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An English as a foreign language teacher's approach to including students with learning differences in a mainstream classroom: A case study

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Abstract

Interest in foreign language (FL) learners with special educational needs (SEN) has increased internationally in the past 10-15 years. Among the growing number of research studies hardly any have yet explored the situation of mainstream FL teachers, who are expected to create learning opportunities for SEN students in integrated classes without any preliminary training in special needs education. The aim of this case study was to explore and understand one such FL teacher's experience. Qualitative data for the study were collected from lesson observations and interviews conducted with the teacher, one of his SEN students, and her parent. The data was analyzed using an inductive approach. The findings show how an English teacher without any special qualifications or training in developmental pedagogy can be successful in including students with specific learning differences in a mainstream FL classroom.

Keywords: EFL teacher; language teaching; learning differences; integration and inclusion; ADHD

1. Introduction

Students with special educational needs (SEN) are increasingly being educated in mainstream schools. This is a welcome change in educational policy, but it

may generate tension both in schools and in teachers due to increased responsibilities and lack of experience or established *good practice* (European Commission, 2005). Particularly difficult is the situation of foreign language (FL) teachers who are expected to prepare students with sensory impairment or language-based learning difficulties to meet the FL requirements set by the curriculum for non-special needs learners. In Hungary, which is the context of the present study, this is a truly demanding task in a regular school environment short of both support staff and resources. FL teachers without any special training and without the assistance of colleagues trained in special education may feel left alone to cope with the task. Experience shows that a great number of SEN students end up with a waiver in foreign languages due to the fact that neither the teacher nor the school is capable of dealing with the challenge successfully (Gyarmathy & Vassné, 2004). While an exemption might look like a welcome solution temporarily, in effect it means that SEN students are deprived of an essential 21st century skill, that is, the ability to use foreign languages (Crombie, 2000; Kormos & Kontra, 2008). As this is a recent development, it is worth investigating how a practicing FL teacher who has not participated in any pre- or in-service training specifically addressing students with learning difficulties copes with the challenges of teaching a SEN student diagnosed with attention deficit disorder (ADD) in an integrated setting and what instructional practices and methods he uses in his mainstream FL classes to create an inclusive environment and help his SEN student succeed.

In line with the principles of exploratory qualitative research, the aim of this case study is to help the reader get greater understanding of the issue under investigation and offer findings that are transferrable to similar contexts (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). In the following, first a brief outline of SEN education and previous research on teaching FLs to learners with SEN will be provided. This will be followed by a description of the method of data collection and analysis applied in this study. Finally, using a descriptive-interpretive approach (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Holliday, 2007) insights will be provided into the work of an EFL teacher trying to integrate a SEN learner in a mainstream school.

2. Students with special needs in language pedagogy

2.1. Concepts and terminology

Teaching foreign languages to students with learning *disabilities*, learning *difficulties* or learning *differences* (Kormos & Smith, 2012) has been on the agenda of researchers in FL pedagogy for some time (e.g., Csizér, Kormos, & Sarkadi, 2010; Nijakowska, 2010; Sarkadi, 2008; Schneider & Crombie, 2003; Sparks,

2009; Sparks & Miller, 2000); nevertheless, there is a great variety in how terms and concepts are used. Moreover, no specific scientific theory is available to guide researchers in conducting investigations in this field. In order to map out the territory for the present research, in this section key concepts and their interrelationship in educating learners with special needs will be outlined with on the basis of previous research.

A useful working definition of SEN is offered by the EU report entitled *Special educational needs in Europe: The teaching and learning of languages: Insights and innovation*, which posits that "[a] child has special educational needs if s/he has learning difficulties that require special educational provision" (European Commission, 2005, p. 7). The document discusses SEN under four main categories: sensory and physical impairments, communication and interaction disorders, cognitive and learning differences (including dyslexia, dyspraxia, dysgraphia), and emotional, behavioral and social difficulties, such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). The text also calls attention to the fact that there is a significant overlap between and within categories and individuals are frequently affected by a combination of difficulties. ADHD, a behavioral disorder, for instance, has been found to frequently co-occur with dyslexia, identified as a learning difference (Kormos & Smith, 2012; Kormos, 2017).

