

## Acquis Communautaire

In the field of foreign languages a major emphasis within the *acquis communautaire* is educational provision for all which leads towards each citizen having some competence in at least two Community languages (MT+2). Access to educational opportunities in foreign languages is part of the social dimension of European integration, and a means for the individual to benefit from occupational and personal opportunities. In addition, access to foreign language learning at school is directly linked to the promotion of lifelong learning and European citizenship. Individuals are protected from any discriminatory practice on grounds including disability and genetic features, which would exclude them from such access Charter of the Fundamental Rights of the European Union 2001, Article 21.

Thus, we may assume that all young people in the European Union, whatever their disability, whether educated in mainstream or segregated schools/streams, have equal rights to foreign languages education according to provision of opportunity and resources in their respective environments.

## Special Educational Needs (SEN)

Some young people who are disabled may be considered to have special educational needs (SEN). Equally, some young people considered to have special educational needs are not disabled. In addition, whereas some young learners will be identified as having SEN, others are likely to go through schooling, and foreign language learning, without recognition which could trigger forms of adaptive support.

When we consider SEN and foreign language teaching across Europe, particularly in mainstream education, it is essential to recognize that alongside those who are officially recognized as having SEN, there may be cohorts of other 'at risk' young people which are not immediately identifiable. Thus the magnitude of the issue, in purely numerical terms, may be larger than can be seen from available quantitative data.

The term special educational needs, is understood in different ways across the Union. Definitions are influenced by legislation, diagnostic procedures, funding arrangements, and educational provision, amongst others. Across Europe the range of defined SEN types ranges from 1 to more than 10 categories.

Correspondingly, the reported rates for SEN pupils in member states differ widely. The range stretches from 0.9% in Greece through to 17.8% in Finland (2003). Finding explanations for this contrast is complex and multi-faceted. Quantitative indicators used range from precise data through to estimates. Diagnosis, decentralization and inclusion into mainstream education are major factors which account for this.

SEN provision, and consequently school-based foreign language learning, is in a period of considerable change in Europe. This is primarily due to inclusive policies and practices whereby SEN pupils are increasingly educated in mainstream schools and classes. This represents a major cultural and organizational shift of thinking in how to provide for SEN pupils in member states. Across Europe ‘inclusion’ remains a large-scale ongoing process.

Divergent definitions, diagnostic procedures, educational provision, and the inevitable tensions that emerge during major re-structuring, mean that any European comparative analysis of SEN is problematic. When we consider SEN and the provision of foreign languages education, the picture becomes ever more complex.

## **SEN & Foreign Language Learning**

It is clear that member states are committed to equal opportunities in education, and thus school-based foreign language learning provision aims to provide SEN pupils with education equivalent to mainstream curricula as far as possible. What is not clear is if SEN pupils genuinely have equal access to foreign language learning.

Ensuring full access to foreign language learning is fundamentally an issue of responding to diversity. Scientific knowledge on cognition and learning, and insight into individual learning styles, has advanced considerably in recent years. In addition, the teaching profession has focused on designing methodologies so that language learning suits a range of diverse ‘language learning styles’.

The foundation of good foreign language teaching practice rests on responding to the diverse language learning styles of the individual. This applies to all learners regardless of age, ability or disability.

Recent good practice in SEN has led to the development of Individual Educational Plans (IEP). The IEP has been given special prominence during the shift towards inclusion of SEN pupils into mainstream education. The IEP is crucially important in SEN because frequently individuals do not have a single disability. Rather, they may have multiple disabilities, whether temporary or permanent. The same logic applies to their abilities which will be multi-faceted. Thus, SEN pupils do not tend to fit easily into watertight categories. The IEP allows those responsible for the individual, and the individual him/herself, to design an adapted educational plan specific to the person’s abilities and disabilities.

Quality foreign language teaching practice for pupils with SEN requires methodologies which are equally good for non-SEN pupils alongside specific interventions according to the profile of attitudes, aptitudes, and needs in the individual’s IEP. Across the board, these methods require enhanced multi-sensory input and adaptive support.

Responding to diversity through the IEP helps steer stakeholders away from overtly or inadvertently side-lining the SEN pupil with respect to foreign language learning. The aim of teaching foreign languages to pupils with special needs goes beyond preparing him/her to have a specific level of communicative competence in order to use a target language in professional and personal life. SEN pupils can and do achieve high levels of foreign language competence, but there are those who do not. However, these lower level achievers are able to achieve other benefits, relating to personal and educational development, alongside possible modest linguistic achievements. To encourage a pupil to bypass foreign language learning because of low foreign language communicative performance expectations is to deny him/her access to these benefits which link directly to European citizenship.

