

# Foreign Language Education of Learners with Special Educational Needs in Slovakia

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## **Abstract**

*Foreign language education of learners with special educational needs is one of the fields of language pedagogy which constantly demand more attention from teachers, researchers, teacher trainers, education-system decision-makers and managers. Despite the growing number of research outputs, their systematic summary is still necessary.*

*The objective of this paper, which includes partial results of the research project KEGA 036UKF-4/2013 funded by the Ministry of Education of the Slovak Republic, is to offer a systematic picture of the current status and organization of foreign language education provided to learners with special educational needs in Slovakia. Detailed attention is paid to 3 defined areas: the legal framework and organization of foreign language education of learners with special educational needs in Slovakia; b) the extent of support provided to foreign language teachers; and c) the reflection of Slovak language education of learners with special educational needs in research. The results which are presented in the paper might be an effective starting point for international comparison or for further research in the field. They might be interesting for the designers of teacher training courses as well.*

**Key words:** foreign language education, special educational needs, segregation, integration, inclusion

## **1. Introduction**

One of the most obvious aspects of humanistic education is how it treats those who are somehow different, standing out from the mainstream that defines general learning objectives and curriculum. A rather sizable subgroup of these “different” learners are learners with special educational needs, which in this paper are seen in the context of foreign language education.

Schwarz (1997, p. 1), one of the pioneers in research on foreign language education of learners with special needs, once aptly expressed the reason why more interest should be paid to the area of foreign language education to learners with SEN: “For the student unencumbered by a learning disability, foreign language study is indeed an enriching and rewarding experience. For the learning disabled student, however, it can be

an unbelievably stressful and humiliating experience, the opposite of what is intended". Ortiz (1998, p. 3) added that "these difficulties may become more serious over time if instruction is not modified to address the students' specific needs. Unless these students receive appropriate interventions, they will continue to struggle, and the gap between their achievement and that of their peers will widen over time".

To define learning disorders and their effects on foreign language learning, Root (1994, p. 1) quotes Levine: "Learning disability is the term currently used to describe a handicap that interferes with someone's ability to store, process or produce information. Such disabilities affect both children and adults. The impairment can be quite subtle and go undetected throughout life. But learning disabilities create a gap between a person's true capacity and his day to day production and performance. It's not always immediately obvious that a person has a learning disability, however, the most straightforward indication is academic failure or underachievement by someone who seems capable of more".

Moreover, the possibility of the occurrence of a new type of disability named "the foreign language learning disability" has been considered by both learning-disorders and foreign-language pedagogy sources (starting with Arries, 1999 and Sparks, Ganschow, & Javorsky, 1998).

The aim of the study is to introduce the situation in foreign language education of learners with special educational needs in Slovakia (in the form of a "revelatory" case study). The main motivation for the paper was the fact that the topic has never been systematically discussed before.

### Defining the used terms

For the purposes of this paper we use the terminology as listed and defined in the Slovak School Act 245/2008, §2):

- **mainstream learners** are learners able to follow the curriculum without requiring any special treatment;
- **a learner with special educational needs** is a learner who has been diagnosed by the Centre of pedagogical and psychological consultancy (CPPC) as the one with SEN.
- **a special educational need (SEN)** is the requirement for modification of conditions, content, forms, methods and approaches to the educational process which arises from the learner's health status, learning disabilities, or socially disadvantaged environment in which the learner lives.

Consequently, a learner with SEN is listed under one of more of the following categories:

- a) a learner with a health disadvantage (which might be an ill learner, or a learner with a mental, hearing, sight, or physical impairment; disturbed communication skill, autism or other pervasive developmental disorders, learning and attention disorders);
- b) a learner from a socially disadvantaged environment (i.e. an environment which does not support learner's optimal development and progress, which may lead to a risk of learner's social exclusion);
- c) a gifted learner (with above-average intellect, music or sport skills).

## 2. Research objectives and research questions

The aim of the research is to discuss the current status and organization of foreign language education provided to learners with special educational needs in Slovakia. The main aim of the research was to collect and analyse data from 3 defined areas:

- a) legal framework and organization of foreign language education to learners with special educational needs in learning the Slovak language;
- b) extent of support provided to foreign language teachers;
- c) reflections of Slovak language education to learners with special educational needs in research.