The use of the terms *disability/disorder/difficulty/difference* varies across documents and research papers. Since the notions of disability, disorder or difficulty all have negative connotations, recent, educationally oriented sources prefer to use the term *specific learning differences* (Kormos & Smith, 2012; for a detailed discussion see Kormos, 2017, pp. 2-6) to emphasize that children with SEN are also capable of learning; they just learn differently and have to be taught differently. As a token of the author's identification with this point of view, in the present study, the terms *SEN students, students with special needs*, and *students with specific learning differences* are used interchangeably.

Within the category of SEN, dyslexia is said to be the most frequently encountered problem and therefore it is also the most widely researched specific learning difference (SpLD). Language teachers looking for information and pedagogical advice regarding learners with SpLD frequently have to resort to consulting the literature on dyslexic students. Schneider and Crombie's (2003, p. 3) definition captures the essence of dyslexia and the role of the teacher:

> (...) a language processing difficulty to varying degrees that affect mainly reading and writing in letter, number and/or musical symbols. These difficulties occur because of differing abilities of the brain to process auditory and/or visually presented information. While dyslexia cannot be cured, specific accommodations through professional teaching can provide the dyslexic individual with successful coping strategies.

Dyslexic students are characterized by weak phonological processing skills, poor working memory, limited attention span, poor organizational skills and low self esteem. Crombie (2003, p. 116) notes that "[p]oor working memory, faulty auditory sequencing and difficulties with object naming can make the retention and reproduction of vocabulary particularly difficult" for them.

As mentioned before, there are very few clear cases as most students display a mixture of cognitive and behavioral difficulties (European Commission, 2005). Dyslexia often co-occurs with dysgraphia, dyspraxia, and/or ADHD (Kormos & Smith, 2012; Pennington, 2006). Kaplan and her colleagues (Kaplan, Dewey, Crawford, & Wilson, 2001) found that in their sample of 179 children there was a 51.6% chance for those who were diagnosed with dyslexia to also have another disorder. Conversely, Kormos (2017, p. 23) citing previous research states that the prevalence of dyslexia among children with ADHD might be 8-39%, depending on the applied diagnostic procedure. Discussing the difficulties of dyslexic language learners and recommended teaching approaches, Crombie (2000) observes that "[f]or children who have language learning problems, dyslexic or not, many of the issues and possible solutions seem likely to be the same" (p. 113).

In her book on the second language learning processes of students with specific learning difficulties, Kormos (2017) devotes considerable attention to ADHD arguing that "ADHD extends 'beyond behavior'" (p. 6) and that it can be the cause of learning and literacy-related difficulties. According to the American Psychiatric Association (2015), "ADHD is characterized by a pattern of behavior, present in multiple settings (e.g., school and home), that can result in performance issues in social, educational, or work settings". Students with ADD manifest inattentive behavior, those with ADHD show hyperactive and impulsive behavior (Pfiffner & Haack, 2014), and some individuals present a combination of both types. Students with ADHD have difficulty focusing; they can be easily distracted and tend to be forgetful (Evans, Owens, & Bunford, 2014). These students are not organized in the classroom and it is hard to keep them on task; they fidget, become disruptive, and their mood can change swiftly (Lougy & Rosenthal, 2002). Brooks emphasizes that "(...) a major feature of the mindset of many individuals with ADHD is their belief that they are not very competent, that they are destined to fail" (2002, p. 136). Jeffries and Everatt's (2004) research findings suggest that students with ADHD may have similar learning profiles to dyslexic students, and they might face similar difficulties to them when it comes to reading and writing. Dyslexic learners may misread words and students with ADHD may leave off endings or may lose track of where they are in the text, all of which may lead to comprehension problems (Dakin & Erenberg, 2005; Tridas, 2007).

