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Editorial

Teaching English as a Foreign/Second Language Students with Specific Learning Difficulties

Various European Commission policy documents highlight the importance of pluri/multilingual education and provide a number of arguments for such a policy; for example, (1) individuals who learn more languages have better personal and professional opportunities, (2) multilingual societies foster cultural awareness, mutual understanding and social cohesion, and (3) multilingual workers with intercultural competences are a vital resource for helping businesses succeed and grow in global markets (European Commission, 2012). The language that is most taught and assessed as a first foreign language is English: 97% of all young Europeans study English as a first foreign language. Eurydice reports that, in almost all European countries, English is the foreign language learnt by most students during primary and secondary education. It is also a mandatory foreign language in nearly all education systems that stipulate a particular foreign language that all students must study (Eurydice, 2017).

However, when it comes to measuring foreign language competences of secondary school students, the European Survey on Language Competences (2012), which assessed English as a first foreign language (EFL) in 13 out of 16 education systems, revealed that only 42% of the tested pupils overall reached the level of independent user in the first foreign language (B1 level). This means that, after several years of studying a language in school, the majority of young Europeans cannot hold a simple conversation in the language they have studied (European Commission, 2012). One of the potential reasons for such a poor result might be that some of the students find learning English particularly difficult because of their inherent, physiological characteristics. These students are commonly defined as students with specific learning difficulties, and they have only recently come to the attention of EFL researchers (Kormos, 2017a; Kormos et al., 2018; Nijakowska & Kormos, 2017b).

Kormos argues that, although the cognitive factors that influence processes of second language (L2) development have been widely researched, the language learning processes of students with specific learning difficulties have received little attention (Kormos, 2017). Despite the fact that statistics show that one out of ten students might potentially have some form of learning difficulty, (language) teacher education programmes still devote very little attention to enhancing (language) teachers' competences in teaching students with specific learning difficulties. To support students with specific learning difficulties who

learn English as a second/foreign language, all stakeholders involved in language learning/acquisition (preschool teachers, primary teachers, head teachers, teacher trainers, researchers, decision makers, etc.) need to understand how individual differences in cognitive functioning influence second/foreign language acquisition in these students. With this in mind, the editors of the current issue invited authors to investigate the learning and teaching of students with specific learning difficulties in both school and out-of-school contexts where English is taught/used as a second/foreign language. More specifically, this special issue welcomed articles that discuss issues such as memory difficulties and learning/teaching ESL/EFL, organisational difficulties and learning/teaching ESL/EFL, writing difficulties and learning/teaching ESL/EFL, visual processing difficulties and learning/teaching ESL/EFL, reading difficulties and learning/teaching ESL/EFL, auditory processing difficulties and learning/teaching ESL/EFL, time management difficulties and learning/teaching ESL/EFL, sensory distractions and learning/teaching ESL/EFL, identification of specific learning difficulties in learning/teaching ESL/EFL, classroom accommodations for foreign/second language learners with specific learning difficulties, specific learning difficulties and developing phonological and orthographic awareness in learning/teaching ESL/EFL, specific learning difficulties and teaching vocabulary and grammar in the ESL/EFL context, specific learning difficulties and teaching listening and speaking in the ESL/EFL context, specific learning difficulties and teaching reading and writing in the ESL/EFL context, assessment of ESL/EFL learners with specific learning difficulties, ESL/EFL teachers' competences in teaching students with specific learning difficulties, inclusive policies in English language education and similar. We were pleasantly surprised by the enthusiastic response of more than twenty contributors who sent in their abstracts on the topic of teaching EFL/ESL students with specific learning difficulties. After a careful selection process, seven articles were accepted as the focus articles of this issue. Next to these, the issue also brings three *varia* articles and two book reviews.

The first article, entitled *Disability, Inclusion and Language-in-Education Policy in the Global South: The Colombian Context*, provides arguments and solutions for a more localised approach to meeting the educational needs of English language learners instead of following one single international standard that is commonly decided and designed in the so-called Global North. According to the authors, the suggested model should incorporate local knowledge and practice based on Global South epistemologies to ensure that all students receive culturally and context-sensitive equitable classroom instruction.

