are at home in their home environment, the one who's helping them with their homework might undo everything that was done in the classroom. If you're trying to teach a particular approach to phonics, and then the parent hasn't learned that, they delete that, and send their child back [to class] with less what you have sent them home with (Adam, 15/09/2020, 41.03-41.54).*

Practices described by teachers in this research have also been noted as being beneficial for the education of learners with SpLD in other scholarly literature. For example, in 'Inclusion in Europe through Knowledge and Technology' (2015), teachers are advised to use 'structured, sequential and multisensory teaching approaches, making frequent use of repeated positive feedback' (p. 10). Indeed, Nijakowska (2008) found that a group of second language learners with SpLDs, who were taught using multisensory structured language instruction, significantly outperformed the control group of learners who had no SpLDs in a second language word-reading and spelling post-test. Similar findings were obtained by Ganschow and Sparks (1995) and Sparks et al. (1998). Despite these positive findings, the multisensory structured language approach has yet to make its way into regular second language classrooms as 'foreign language teacher training programs do not focus on how to best address struggling foreign language learner needs through explicit instruction' (Pfenninger, 2015, p. 113). In terms of more specific language skills-related practices, teachers in scholarly literature are advised to use bi-modal presentation (i.e., a presentation that requires the use of read-aloud assistance) when giving more challenging reading comprehension texts to learners with SpLD (Košak-Babuder et al., 2018). Furthermore, to support gifted dyslexic readers, Van Viersen et al. (2017) recommend allowing them to use alternative reading strategies, such as sight-word reading or processing words in larger orthographic units. Finally, Farukh and Vulchanova (2016) and de Bree and Unsworth (2014) recommend that exposure to bilingual education programmes can potentially benefit learners with dyslexic-type reading and lexical difficulties.

Assessment practices

On the subject of assessing the language development of learners with SpLD, teachers focused on discussion of three key areas. Firstly, David raised the importance of teaching assistants' support in the accurate and thorough assessment of language the progression of learners with specific learning difficulties. David said that his teaching assistant's help was crucial in allowing timely assessment of the SpLD learner's progression, without taking away his instructional time and attention from the class:

> *The benefit of having a dedicated TA was fantastic […] You can monitor students when you go around, but with this particular student [student with visual impairment] it was very difficult, partly because she was so shy and partly because she spoke so quietly and I would have had to have really just focused on her for it to assess her in fluency, or cohesiveness, or*

grammar range. So, I got feedback from the TA, who I would give instructions to in advance of the class and say can you just check that she can do this? Can you see how she is with this? Can you check her fluency, whether she's using any synonyms […] (David, 07/10/2020, 25.06–26.39)

Secondly, Adam raised the issue of inclusivity in assessment for SpLD learners and use of appropriate accommodations in assessment practices for them. For example, he noted that visually impaired students could still be assessed on their mastery of written (as opposed to spoken) language. This could be done by giving them tasks requiring the production of creative language, for example. This language could be, and indeed is, used in writing, but in the case of these learners, it would be elicited verbally from them. Adam also spoke highly supportively in favour of appropriate assessment accommodations in listening comprehension activities, which would not unfairly differentiate or disadvantage learners with hearing difficulties from other students in the class. He specifically noted making scripts of CD recordings available to SpLD learners during listening tasks. Parental support could also be seen as a form of learning accommodation. Aina noted that care should be taken to ensure that parental support with the completion of SpLD learners' homework (which is later to be assessed by their teacher) does not invalidate or skew the accuracy of the learners' independent performance.

Thirdly, Christina raised the issue of teachers' limited awareness about the necessity to use adjusted marking scales or marking criteria when assessing the work of SpLD learners. She gave an example of a situation where dyslexic learners' spelling tests were marked in the same way as the work of their peers who did not have SpLD. Colleagues from the SEN team drew teachers' attention to the need to adjust exercised practices to make assessments for dyslexic learners fairer. In consultation with teachers, the decision was reached to disregard dyslexic learners' spelling errors so long as they did not interfere with the assessor's comprehension/recognition of the tested word.