### Research questions

1. How is foreign language education 'of learners with special educational needs' catered for in Slovak school legislation (the School Act, national curriculum, a reform conceptions)?
2. In which organizational forms, for which levels of education and in which types of school is foreign language education 'to learners with special educational needs' provided in Slovakia?
3. What professional and methodological support is provided to teachers of foreign languages?
4. How much is foreign language education of learners with SEN in Slovakia reflected in (and saturated by) the latest research findings?

### 3. Research method

The research was designed as a single case study of the "revelatory" nature (Thomas, 2011; Day Ashley, 2012, p. 102) since the defined research topic has not been previously studied. This case study keeps all aspects of "an empirical investigation of a particular contemporary phenomenon within its real life context using multiple sources of evidence" (Robson, 2002, p. 178). Parameters of the phenomenon's particularity - a contemporary state and organization of foreign language education to learners with special educational needs in Slovakia - included spatial (Slovakia), temporal (1989-2013), and content determinants (school legislation, organization of foreign language education, and bilingual education research).

The diverse research methods and techniques, including statistical methods, observations, interviews, questionnaires, etc. were combined, and only validated data sources provided by the *Statistical Yearbook* of the Slovak Ministry of Education (UIPŠ, 2013a) were used. To complete the case study, numerous information sources were used, including obligatory pedagogical documents (the Slovak national curriculum, school curricula, the national Conception of teaching foreign languages at primary and secondary schools etc.), interviews with school directors and foreign language teachers and also observations of teachers' performances. A considerable part of the presented data is the result of in-depth content analysis of both research reports and foreign language teachers' academic research products (diploma, rigoroza and doctoral thesis).

### Specific context of the case study

As Day Ashley put it, to bring valid results the case study needs to investigate the determined phenomenon "with reference to the specific context in which it is situated" (2012, p. 102). The context of the presented case study is contemporary situation in teaching foreign languages to learners with special educational needs in Slovakia.

Slovakia is a small post-communist country in Central Europe. Until 1993, it was a part of Czechoslovakia. On January 1, 1993, Slovakia became an independent nation recognized by the United Nations and its member states. After the breakup of Czechoslovakia (as one of the consequences of the "Velvet Revolution" in 1989), Slovakia reformed all its public systems including the school system. In 2004, it became a member state of the EU and as such, it needed to adopt principles of the united European legislation towards education (e.g. "M+2" rule, according to which each European citizen should be able to communicate in his/her mother language and at least two other languages). This repeatedly led to numerous system changes in the Slovak educational system.

These days, the school system of the Slovak Republic includes 7 types of schools: nursery schools (for children from 3 to 6 years), primary schools (for children from 6 to 15 years, divided into two levels: primary education and lower secondary education), grammar schools (with either 4-, 5- or 8-year study programmes), secondary vocational schools (with 2-, 3- or 4-year study programmes), conservatories, schools for learners with special educational needs, elementary art schools, and language schools.

Compulsory education in Slovakia lasts for 10 years. Most primary and secondary schools are public (up to 90%). The rest are private schools owned either by churches or private owners.

Secondary vocational schools prepare students for all types of occupations. After finishing any 4-year secondary school study programme, students may take a school-leaving exam ("maturita"). Grammar schools are generally considered as "elite" or "prestigious" because of their more academic-oriented study programmes and their intention to prepare students for university and higher educational study. Higher education is provided by public, state, and private universities or colleges. The latest observable trend in the Slovak education system is the growing number of students who choose to study at universities and colleges abroad.

Along with other European countries, foreign language education has become one of the priorities defined in Slovak school legislation. Changes in foreign language education have been in line with the long-lasting and systematic reform of Slovak school system (since 1989). The general aim of foreign language education in Slovakia has been highlighted in the basic document called *The Conception of Foreign Language Education at Primary and Secondary Schools* (Konceptia..., 2007) as follows: "The general aim is to ensure reaching communicative levels B1 or B2 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) in the first foreign language and communicative levels A2/B1 according to CEFR for languages in the second foreign language by all learners in the Slovak Republic at the end of the secondary school" (Konceptia..., 2007). Learners are allowed to choose from 6 foreign languages: English, German, French, Russian, Spanish and Italian, according to the possibilities of the school. The aim of the conception was to provide quality foreign language education for all primary and secondary learners; to unify foreign language syllabi at all types of schools; to maximize intensity and lower extensity (variants) of foreign language teaching programmes; to guarantee continuity of foreign language education in the first foreign language while passing from primary schools to secondary schools; and to ensure that secondary schools graduates will be able to communicate appropriately in two foreign languages to perform well in European labour markets.

