



Foreign Language for Learners with Specific Learning Differences – the SupEFL Project

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Abstract

This paper aims to present findings based on a project within the Erasmus+ Program of the European Union called SupEFL - "Supplemental Self-Help in English as a Foreign Language for Learners with Specific Learning Differences". SupEFL is directed at learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) who are experiencing difficulties with one or more of the four language systems (reading, writing, listening and speaking). Some of the project objectives include: to provide adults with SpLDs in EFL with access to free ICT-based tools, techniques and resources they need to complete EFL programs; to contribute toward assisting unemployed dyslexics in acquiring critical language skills in English and integrating them in the labour market; and, finally, to promote language learning and multilingualism and furthers the social and economic inclusion of disadvantaged persons. The key project audience are learners with Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLDs). Dyslexia, specific learning difficulties, attention and hyperactivity disorders, autism spectrum are some examples of the set of specialities that seem to be most frequently diagnosed. It is of great importance to reconsider the way people with these learning difficulties are viewed and direct efforts to create an inclusive environment, instead of just considering these people as misfits. In this context, the use of technology can be a powerful resource to create this inclusive environment.

For the purpose of this paper, we will present preliminary findings from the first phase of the project, which aimed to develop a comparative analysis of national research and existing legislation in each country. The aim was to carry out national surveys on the specific problems which emerge in the course of English language training in four systems for learners with SpLDs. Results from the field-work carried out in the participating countries will be summarized and discussed in detail in the full paper.

Introduction

The immense and ground-breaking technological progress that has been and is going on has radically transformed our lives. A significant change in culture brings about significant changes in the functioning of the human brain, and there through in information processing (Small and Vorgan, 2008). Many of the neurologically based achievement difficulties are a result of recent cultural changes. Dyslexia, specific learning difficulties, attention and hyperactivity disorders, and the autism spectrum are some of the special conditions that seem to be diagnosed more and more frequently (Gyarmathy, 2012).

Small environmental changes are responsible for a number of differences in the development of human abilities today.

- A higher amount of stimuli: A developing brain learns to accommodate the increased stimulus load. The brain then needs a higher amount of stimuli to maintain optimal arousal.
- Significantly more information: Information processing is getting faster.
- Multi-tasking: When processing multiple stimuli, the brain switches to the striatum, the part of the brain that is involved in short-term memory operation, instead of the long-term memory processor, the hippocampus, which is active when there are less stimuli in the environment.
- Less kinaesthetic-sensory experience: This results in a slower development and in many cases a weaker functioning of the sensory-motor system. Movement and exercise help the formation of the body scheme in the brain, relative to which spatial directions are internalized.
- More visual experience: Visual information processing and reasoning is under constant training. Visuality has become more important and enhanced.
- Less verbal stimuli: A lower level of literacy.

Ready-made pictures: Children do not learn to create a personal, mental image or picture from linguistic sequences. Their reading comprehension is weaker, since reading comprehension is based on image formation. Either we insist on considering such people as misfits, or we reconsider our view and direct our efforts to creating an inclusive environment.



Info-communication technology and effective learning technology can contribute immensely to the creation of an inclusive environment. It is high time we followed the changes and implemented a change in education to decrease the ratio of special learners, viewing specialness as a valuable difference, for a change. John Raven (2014) wrote: *“Dyslexia” is generated by a deeply dysfunctional school system largely designed by bureaucrats which is good for some, OK for about another third, but bad, indeed often seriously damaging, for about a third.*”

Technological development will not stop, and it is quite possible that after a while special learners will be the rule rather than the exception very soon. An inclusive system will therefore be the norm of the future.

One of the most critical changes involves literacy abilities. While verbal skills and literacy are an important part of human thinking and communication, these abilities seem to be affected most by technological development. It is thus understandable that special learners are frequently in trouble when they have to acquire a second language.

Learning foreign languages is, at the same time, becoming increasingly important in today's multilingual world. The command of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is widely considered as a key competence and a requirement for equal opportunities in education, at the workplace and in life, in general. The exclusion of special learners has been widely recognised and educational policy in many countries is increasingly coming to reflect this.

The SupEFL Project

The SupEFL, "Supplemental Self-Help in English as a Foreign Language for Learners with Specific Learning Differences", is a project funded by an Erasmus+ Program of the European Union directed at learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) who are experiencing difficulties with one or more of the four language systems (reading, writing, listening and speaking).

The project includes a consortium of 7 partners (Portugal, Finland, Lithuania, Bulgaria, Hungary, Germany - English at work and E-training solutions), who intend to develop Self-help Open Educational Resources (OER) for learners of English with special needs in one or more of the following areas: reading, writing, speaking, listening, memory, motivation and/or learning in general.

Methodology

For the purpose of this paper, we will present preliminary findings from the first phase of the project, which aimed to develop a comparative analysis of national research and existing legislation in each country. Data collection was based on a document analysis of existing legislation and policies and also semi-structured interviews to experts in the field. This analysis was completed with the application of a survey to collect information from learners and trainers in regard to difficulties felt in learning English as a foreign language.

Results

a) Analysis of Legislation and Policies

The aim of this legislation content analysis (Table 1) was to get concrete information about countries' state of information| legislation on the neurologically based learning difficulties especially dyslexia problem and intervention strategies.