With regards to feedback on learners' assessed work, Kamila noted that she would offer feedback to her dyslexic learners using bullet points lists, rather than sets of paragraphs containing long sentences. She also noted paying particular attention to the function of her feedback, prioritising scaffolding feedback over evaluative.

Review of scholarly literature on the topic of assessment of learners with SpLD reveals findings similar to those reported in this paper. Additionally, a couple of other recommendations are worth mentioning here. Gajar (1987) recommends using the Modern Language Aptitude Test (MLAT) (Carroll &

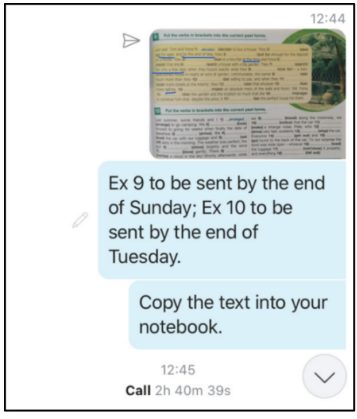
Sapon, 1959) as a diagnostic instrument for identifying learners with language learning difficulties, as this test differentiated well between learners with SpLD and those with no SpLD. Sparks et al. (1989) argue in favour of using cognitive and linguistic assessment tools in addition to the MLAT test to identify learners with SpLD. Kormos, Csizér and Sarkadi (2009) highlight the importance of using assessment tasks that do not emphasise accuracy and spelling in SpLD learners' written work, as this helps to minimise anxiety in this group of learners. Abrams (2008) argues in favour of alternative assessment tasks and weekly tutorial sessions to assist SpLD learners in learning a second language. The author also notes that this practice requires substantial additional resources and relies on effective collaboration between a teaching team and learning support services. The advantages of using dynamic language assessment procedures alongside multisensory structured language instruction have also been noted by the ELT scholars researching SpLD contexts. Schneider and Ganschow (2000, p. 72) define dynamic (cognitive) assessment as 'an ongoing diagnostic prescriptive approach to instruction, which allows for the continuous interaction between teacher and learner that needs to occur in order for some individuals to discover solutions to learning problems'. The authors (ibid) highlighted the importance of using guided-discovery procedures, which incorporate elements of dynamic assessment, to help SpLD learners develop explicit knowledge of the second language.

Materials' accommodations

The extent of support with accommodating materials for learners with SpLD needs varied depending on the context in which the interviewed teachers worked. Kamila noted that, in her context, teachers, despite being informed about the nature of SpLD learners' needs, were not instructed about how to teach them - 'it [was] up to every teacher to modify and prepare lessons accordingly' (Kamila, 25/09/2020, 04.24-04.29). In Adam's content, support was available, but only some teachers chose to make use of it – 'Some [teachers were] really enthusiastic [about making accommodations to their teaching materials], some really went for them, [however] some, just saw it as more work and as soon as you turned around they'd just go back to the normal approach' (Adam, 15/09/2020, 35.26-35.44). All interviewed teachers noted the following materials' accommodations as being helpful to SpLD learners: increasing the font size of resources, printing them on coloured paper, highlighting parts of text and keywords in materials, simplifying texts by paraphrasing, removing complex structures or content, including extra visual or aural support into original activities and materials (Figure 4).

Teachers also noted the following instructional accommodations as being useful: inviting learners to explain new terms in their own words instead of merely copying their definitions from a dictionary, encouraging them to put new grammatical structures into their own sentences, allowing students to work independently and at their own pace so that not to overstress them, giving students options about how to complete their tasks (e.g., by drawing, colouring, singing), providing students with handouts outlining structure of the lesson and order of its activities, ensuring that students have access to online resources and to assistive tools required for their learning, breaking down longer and more demanding tasks in smaller sections and setting up separate submission deadlines for them to ensure their timely completion by learners with SpLD (Figure 5).