As regards the teaching of SpLD students, the EU report on special educational needs in Europe (European Commission, 2005) states that "overall there

is a trend towards inclusion of special needs learners into mainstream schools" (p. 12). The terms *inclusion* and *integration* denote similar notions and are frequently used interchangeably, although there is an important difference in meaning. Integration can refer to the mere physical presence of SEN students in regular classes. A student can physically be present in the classroom and still be side-lined in a pedagogical sense (European Commission, 2005). Inclusion, on the other hand, implies a higher integrational level which takes account of each student's individual needs (Fisher, 2009) and makes participation and engagement accessible to them. This is achieved by adjusting the curriculum, redesigning the classroom, and choosing instructional methods to accommodate all. Kormos and Smith (2012) point out that inclusion in its purest form "calls for a radical restructuring of the education system" (p. 11), and since the circumstances for this level of inclusion are not yet available in the Hungarian educational system, the terms *integration* and *inclusion* are being used interchangeably.

2.2. ADHD and the teaching and learning of foreign languages

In the literature there are no language teaching methods specifically designed for learners with ADHD; to date only a few internationally known studies have investigated ADHD in the context of FL learning at college level (Sparks, Javorsky, & Philips, 2004, 2005). Nevertheless, extensive work has been undertaken on recommended interventions for students with ADHD in general classrooms. These include behavioral interventions, such as direct instruction on attention (Rief, 2003), or modification of the environment to help avoid distraction and the so-called academic interventions that address student learning (DuPaul, Weyandt, & Janusis, 2011). Recommended academic interventions entail differentiated classroom instruction in three main areas: content, (what students learn), process (through what activities they learn), and products (how they are assessed) according to students' needs (Tomlinson & Allan, 2000). Instruction in a differentiated classroom builds on students' strengths and provides support in areas of weakness.

As a type of academic intervention, the use of computer technology is recommended by Clarfield and Stoner (2005), who claim that computer assisted classroom instruction is beneficial in maintaining ADHD students' on-task behavior in reading tasks. As these students are found to be poor spellers, they can benefit from structured and direct instruction on spelling in writing (Rief, 2003). In developing a direct approach to teaching languages to at-risk learners, the work carried out by Sparks and Ganschow (e.g., Sparks, 2009; Sparks, Artzer, Patton, Ganschow, Miller, Hordubay & Walsh, 1998) is seminal. They developed the multisensory structured language (MSL) approach and successfully implemented it in teaching Spanish to dyslexic learners. The essence of the MSL

approach is the explicit, step by step instruction of phonology and orthography, that is, the teaching of sound–symbol relationships, syntax, the overt explanation of grammatical concepts, and the multisensory practice of structures and vocabulary (Sparks & Miller, 2000). This means that the students are encouraged to use their visual, auditory and kinesthetic skills simultaneously (Sparks et al., 1998, p. 242). The successful use of a step-by-step method with dyslexics (Sparks & Miller, 2000) entails breaking down the teaching material into small segments which are practiced and reinforced for long term memory attainment. Murphy (2014) also advocates breaking down longer assignments into smaller chunks for ADHD students in the general classroom and letting them work on one part of the task, thus making the whole assignment more manageable.

Rief (2012) suggests generating topical words pertaining to the theme being studied as one of the examples utilizing direct instruction. Similarly, Rief (2012, p. 93) recommends the use of multisensory approaches "to accelerate the reading and writing progress" of ADHD students in the general classroom. As ADHD students are very visual, visual aspects of learning should be encouraged: visual presentation techniques, the use of pictures and colors to aid memory, or color-coding difficult letters to improve spelling.

In addition to the methods listed above, Murphy (2014) proposes allowing students to stand or move around or to use a fidget toy in the classroom. According to Kormos and Smith (2012, p. 134), ADHD students benefit from always being seated in the same place but value a designated area at the back of the classroom when they become distracted. Pfiffner, Barkley, and DuPaul (2006) add techniques such as giving clear and brief instructions, offering incentives rather than punishment, praising students who are on-task, or redirecting off-task students with nonverbal gestures. Last but not least, Kormos and Smith (2012, p. 117) promote a positive and supportive learning environment by encouraging students and rewarding their efforts.