*The Conception...* (2007) has established the minimal target model of foreign language education (see Attachment 1) which was introduced into schools in September 2008. The model defines the compulsory start of foreign language education for all learners at least in the third year of the primary school. It has been slightly altered (with a lower number of lessons in foreign languages per week) for schools where pupils learn in one of the minority languages used in Slovakia.

### **3. Research findings**

#### **3.1 Education of learners with special educational needs reflected in Slovak school legislation and state pedagogical documents**

The basic framework for the contemporary Slovak education system is given by the School Act 245/2008. Along with other means of humanistic pedagogy, the act create conditions for securing equal chances for learners with special educational needs in all areas of education, including foreign language education. (The Slovak Republic pledged to do so in many international directives and doctrines, e.g. Declaration of the Rights of the Child, Declaration of Human Rights, Human Rights Agreement, Antidiscrimination Act 365/2004, etc.

Not so long ago (up to the end of the 1980s, or even later), the only way these learners were treated in the Slovak educational system was to place them in special schools segregated from mainstream schools. In 1993, *The Conception of special education development* (Konceptcia..., 1993) was published which established two system approaches to SEN learners' education: a) further development of special schools and b) integrated education of SEN learners in special classes within mainstream schools. The further step was secured by the document called *The Conception of educating learners with health impairment* (Konceptcia..., 2000). Based on the aforementioned documents, the contemporary Slovak school system distinguishes 3 educational approaches to SEN learners' education (School Act 245/2008): segregation, integration, and inclusion.

### **A. Segregation**

Until 1989, segregation (grouping learners according to their health status, level of their skills, proficiency, competence, etc.) of learners with special educational needs was the only approach applied by Slovak education. These days, only learners with grave difficulties or handicaps are disengaged from mainstream education and attend special schools (both primary and secondary). Foreign language education is not the compulsory part of their curriculum. The current numbers of Slovak special schools and learners who attend them were gained from the latest statistical data provided in the official *Statistical Yearbook* (UIPŠ, 2013) are indicated in Tab. 1.

### **B. Integration**

Integration as a form of education is based on involving learners with SEN to mainstream schools and classes for intact learners. They become regular students, however, they follow their individual learning plans (designed by both the CPPCs and the school), which means that SEN learners spend part of their school day with other learners within a regular school class completing the regular school tasks as others, and in the other part of the school day they learn individually (either in special classes with special teachers, or completing tasks in the mainstream classroom with their assistants). Integrated learners follow the same curriculum and target standards as the mainstream learners. The school management is responsible for equipping the classes and other school environment so it meets the special needs of these learners: modification of school buildings' design, classroom equipment, compensating teaching aids etc.). Typically, individual learning plans are designed by adapting educational objectives, reducing or extending content, applying different timing, etc. The aim of foreign language education with this group of learners is to compensate the existing defects to such an extent as to make it possible for them to manage at least basic syllabus, so they could lead a productive and successful life in a plurilingual and multicultural society in the future.

Table 2 shows the number of such "internally" integrated learners at all types of Slovak schools.

### **C. Inclusion**

In accordance with the School Act 245/2008 all learners with special needs, whose learning performances and outcomes are not seriously affected and who do not require special attention of special educators/assistants, should be included into regular classes. It means that learners with SEN are involved in regular school activities during the whole school day. During the entire time, they are taught by mainstream teachers alongside mainstream learners, which brings important social consequences for future life of all the subjects involved, since the experience usually has an enriching effect on both learners with SEN and intact learners. This type of organization relies heavily on the expertise of the teacher who must be skilled to differentiate the learning objectives and manage mixed-ability group activities, based on solidarity and as team work.

### 3.2 Professional support for teachers

Slovak foreign language teachers are provided with several types of professional support while dealing with learners with SEN: institutional (ECC, MPC, universities), specialized teacher-training courses, conferences, specialized publications and other sources, etc.

Centres of pedagogical and psychological consultancy (CPPC) provide complex psychological, special-pedagogical and diagnostic consultancy to both schools/teachers and parents. CPPC's services are free of charge for both.

Regarding learners with SEN, they are responsible for diagnosing the learners and working out their individual learning plans. Moreover, they furnish schools/teachers with methodological instructions, special teaching materials and compensation aids if necessary.

Methodological and pedagogical centres (MPC) are, in accord with Law 596/2003, the organizations under direct management of the Ministry of Education. They focus on in-service teacher's training and life-long education. So far, no courses have been organized to train foreign language teachers how to perform foreign language teaching to learners with SEN.