Questions	YES	NO	NOT CLEAR
Q.1. Official definition for neurologically based learning difficulties?	DE	BG, HU, PT	FI, LI
Q.2 .Dyslexia is recognized in legislation as disability?	HU	BG, LI, PT	FI,DE
Q.3. Dyslexia recognized in legislation as Special Educational Needs?	DE,FI,LI	BG, HU	PT
Q.4. Prevalence of dyslexia in your country?	DE, FI, HU, LI, PT	BG	_
Q.5. Legislation support -compulsory education?	BG,DE, FI, HU, LI, PT	_	_
Q.6. Legislation support -higher education?	BG, FI	DE	HU,LI,PT
Q.7. Dyslexia and others part of compulsory teacher training?	LI, PT	BG, DE, FI, HU	-
Q.8. Standardized assessment difficulties provided by the state?	BG, LI, PT	DE, FI, HU	-
Q.9. Is there anti-discrimination legislation for employees?	BG, DE, FI, HU	LI, PT	-
Q.10. Dyslexia association and civil institutions for neurologically based learning?	BG,DE,FI,HU,PT	_	LI

Table 1. Existing legislation and policies with respect to neurologically based learning difficulties especially dyslexia

As we can see (Table 1), only in Hungary, dyslexia is officially recognized. Dyslexia is not part of compulsory teacher training in Bulgaria, Germany, Finland, and Hungary. In Bulgaria, Finland, Germany and Hungary there is anti-discrimination legislation while there is none in Portugal and Lithuania. Finally we can say that in Bulgaria, Germany, Finland, Hungary and Portugal there exists a dyslexia association for people with neurologically based learning difficulties exist.

b) Results from Surveys to Learners and Trainers

In total, 62 learners and 57 trainers participated in the national surveys carried out in each of the six countries. In regard to data collected from the learners, the sample included 35 males and 27 females. In terms of ages, the majority (56%) of the learners are young (18-25years old), followed by ages between 34-41 with 18%, and in ex-aequo with 13% of the individuals (26-33 and 42 or more). Most of the learners from the six countries are students (53%), except in Germany where the great majority is employed. A small percentage (7%) is unemployed. When questioned in regard to the difficulties in learning English, most of the respondents (60%) mentioned that they do not have difficulties. Those that consider having learning difficulties with English as a foreign language indicated (20 out of 25) the following difficulties: Listening (n=8), Writing (n=7), Vocabulary and spelling (n=5), Speaking (n=4) and Grammar (n=4), Understanding (n=3), Memory (n=2) and Motivation (n=2), finally Reading (n=1) and Learning in general (n=1). Besides the support that they get from their teacher in class, the learners consider needing help in the following areas: Speaking, Writing, Listening, Motivation, Memory, Learning in general and Reading. Seven individuals from Finland did not answer this item. Learners identified the following specific support they want/need:

- a) Short training videos;
- b) Support for speaking;
- c) Better explanation of the material;
- d) Learning grammar;
- e) Speaking with English people;
- f) Vocabulary and practicing; reviewing topics to remember vocabulary;
- g) Ideas on how to remember new words, some memory-develop exercises and examples;
- h) Support for concentration.

Learners ranked their preference for getting free online help in the following order: Speaking, Writing, Listening, Reading and Memory, Motivation and, finally, Learning in general.

Some respondents include additional comments focusing on:

- a) Online contacts with teachers or tutors in English, chatting with English speakers;
- b) It would be good to have online help;
- c) Complete a test online; Applications for IOS and Android (mobile learning);
- d) Hear a narrator.

In regard to data collected from the trainers, the sample included 9 males and 48 females. Concerning the experience as an English teacher, our sample from each country has mainly 16 years or more of experience in teaching English. In almost all countries, the sample included teachers from all categories of different years of experience (except for Germany and Hungary).

When asked to rank the importance of self-help tools and techniques to support learners, trainers considered the following order of preference in terms of importance: motivation, memory, speaking, reading, listening, writing and learning in general. In this case, 1 is the most important and 7 the least important. Trainers from our sample have taught learners with special needs mainly in motivation areas. The area which trainers haven't had learners with special needs is listening.

Conclusions

The analysis of existing legislation presented in this article revealed that only in Germany there is a clear and official definition for neurologically based learning difficulties but only in Hungary dyslexia is recognized in legislation as disability although it is not recognized in this country, as a Special Educational Need. Concerning the existence of legislation to support compulsory education and higher education, only in Bulgaria and Finland there is legislation to support both educational levels. Portugal and Lithuanian promote training to enable teachers to deal with dyslexia, and in these two countries and Bulgaria there are standardized assessment difficulties provided by the state. In Bulgaria, Germany, Finland and Hungary there are anti-discrimination legislation for employees and almost all countries except Lithuania have civil institutions for neurologically based learning.

The learners' immediate environment as well as from the instructional setting might affect learning goals, attitudes, and motivated behavior. In regard to the empirical study carried out, data collected



from trainers and learners reveal the areas in which more difficulties are found to learn the English language. Although 60% of our samples of learners refer not having major difficulties, the areas of listening, writing, vocabulary and spelling were identified as the ones most needing further support. Some of the suggestions pointed out by learners were: short training videos; support for speaking; better explanation of the material; learning grammar; speaking with English people; vocabulary and practicing; reviewing topics to remember vocabulary; ideas on how to remember new words, some memory-develop exercises and examples; support for concentration. Data from trainers, mainly female teachers (84%), reveal the importance of self-help tools and techniques which need to be developed to support learners. The areas identified as most important were (by order of preference): motivation, memory, speaking, reading, listening, writing and learning in general.

Motivation is, therefore, one of the key areas to be improved as it was found in other studies (Kormos, Csizér, 2010). As examples of specific support that could be provided to learners with special needs in regard to motivation issues, teachers pointed out the following suggestions: games, trivia, storytelling, songs; giving feedback about their progress and putting emphasis on their strengths; involvement; colours, pop ups, interactive exercises; rewards, compliments, stickers; creative exercises; special activities, engagement; concise and short activities; provide specific praising comments; give students daily life examples so they can feel motivated to learn. These findings are important inputs for the development of educational tools to support English language learning for learners with special needs.

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