2.3. Special needs situation in Hungary

In Hungary, it was Act 79 on Public Education (Magyar Köztársaság Országgyűlése, 1993) that officially paved the way for the inclusion of SEN children in mainstream schools in 1993. However, until quite recently it was common practice to exempt SEN students, particularly dyslexic learners, from the FL requirement (Kormos, Sarkadi, & Csizér, 2009; Sarkadi, 2009). This approach is now gradually changing and instead of waivers the introduction of accommodations and alternative teaching methods are recommended, including holistic information processing, multisensory techniques, overt and explicit teaching of structures, and differentiation (Kontráné Hegybíró, Dóczi–Vámos, & Kálmos, 2012;

Sarkadi, 2008, 2009; Tánczos, 2007). The teacher participants of a focus-group interview study (Kormos & Kontra, 2008) emphasized that above all, FL teachers who wish to achieve success have to change their attitudes and accept SEN students on their own terms, understand their difficulties and cater for their individual needs.

While research on integrating dyslexic students in a mainstream EFL environment has grown considerably in the past 10-15 years, Pintz (2008) claims that little attention has been devoted to language learners with ADHD. Therefore, in her individual case study conducted as part of her MA research she focuses on a 16-year-old student with ADHD, diagnosed with dyslexia, dysgraphia, and dyscalculia. Utilizing knowledge gained from coursework and literature, Pintz identifies problematic areas in the student's language learning such as vocabulary acquisition problems, spelling/sound-symbol relationship difficulties, and issues with syntax. Based on more than a year's experience of one-on-one tutoring, Pintz considers the application of multisensory teaching methods, such as the activation of kinesthetic, visual, and auditory channels via movement, images, and sounds, to be effective. She believes that students can utilize additional sensory information by the use of real objects when memorizing vocabulary or grammar items. Visuals, charts or posters on the wall, pictures, drawings, and the use of colors can be the hallmark of visual representation, and color coding can help the learner organize information more effectively.

Unlike Pintz, however, most teachers in mainstream schools do not have the advantage of attending courses on SEN language learners or working with a university tutor. The present research, which forms part of a more extensive study on SEN FL learning, is novel in the sense that it investigates the case of one such FL teacher in a mainstream school. The research question guiding the investigation has been formulated as follows: *How does a language teacher without any prior training in special education cope with the task of including a student with ADHD in a mainstream EFL class?*

3. Research method

The research question favored a case study approach within the qualitative paradigm (Yin, 2009). Creswell (1998) defines a *case study* as "an exploration of a 'bounded system' or a case (or multiple cases) over time through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information rich in context" (p. 61). The investigation described below was guided by Patton's observation that "[q]ualitative methods facilitate study of issues in depth and detail" and that "[a]pproaching fieldwork without being constrained by predetermined categories of analysis contributes to the depth, openness, and detail of qualitative inquiry" (2002, p. 14). The design followed the interpretive tradition of case study

research in trying to see the situation through the eyes of the participants (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). In other words, the researcher's goal was not to verify or construct a theory but to explore the issue in depth in order to understand it from the participant's perspective.

3.1. Participants

3.1.1. Mr. Fekete, the EFL teacher

The case for this study is a 52-year-old Hungarian teacher of English, Mr. Fekete (pseudonym). He was purposively selected (Cohen, et al., 2007, p. 114-115) from a small pool of teachers interviewed in a previous project. His school did not differ from other primary schools, nor did the students he is teaching differ from other student communities. What made him stand out from the other interviewees was his high degree of confidence and the fact that his approach to SEN students was different from the common practice of exempting students with SpLD from foreign language learning.

Mr. Fekete had 33 years of experience. He held a language teacher's degree for grades 1 to 6 and a supplementary degree that qualifies him to teach within the European Union. He had never taken part in any professional development specifically addressing students with learning differences. He had taught at two other schools before entering his present job as one of six Hungarian teachers of English. Mr. Fekete taught seven groups. In his grade 6 group, which was selected for the present study, there were 11 students, three with SpLD. One of them was Zelia, a student identified by Mr. Fekete as having the most severe learning difficulties in her group. In order to get a complete picture of Mr. Fekete as a teacher of students with SpLD, and for the purpose of triangulation, Zelia and her mother, Anna (both pseudonyms), were also interviewed.