In Slovakia, there are 8 universities which have the accredited right to organize pre-service and in-service teacher training for foreign language teachers. Only a few of them (i.e. Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra, the University of Matej Bell in Banská Bystrica, and the Catholic university in Ružomberok) provide their students with courses or workshops on teaching foreign languages to learners with SEN.

To provide academics, textbook authors, school managers, teacher trainers, and teachers with the chance to discuss the latest progress in the field, non-governmental association SlovakEdu, o. z. organizes international conferences Foreign Languages and Cultures at School (2002-20013) annually, with one section dedicated to the problem of foreign language education of learners with SEN.

Despite the fact that the fields of general special pedagogy and psychology have been well developed and saturated in Slovakia, only a few publications on the topic, which respond to the particular Slovak context, have been published so far. They range from theoretical expositions (Andreánsky&Andreánska, 2004; Homolová, 2010, Homolová&Ivančíková, 2013; Hvozdíková, 2010, 2011) to methodological and instructional (Jursová&Zacharová, 2012; Pokrivčáková, 2009, 2012; Vačková&Začková, 2003). To evaluate this aspect of the support provided to teachers, it may be easily concluded that a limited number of publications on the topic is the obvious consequence of the lack of complex and regionally determined research.

### 3.3 The reflections of Slovak language education to learners with special educational needs in research

Institutional research on teaching foreign languages to learners with special educational needs in Slovakia is extremely rare, or even non-existent. It might be caused both by the extended requirements on theoretical preparation of the researchers (they unquestioningly need to integrate knowledge and methodologies of several disciplines: language pedagogy, special pedagogy, special psychology, cognitive sciences, and others) and the problems related to finding subjects (and their parents) open to long-term cooperation.

Quite untraditionally, the most important sources of new knowledge in the field are research products by university students and in-practice teachers with the characteristics of academic research reports, such as doctoral theses, rigorous theses, and diploma theses. Despite some limitations (e.g. reduced extent of samples), their methodological appropriateness was secured by the fact that their authors were supervised by expert teacher trainers and double-checked by university teachers.

Very recently, Hvozdková (2013) published her doctoral thesis with the research results coming from an extended case study within which she longitudinally observed and tested a Slovak learner with ADHD (subject) who learned English as a foreign language. Her observations resulted in creating an intervention programme for the subject. While testing the effectiveness of the programme (based on using drama techniques), Hvozdková monitored intact learners in the subject's English class, as well. She found the positive impact of the programme on both the observed subject with ADHD and the intact rest of the English class.

In the following part of the paper, we present the results of qualitative content analysis of 16 rigorous and diploma theses (their list is given in Attachment 2) on the defined topic. 8 codes were identified and they are emphasized in bold and numbered in brackets.

A vast majority of the analysed theses focused on **ontypes of learning disorders**(1) in classes and how they affect the learner's progress in learning foreign languages. Namely, dyslexia, dysgraphia, and ADHD occurred as the most necessary to be dealt with, since they directly affect the learner's performance in the foreign language class. One diploma thesis studied the particularities of teaching English to blind learners and one diploma thesis considered the particularities of foreign language education of gifted learners. No thesis focused on teaching foreign languages to learners from socially disadvantaged environments.

All the analysed theses included surveys of various kinds (e.g. interviews and questionnaires) to identify **attitudes of foreign language teachers**(2) to foreign language education of learners with SEN. The teachers' general attitude may be concluded as: "In theory everything is great, but in practice, it is very problematic". Teachers mostly expressed their frustration caused mainly by the lack of proper training in the field, the lack of sufficient information, the lack of adapted teaching materials and the omniscient time stress.

What occurred in nearly all theses is the conclusion that foreign language teachers were extremely disappointed by the contemporary situation in classrooms, where more than two students typically require special educational care. However, foreign language teachers have never been **trained to deal with SEN learners**(3). They feel "caught in a trap", unprepared and unsure of themselves. Teachers also mentioned frequently their fear that by adapting teaching techniques and tempo to learners with SEN, they would negatively influence and limit progress of intact learners. None of the teachers questioned in 16 theses expressed satisfaction or feelings of being successful.