In the second article, entitled *The Universal Genre Sphere: A Curricular Model Integrating GBA and UDL to Promote Equitable Academic Writing*

Instruction for EAL University Students, the authors propose an instructional model called the universal genre sphere (UGS) for teaching academic writing, which is especially suitable for learners of English as an additional language (EALs) with or without learning differences. The model is therefore designed for all kinds of learners, which inclusive education is per se. The authors' intention was, inter alia, to bring together three otherwise separated disciplines of research, i.e., second-language writing, English as an additional language and learning differences. The new inclusive and effective (UGS) model has therefore been designed based on the theories of universal design for learning, the genre-based approach and the teaching-learning cycle. How does this look in practice? The model exploits students' interests while breaking the learning process into manageable and adjustable components, thus making academic writing accessible to learners with learning differences, as well. Moreover, the authors encourage other researchers to design their own context-specific implementations of this new model, thus providing practice with more evidence-based data of the efficiency of the model.

The next article, entitled *The Influence of Technology in Educating English Language Learners at-risk or with Disabilities: A Systematic Review*, focuses on the increased development of technological tools in inclusive language education, an area that gained additional momentum during the Covid-19 pandemic. The authors conducted a systematic review of the empirical studies of technology tools for ESL/EFL students with learning difficulties published in the last twenty years. The paper presents the frequent mental and physical difficulties of English language learners, typical technological tools used in and out of school and, more importantly, their effects on student learning outcomes and perceptions. The authors also call for more attention to be devoted to the use of technology, especially for language learners with special needs, and suggest open issues worth investigating in the future.

The article entitled *Meeting the Needs of Learners with Specific Learning Difficulties in Online and Face-to-Face Language Classrooms: Teacher Beliefs and Practices* focuses on language teachers' beliefs, knowledge and practices concerning the provision of high-quality education to learners with specific learning difficulties in different educational contexts around the world. This qualitative study suggests that, regardless of the educational setting, teachers are faced with similar challenges in teaching learners with specific learning difficulties. A lack of specialised training in this area is the common key factor, which further affects the quality of teaching practice. During the pandemic, technology-assisted online instruction was perceived as favourable by learners with certain types of learning difficulties. These findings are important for further research, as well as for teacher practitioners and teacher educators.

The authors of the next article, entitled *Undergraduate and Graduate Students' Beliefs about Dyslexia: Implications for Initial Foreign Language Teacher Education*, employed a convergent parallel mixed methods design and discovered that both undergraduate and graduate students have an almost equal number of misconceptions about dyslexia, with the majority affirming that they need more training in teaching students with dyslexia or other specific learning difficulties. The study also identifies a framework of three main student concerns about teaching students with dyslexia and other learning differences, i.e., teacher beliefs and attitudes, teaching practices and teacher preparation.

The sixth article, entitled *Inclusive Teaching Practices with Learners with Dyslexia: Face-To-Face Training-Induced Changes in Foreign Language Teachers' Self-Efficacy Beliefs, Concerns and Attitudes*, reports on how foreign language teachers' self-efficacy beliefs, concerns and attitudes related to implementing inclusive instructional practices with learners with dyslexia changed as a result of their participation in an intensive face-to-face course on dyslexia and FL teaching. Several potential variables were examined and, interestingly, no significant effects of general teaching experience, experience in teaching learners with dyslexia, teaching context (country), fulltime employment and level of education on self-efficacy beliefs and attitudes were found either before or after the course. However, teaching context (country) and fulltime employment did differentiate participants with regard to how concerned they were about implementing inclusive teaching before the course and these differences prevailed after the course.

The final focus article, entitled *Dyslexia and English as a Foreign Language in Norwegian Primary Education: A Mixed Methods Intervention Study*, reports on the exploration of the effect of specific teaching accommodations for English language learners with dyslexia in a Norwegian primary school. Specifically, the impact of multisensory techniques on spelling skills and motivation was investigated. The findings revealed that all of the participating pupils reported gains in their motivation and improvement in attitude towards learning English. The reader can also find some teaching recommendations in the article for using specific accommodations for EFL learners with dyslexia.

In addition to the focus issue, there are also three articles in the *Varia* section and two book reviews, one covering the topic of immigrants in Slovenia through the research prism of students at the Faculty of Education, University of Ljubljana, and the other addressing the focus of the current issue, *Supporting Learners with Dyslexia in the ELT Classroom*. The three *Varia* articles discuss (1) access to intervention programmes for children with poor reading skills, (2) the collaborative wall as a technological means to improve

the teaching-learning process in physics instruction, and (3) some insights into engineering education teaching practice during the Covid-19 pandemic. Readers are warmly invited to engage with all of the engrossing articles collected in the present edition of the CEPS Journal.

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