3.1.2. Zelia, a SEN student

Zelia is a quiet child who comes from a supportive family. When entering school, she exhibited high levels of inattention, was easily distracted by external stimuli, and had difficulties in following teachers' instructions. She often made mistakes in her work. During her first year of primary school the head teacher suspected she might be an SpLD student and asked the parents to take the child to the Pedagogical and Psychological Counsel for a professional opinion. The experts came to the conclusion that Zelia had attention deficit disorder (ADD) and made recommendations for specific accommodations at school. Zelia is now entitled to regular remedial sessions once a week. She also gets differentiated treatment

in class. Rapid changes of activities and playful exercises are said to contribute to her development. It is recommended that her performance should be assessed on her own terms according to the progress she makes. She is entitled to extended time for completing her in-class assignments and written tests. Zelia benefits from sitting or standing at the front of the class, near the teacher, so as to ensure a more distraction-free environment. Due to her difficulties with spatial orientation and directionality, Zelia needs guidance in finding her way in the coursebook and on test papers. Zelia can benefit from short, simple, and direct instructions which have to be accompanied by gestures and eye contact. It may be helpful to break assignments into smaller components. Zelia needs to receive immediate feedback on each component, a small reward together with frequent positive confirmation.

3.1.3. Zelia's mother, Anna

Anna is in her mid-40s, married with three children. After graduating from college, she held a full-time job at one of the thriving IT services companies. Now she is a homemaker so that she can better look after her children, Zelia in particular. Anna does her best to organize Zelia's life and she offers her support in the areas where Zelia is weaker. She is a caring mother who understands not only the struggles her daughter faces due to her ADD, but also the bullying she suffers because she is different. Anna does not want her daughter to be stigmatized. Instead of focusing on Zelia's weaknesses, Anna always highlights her strengths to help her daughter see herself more positively and encourages her in what she is good at and enjoys doing, for instance skiing.

3.2. The setting

The primary school where Mr. Fekete teaches is situated in a socioeconomically advantageous part of Budapest. At the time of data collection, 625 pupils aged 6 to 14 years, from grades 1 to 8, attended the institution. The school premises provide an adequate working environment for teaching and learning. The building is in good condition, the rooms are spacious and well-lit; the classrooms are equipped with projectors and decorated with posters and pictures. Teachers have access to computers or laptops.

The walls in Mr. Fekete's classroom show his conscious effort to create a safe and friendly environment that is also conducive to learning. Some visuals created by the students themselves feature high frequency words on different topics to support the memorization of vocabulary and spelling. Mr. Fekete has cluster tables ready for task sharing and group work; he strategically places furniture to reduce distractions and help students concentrate. Mr. Fekete's overall

classroom environment encourages all students, not only Zelia, to participate in the activities and learn.

3.3. Instruments of data collection

The instruments of data collection were semi-structured individual interviews and classroom observations. The preparation of the interview guides was based on case study literature (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Yin, 2009). Open-ended questions were used, which allowed greater flexibility and richer interaction to take place. First, broad areas of relevant knowledge about educating SpLD learners were selected and then questions were formulated within each relevant field. Finally, probing sub-questions were drafted to elicit more details and more specific information about key issues.

The first teacher interview asked the participating EFL teacher to reflect on various aspects of working with SEN students aged 12-14 in an integrated primary school. The follow-up interview with the teacher was comprised of seven questions, which specifically aimed at eliciting detailed information on accommodating one student with learning differences, Zelia. Questions such as "What is it that you do differently with Zelia than with the others in and outside class? or "What specific help do you provide Zelia?" were employed to get insight into the details of the methods and techniques used. The teacher interviews lasted 85 and 40 minutes respectively.

The interview with the student, Zelia, included questions about her attitude towards studying English, the characteristics of learning English both at school and at home, specific problems Zelia had and how Mr. Fekete helped her to overcome them. The aim of the interview conducted with Zelia's mother was to obtain information on the nature of Zelia's difficulties and her learning experiences from the mother's perspective and how she thought Mr. Fekete managed to integrate Zelia in his EFL class. The mother and child interviews took around 20 minutes each.

Mr. Fekete's interview guides, Zelia's interview protocol and the questions for Zelia's mother were reviewed by one of the tutors of the author's PhD program, and piloted with the help of a student with learning differences, Zelia's classmate, and the mother of the same student. All the instruments of data collection were designed in Hungarian.