Teachers also complained about less-than-ideal **cooperation with CPPCPs**(4) and sometimes very problematic relationships with parents who are not willing to accept "otherness" and any special needs of their children. By comparing their statements to the programmes of CPPCPs, it is obvious that teachers expect very precise, tailor-made directions with concrete teaching techniques, while CPPCPs provide them only with general and framework instructions.

Observations described in the theses refer to the fact that in practice, integration and inclusion of learners with SEN usually ends behind the classroom's door. The authors observed the wide spectrum of **incorrect or even harmful teachers' acts**(5):

- a) excessively tolerant approach where SEN learner do not need to do anything because "they have disorders",
- b) formally tolerant approach where teachers do not apply any special care to SEN learners at the end of the school year while assessing if they improve SEN learners marks;
- c) deprecating or doubting approach when teachers are not willing to accept SEN learners and to adapt their pedagogical performance so that these needs are fulfilled,
- d) incorrect or even harmful re-education, e.g. when teachers ask dysgraphic learners to copy long writing exercise, etc.;

- e) inappropriately comparing SEN learners' outcomes to those of intact learners;
- f) "internal" segregation of SEN learners when they are constantly singled out and appointed different learning tasks.

It is important to emphasize the fact that teachers make these mistakes unintentionally. All of them expressed their wish and **determination to help SEN learners**(6). More probably, their actions resulted from **the generally complained lack of information**(7) and proper training. In this context it is very important that teachers also expressed that they are **willing to get new information**(8) and undergo specialized teacher training.

#### 4. Conclusions

The objective of this paper was to introduce the current status and organizational structure of foreign language education provided to learners with SEN in Slovakia, and to offer the summative material for further international comparison. Three areas were especially emphasized: the legal framework and organization of foreign language education of learners with SEN in Slovakia; b) ways of support provided to foreign language teachers; and c) overview of research results regarding the existing situation in foreign language education of learners with SEN. research. The results showed that while the legislation and state documents related to education are in accord with international standards, and thus create standard conditions for the development of foreign language education of the target group, the existing situation at schools is not very optimistic. The results also pointed to the areas in which a set of important measures need to be adopted. Learning more about real situation at schools requires further empirical research. The courses on foreign language education of learners with SEN (focused mostly on classroom management in mixed-ability classes and internal differentiation) should be integrated in all pre-service and in-service teacher training programmes. The appropriate evaluation instruments for the objective evaluation of learners with SEN should be designed and validated as soon as possible. What is needed is more theoretical sources, teaching materials, and practical handbooks, as well as other measures that would lead to the fulfilment of the general aim: to improve foreign language education of learners with SEN while keeping the appropriate demandingness and attractiveness of foreign language education of intact learners in the same classroom.

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**Tab. 1: Number of special schools and their learners in Slovakia**

<b>Primary schools</b>		<b>learners</b>
Public	210	24,044
Private	16	1,041
Church	9	399
Total	235	25,484
<b>Secondary schools</b>		<b>learners</b>
public	119	2,385
private	3	212
church	5	178
Total	127	2,775

**Tab. 2: Number of integrated learners at Slovak schools**

Type of school	Number of integrated learners
Nursery schools	446
Primary schools	20,246 (of which 15,472 learners have learning difficulties)
Grammar schools	518
Conservatories	44
Secondary vocational schools	4,770
Total	26,024

**Attachment 1: The model of teaching foreign languages at Slovak schools (numbers indicate foreign language lessons per week)**

		GS	SVS	SVTS3	GS	SVS	SVTS3
		1FL	1FL	1FL	2FL	2FL	2FL
Final level	Year						
	CEFR level	B2	B1	B1.1	B1/B2.1	B1	A2
Secondary schools (year)	Year 4	4	3		3 or 5	2	
	Year 3	4	3	3	3 or 5	2	2
	Year 2	4	3	3	4	3	2
	Year 1	4	3	3	4	3	2
CEFR level		A2	A2	A2	A1	A1	A1
Primary schools (year)	Year 9	3	3	3	3	3	3
	Year 8	3	3	3	3	3	3
	Year 7	3	3	3	3	3	3
	Year 6	3	3	3	3	3	3
	Year 5	4	4	4			
	Year 4	4	4	4			
	Year 3	3	3	3			

**Legend:**

GS – Grammar Schools

SVS – Secondary Vocational Schools

SVTS - Secondary Vocational Training Schools

1FL – the first foreign language

2FL – the second foreign language

**Attachment 2: The list of unpublished academic research papers (diploma and rigorosa thesis) by pre-service or in-service teachers which were qualitatively analysed in the study.**