In honouring the *acquis communautaire* the foreign language teaching profession across Europe will need to further respond appropriately to ever greater diversity in classrooms. Pupils with special needs are only one part of the diversity jigsaw to which the foreign language learning systems will need to further adapt leading to benefits for all.

## Report contents

Special Educational Needs in Europe - The Teaching & Learning of Languages: Insights & Innovation examines policy issues, practical solutions for specific SEN conditions, and examples of good practice.

Chapter 1 gives an overview of quantitative findings and key issues. Chapter 2 provides comment and insights from the field on specific SEN types, professional support resources and testing. Chapter 3 provides case profile examples of good practice and innovation. Chapter 4 covers generic features of good practice. Chapter 5 summarizes the added value of further efforts in this area. Chapter 6 contains the proposals for further development and recommendations.

## Main Findings

There is a view that certain SEN pupils should not learn foreign languages because the time and resources should be better spent on first language and/or other subjects. ‘Why ask them to learn a second language when they cannot even master the first?’ This view may be held by administrators, teachers or parents. It is reportedly commonly voiced across Europe. It is a view which is not supported by evidence. Pupils who perform lower than peers in the first language, or other subjects, can benefit from foreign language learning.

The reported prevailing view that SEN pupils are ‘different to mainstream’ and therefore require ‘different’ educational solutions is linked to diagnosis and labeling. Diagnosis, and periodic re-diagnosis, is essential for triggering support, but labeling can be detrimental in revealing negative assumptions about the potential of the pupil to learn languages. This view may unduly highlight disabilities and disguise abilities. ‘Pigeon-holing’ through labeling can thus block access to foreign language learning.

Across Europe, the size of the school population ‘at risk’ of underperforming in foreign language learning, because of inability to respond to mainstream teaching approaches and testing systems, may be higher than that presently categorized as SEN.

There is a lack of evidence to show that any specific SEN category pupil should be denied equal access to foreign language learning. There is evidence of success in foreign language learning with even the reportedly ‘most challenging’ of SEN categories in terms of inclusion, namely those pupils with behavioural, social and/or emotional difficulties.

On a case-by-case basis there will be individual learners who should be guided away from learning foreign languages. But there appears to be a lack of guidance, in certain sectors, on what factors need to be taken into consideration for this decision to be made in a fully informed manner during development of the IEP.

One of the considerable changes in European SEN educational provision and care over recent years has been the shift from relying on a psycho-medical paradigm towards one which is fundamentally educational. This is a basic force behind the development of the IEP. There is now a need to further educate all stakeholders on the successes that can be achieved in the teaching of foreign languages to SEN pupils within this educational paradigm. This will improve the quality of decision-making on the IEP which will be further geared towards the individual’s potential, and not any specific SEN category diagnosis.

Articulation of the potential and value of foreign language learning is also particularly relevant in terms of SEN financing trends across Europe. One of which is ‘pupil-bound budgeting’. This involves each individual SEN pupil being allocated a specific support budget. Lack of guidance on the merits of foreign language learning may make it easier to recommend avoidance in pupil-bound budget cases. This argument is partly based on the reported preference for ‘whole school budgets’ which involves extra finance being allocated to serve all SEN pupils within a given school. Whole-school budgets might be significant in ensuring that individuals are not marginalized in respect to having opportunities to learn foreign languages.

It is further reported that countries which have decentralized funding support systems for SEN, which, for example, allocate funding as 'through-put' to regions or municipalities, are particularly effective in promoting overall inclusion. It is possible, but not verifiable, that decentralized funding could be linked to greater provision of foreign language learning for SEN pupils.

There is evidence of considerable success in foreign language learning across all SEN categories. This success extends beyond communicative competence and includes other significant educational domains and key competence-building areas involving personal and social development. These 'knock-on' benefits also link to pupil's accessing the European dimension in their lives. Thus describing success is not a question of foreign language learning for the sake of learning a language, but foreign language learning as a platform for enhanced education and personal development.

These achievements do not appear to be sufficiently identifiable and certifiable by national agencies responsible for foreign language performance appraisal. Provision of appropriate assessment is a pre-requisite for encouraging wider provision of foreign language teaching for SEN, and the development of appropriate educational curricula. This would be one factor in reducing the reported 'tension' within those schools which need to demonstrate overall academic performance alongside fully accommodating the needs of SEN pupils.