The interview data were complemented with field notes taken during school visits and observations of Mr. Fekete's classes. Five English lessons were observed and they were complemented with the observation of one mathematics and one Hungarian grammar class in order to obtain a broader view of what methods of integrative instruction are employed in other subjects at the school. Observations lasted 45 minutes each. Recordings were not permitted.

The development of the observation instrument was informed by Wajnryb's (2012) guidelines for constructing observation protocols. It included such basic categories as teaching material and technical equipment, pace, and grouping format (i.e., individual, pair or group work). These were complemented by rubrics for the teacher's methods of differentiation, the applied multisensory techniques, and any further details of how he addressed the individual needs of Zelia.

The observations yielded important information and rich data on Mr. Fekete's teaching practice which helped in gaining greater insight into his attitude to all his students, including Zelia. Besides conducting observations, Zelia's English notebooks, which she used both in class and for writing homework, were used as further means of data triangulation. Information from different sources contributed to the development of a comprehensive picture of Mr. Fekete's classroom instruction.

3.4. Data collection and analysis

Data collection took place in the school year 2016/2017. Great care was taken to manage ethical issues. The head teacher of the school was asked for the school's consent to undertake the investigation and parental consent was also obtained for interviewing the SEN student. After the preliminary analysis of the first interview with Mr. Fekete, the follow-up teacher interview and the student and parent interview guides were designed and the interviews were conducted. The transcription of the audiotaped interviews was done by the researcher and her colleagues from work, who also helped cross-check the transcription. The interview participants were given an opportunity to check the transcripts to enhance the trustworthiness of the research. The analysis of the data started already in the transcribing phase. The emerging issues of the analyzed data guided the data collection of subsequent phases. The conversations yielded a rich data set of almost 13,000 words.

After all the data had been transcribed, the final data analysis took place using an inductive approach (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). The transcripts were read and reread several times for emerging themes. The coding of the identified data segments into categories took place manually in several rounds until the most salient themes were identified. The categories were subsequently grouped under four more inclusive topics, each expressing one aspect of how Mr. Fekete manages to cope with the challenge of including a SEN learner in his EFL class, which will be discussed in the next section.

4. Results and discussion

In this section, the results of the analysis are presented according to the four overarching topics: (1) instinctive dealing with inclusion; (2) providing compensatory

classes; (3) using differentiation in classroom instruction; and (4) motivating special needs learners. In the following discussion, excerpts from the transcribed interviews are provided to support the assertions that are made and to create a *thick description* (Holliday, 2007, p. 74). All data excerpts are cited in the author's translation. The parenthetical codes identify the participants by their initials, refer to the number of the interview, and indicate the location of the segment in the respective interview transcript.

4.1. Instinctive dealing with inclusion

From the interview data it became evident that Mr. Fekete lacked any professional training in teaching SEN students. Although his impression was that the number of students with learning problems at his school was on the increase, he specifically stated that he did not consider himself prepared for coping with their difficulties. In one of his interviews Mr. Fekete explained how he encountered different cases of SEN students and felt that only one or two pupils with milder difficulties could be integrated in his classes "so that it shows and it has some use" (T1, 233). This is not to say that Mr. Fekete minds including students with learning differences in his FL class; in fact, he prefers working with a heterogeneous group: "I like groups with good and weaker students, the good ones know this and want to maintain standards (...) they stimulate the weaker ones" (T1, 225). However, when the difference between the SEN learner and the rest of the class was extreme, he claimed he could not differentiate effectively or could only do so at the cost of giving less to the better students: "They need a special development plan and then those in the middle or the better ones and the good ones do not get the necessary attention" (T1, 225).

It turned out that informally, Mr. Fekete did in fact have a special development plan for Zelia, namely through reading. He used reading activities called *fact files*, which are country specific information activities on food or travel to engage Zelia in his lessons. Zelia confirmed in her interview that she found fact files interesting, and she preferred reading and doing fact file activities to the other tasks of the English lesson. In setting up the reading task, Mr. Fekete helped Zelia with a technique also recommended in the literature on dyslexic language learners (Kontráné Hegybíró, Dóczi-Vámos, & Kálmos, 2012). He commented: "If possible, I ask her to read the first three lines" (Z1, 41-42. This kind of chunking works well with holistic learners since the first sentences of a text in English usually give an idea of what the whole passage is about, which in turn makes comprehending further details easier.