Figure 5
Instructional accommodation: scaffolding task completion by managing its size and completion route



Finally, Christina highlighted the need to draw on SpLD students' strengths to allow them to engage with tasks alongside other learners, yet not be disadvantaged by these tasks' requirements. She said:

> *[…] particularly listening is interesting. What I have done is, instead of playing the listening from CD for everybody, I got the transcript and asked the student who has difficulties with hearing to read it, so that other [students] could get listening practice, because they listened to her. And she could still do comprehension or spotting language features or whatever, because she has had access to the text* (Christina, 24/11/2020, 13.02–13.26).

Teaching online and its impact on teaching practice

The third research question explored whether shift to online mode of teaching delivery had any impact on teachers' instructional practice and, if so, what that impact was. Interestingly, teachers' views on this topic varied. Adam noted that teaching learners online, both SpLD and non-SpLD, was challenging in at least two regards. Firstly, many students, and teachers alike, did not have sufficient level of digital literacy to engage with online mode of teaching and learning effectively. This was particularly true for younger learners who 'would depend on how capable their brother or their parents were in helping them use the device' (Adam, 15/09/2020, 22.19–22.26). Another issue related to the teacher's reduced ability to control and manage the class and individual learners in it virtually. Adam said:

> *In an online environment, I lose a lot of [control over] my classroom management because they [a child with ADHD] might be sitting in a room with their parent, so that the child is no longer looking at me for cues as to how he should behave. They're taking cues from their parents. What their parent might find acceptable I might not find acceptable. It's difficult to kind of negotiate that* (Adam, 15/09/2020, 22.45–23.05).

Similarly, Kamila noted that due to her lack of control over learners' group- and pair-work interactions in online activities she had to significantly reduce number of these types of interactions in her digital classes. She also observed high levels of stress in her learners due to increased screen time and mitigated this by setting up screen-free tasks for her learners involving reading, creating, and thinking. Furthermore, Christina mentioned reduced non-verbal interaction and response on the part of her learners during online lessons as many of them had their cameras switched off. This made it difficult for Christina to assess how well learners followed her instruction and prevented her from making timely adjustments to her practice. It also made it difficult for her learners suffering from hearing loss to comprehend what their pairs were saying, as they could no longer do lip reading.

David commented that the absence of social and in-person interactions in online classes affected his learners' well-being and levels of participation. This was particularly true for his visually impaired student.

However, all teachers identified several advantages of technology-assisted teaching and learning. Adam specifically highlighted the usefulness of such functions as 'dictate' and 'immersive reader' for supporting learners with SpLD and noted that he would put extra effort into making sure that both his SpLD

learners and fellow teachers knew about these functions and how to use them. Christina noted the usefulness of subtitle-generating software for assisting students with hearing difficulties in processing digitally recorded lessons. Kamila noted that technology-assisted lessons allowed her learners to keep better notes of their work, including questions to the teacher. These notes helped Kamila to monitor her learners' progress better and provide them with more detailed written and oral feedback. She also noted that online space was useful not only for storing students' work but also for systematically storing her own resources, which learners could access at any time during the lessons and to which they could come back at a later stage if needed. Talking about the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, David commented that one positive consequence of it was that it 'has brought [teachers] closer together in terms of people trying to collaborate more' (David, 07/10/2020, 42.50–42.59).

Conclusion

Three core findings emerged from our research. Firstly, regardless of the geographical location in which teachers practise, all teachers (apart from SENCO coordinators) seem to be only partly prepared for teaching learners with SpLD if sufficient preparation is measured by the availability, accessibility, and regularity of provision of SpLD-tailored CPD courses for non-SpLD teachers. Secondly, despite a lack of knowledge and professional preparation for working with SpLD learners, teachers continue to make efforts to educate these groups of learners as effectively as they can through self-education initiatives and voluntary training in SpLD instruction. Thirdly, an obligatory shift to online teaching triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic has boosted teachers' awareness and use of technology-assisted tools to effectively educate SpLD learners. It has also united teachers in their efforts to educate learners during challenging times and increased their professional collegiality in some contexts. The major limitation of this study is that it collected views and explored practices from only a small group of teachers, making its findings largely non-generalisable. Conducting a similar study but on a larger scale would enable validating or to calibrating this study's findings further.

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