Major school-based success factors are:

- School leadership and teacher attitudes towards the value of foreign language learning and recognition of educational and personal development outcomes beyond communicative competence
- Methodological adaptation to meet diverse needs, abilities and disabilities
- Curricula adaptation such as 'lateral progression' whereby a pupil learns a modest amount of one language and then rather than progressing upwards to a higher level, takes an additional language to a similar performance stage; extended learning time-frames and learning languages across the curriculum.
- Access to external certifiable performance indicator scales suitable for lower end, and alternative, forms of achievement.
- Finance systems adopted to support the extra costs of SEN; external support through, for example SEN Resource Centres, and multi-disciplinary teamwork.

There is reportedly a professional tension amongst teachers, both language and special needs, resulting from inclusion of SEN pupils into mainstream foreign language classrooms. Provision of in-service education for foreign language teachers may not have kept pace with the processes of inclusion, and increasing classroom diversity. As a result foreign language teachers may hold the opinion that they are not sufficiently trained to handle language learners with special needs. This tension is also evident in the corresponding cultural shift from the SEN specialist as the teacher, 'towards that specialist acting partly as a resource person for other teachers who do not view themselves as SEN specialists'.

The position of ICT in SEN foreign language learning appears to be at a watershed. Initial investment in equipment and software needs to be further combined with foreign language teacher training, technical support and access to upgrading. The potential of ICT is considerable, but because of the inability of market forces to cater for marginalized groups, and the ease at which it can be used poorly, funding and expert input needs to be made available in relation to foreign language learning for all SEN categories. This is particularly the case during the early stages of inclusion where foreign language teachers may reach out to ICT as a solution to a problem, rather than as a means to an end.

## Main Conclusion

The major barrier to successful foreign language learning in SEN is in negative assumptions about learner capabilities, limited vision of the pragmatic value of languages for these pupils, and lack of recognition of the size of the school population involved.

On the basis of this research, the percentage of pupils who experience learning difficulties, at some point in their schooling, is estimated at 15-20%. Thus the foreign language classroom will probably include more SEN pupils than those officially recognized as such.

The use of terms such as ‘difficulty’ or ‘disorder’ may be counter-productive when considering equality of access to foreign language learning. An alternative approach involves not having predominant focus on learning disorders and disabilities, but rather on different kinds of learning ability.

This would help offset one of the problems within the foreign language teaching profession which has been reported widely during the course of this study. It is seeing the special educational needs learner as different – equating this with difficult – and then arguing that insufficient training has been available to handle the situation. Reports by teachers that they lack the skills required to cope with learners who are different is a very real issue. But most learners, if not all, can be considered ‘different’ in some ways, at some point in their lives. The SEN pupil needs to be considered as fundamentally ‘mainstream’. Not as different, and thus differentiated.

A good foreign language teacher will have generic skills and a diversity-oriented attitude by which to partly adapt teaching to suit the individual needs of learners. It is these generic skills which are the basis of achieving good practice in SEN and foreign language learning. These skills are then complemented by extra input according to the abilities and disabilities of the specific learner (e.g. whether hearing or visually impaired, physically handicapped, having behavioural/emotional problems, or other conditions).

In terms of foreign language learning, the SEN label needs to be seen as one feature of classroom diversity. It should act as a signpost, an indicator, of which direction to go in, rather than as a key to a solution. This is because so many SEN learners have ‘multiple disorders of multiple disorders’ which makes off-the-shelf solutions either too simplistic, or which is otherwise instrumental in ensuring avoidance of language learning provision.

For SEN, as for non-SEN, the value of learning languages goes beyond the learning of linguistic features and rules into accessing the benefits of European integration. In ensuring equal access to foreign language learning for all pupils there is a need to ensure that policy filters through to practice. This could be facilitated through implementation of certain actions at the European, member state, professional organization and school levels.

## Main Recommendations

In respect to the social collective of the European Union and member states, the main recommendations of this report are:

- Further establishing right of entitlement appropriate to needs and abilities
- Satisfying the need for data and further developing means for identifying ‘at risk’ learners
- Articulating good practice, success and added value
- Enhancing ICT accessibility, interoperability and applicability

- Further developing the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages
- Establishing and extending European professional network platforms
- Including foreign language expertise in SEN resource centres, and SEN expertise in language centres
- Further providing in-service and initial foreign language teacher education focused on diverse learning preferences
- Recognizing ‘lower end’ foreign language learning achievement