4.2. Differentiated classroom instruction

Differentiation can be accomplished in various ways in class: through content, process and assessment (Tomlinson & Allan, 2000). When Zelia is working on the same material as the rest of her class, she does not get an easier exercise but receives help when she is stuck with a task and needs extra attention instantly as described below:

> *I am standing by Zelia, and if the end of the pencil is sticking out of her mouth, then I see that she is stuck. What is it? This is it. What is the order of the words? Have a look! What is the word order in the first example? If this does not make sense for her, because she is the kind of kid that this may not come to her, then I will show her with the tip of the pencil, or I underline it, or number it in the sample sentence 1, 2... Have a look at the word order (T2, 129-132).*

Mr Fekete also differentiates the amount of work assigned to individual students with learning differences. He explained: "I do not give them a lot, just to suit their abilities" (T1, 396-403). Since Zelia's diagnosis says that she has a slower pace of learning, whenever possible, Zelia is allowed more time to complete her tasks in the EFL class. In her interview, Zelia confirmed that Mr. Fekete can handle the paced learners well in class. In the event that some students finish earlier and others later, "Mr. Fekete gives the rest as homework to those who still have some tasks to do" (Z1, 94-95), but does not leave the paced learners without support.

Mr. Fekete's way of teaching grammar resembles the MSL approach (Sparks et al., 1998; Sparks & Miller, 2000), which emphasizes the direct and explicit teaching of structures in small, logical steps, with a thorough explanation of rules. In one of the observed lessons, he explained word order by first drawing Lego blocks on the blackboard for illustration. Then a sample sentence followed underneath, and finally there were some practice sentences for the students to work on. Mr. Fekete was observed to consciously apply visual illustrations and use color coding when teaching new grammar points.

The layout of the blackboard is mirrored on the pages of Zelia's notebook. For easy overview, each new grammatical item starts on a new page. If necessary, Mr. Fekete reminds Zelia where to find a specific grammatical item and he revises the learnt structures with her constantly. Furthermore, the observation data revealed that he does not shy away from giving his explanations in Hungarian, the first language of the students, to ensure that they all understand the grammatical phenomena. Mr. Fekete provides oral practice opportunities for students with learning differences in a way that allows them to listen to a few examples before it is their turn to answer the teacher:

> *At the beginning I would need to pay attention that I should call upon kids that surely know the answer in the first 2-3 sentences. The analogy becomes evident after the explanation and by putting Zelia on the right track, perhaps she may be able to put together the grammar, translation or the right pronunciation (T2, 32-35).*

In Mr. Fekete's description, Zelia experiences difficulties especially with vocabulary learning, that is, "deliberately committing words to memory" (Laufer, 2017, p. 5), which is notoriously hard for most SEN students (cf. Sarkadi, 2008; Schneider & Crombie, 2003). Zelia confessed that "[t]he trouble is that I forget them all the time (...) the words, I learn them once, and then I forget them" (Z1, 32–34). Anna confirmed that memorizing new words is one of the most problematic tasks for her daughter. Therefore, when putting new vocabulary items on the board, Mr. Fekete tries to help by using the strategy of grouping either by topic or according to sound and rhythm. In Zelia's vocabulary book we find words grouped under such topics as travel, meals, or birthday. Rhythm is used as an organizing principle when teaching the three forms of the irregular verbs "where the first, second and third forms have a rhythm" (T2, 57-58).

Mr. Fekete is aware that even despite his best efforts, Zelia's language output may not always be suitable for assessment. Rather than grading Zelia on one set occasion based on a single test, Mr. Fekete uses continuous assessment with her. His approach is also acknowledged by Zelia's mother: "What is decent of him (we appreciate it and it matters to Zelia a great deal, too) is that in the case Zelia messes up on some tests, there is a possibility to correct it" (A1, 93-94). Mr. Fekete's assessment is process- and not product-based. He grades Zelia on her own terms: "Zelia gets the grade for her knowledge, sometimes she needs help, but that is fine, we are all different. She is just as valuable, she gets there in a paced way. There is nothing wrong with that" (T2, 148-149).

Nevertheless, despite the teacher's efforts at differentiation, a regular 45-minute-long English class does not always allow sufficient practice for a SEN learner and extra compensatory classes are necessary for meeting curricular requirements. This issue is the focus of the following subsection.

4.3. Providing compensatory classes

In contexts where inclusion in its purest form that would entail the "radical restructuring of the education system" (Kormos & Smith, 2012, p. 11) is not feasible, compensatory FL classes (Kormos & Kontra, 2008; Schneider & Crombie, 2003) may successfully supplement regular classes and help SEN learners consolidate knowledge, get answers to individual problems, and gain confidence. Mr. Fekete also recognizes their importance for Zelia:

> *In the case the student cannot participate in the lesson, it may be a solution to provide extra tuition and explain the whole system for the 4th time, draw it for the 5th time and demonstrate [the material] (...) it may work with colors and shapes, there is no guarantee, but there is an opportunity for her and I am not saying that it usually works, but it may be successful provided we approach [the issue] from a different viewpoint, we take a different perspective – definitely in a small group, three, four people maximum (T1, 348-357).*

The benefits of afternoon remedial sessions provided by her school are confirmed by Zelia, too: "during the afternoon classes we do the homework and do oral exercises (...) the first is that we finish homework and Mr. Fekete explains the things we do not understand" (Z1, 113-116).

Weekly compensatory classes are a good means of developing a positive attitude in SEN students towards language learning; they help reduce frustration and build confidence by letting SEN students catch up and then be braver to participate in the mainstream classroom. What Mr. Fekete can do for Zelia in the special compensatory classes is that they work together on the homework, they go over vocabulary to the point of overlearning (T2, 19-21), and review grammar and pronunciation. Mr. Fekete moves Zelia more easily in a small group: "She is much happier, not so stressed, no reservations about the subject, thus she can work with the other three-four kids together. If she completes the homework [during compensatory class], she starts the next day with more courage" (T2, 22-23). He finds that this way Zelia benefits a great deal from compensatory classes.

It is important to know that Mr. Fekete does not only work extra with SpLD students, but he also feels responsible for supporting those who are more advanced, so he offers afternoon classes for them, too, although this is not part of his job description: "I have taken on these responsibilities out of my own initiative; they are not included in my curricular duties. I do these because I take the child into consideration, I would not be able to teach them otherwise, only if I help this way" (T1, 420-422).

4.4. Motivating special needs learners

Motivation in second language (L2) learning has proved to be "one of the most important factors that determine the rate and success of L2 attainment" (Dörnyei & Csizér, 1998, p. 203), and due to such difficulties of SEN students as their lack of age appropriate literacy skills, poor metacognition, or weak verbal memory (Kormos & Kontra, 2008; Kormos & Smith, 2012; Schneider & Crombie, 2003), creating and sustaining their motivation requires extra effort. In his interviews, Mr. Fekete related his complex ways of motivating SEN students. First of all, he does his best to create a safe, welcoming, and non-intimidating class

environment and introduces learners to the target language culture through *fact file* blocks, as mentioned by both Mr. Fekete and Zelia. In order to sustain students' motivation, Mr. Fekete personalizes the learning process of his students so that he tries to fill these tasks with personal content. The *fact file* activities are linked to the individual student's travel and life experience, thus making the material relevant to them.

Mr. Fekete addresses motivation not only by making the assigned tasks relevant for his students, but also by setting a personal example with his own behavior. He is highly committed to his students and their learning as the following excerpt illustrates:

> *There are many ways to get each child to do whatever has to be done. If it is not the bloody sweat kind of homework, doing it from the first sentence all the way to the end, instead I say the first three sets are homework, the next five are voluntary. The student says: "it is not obligatory, but I understand it and he asked me to do them". The output is the same, but it is in a different context. The five sentences were done for me. For me! That is what is special about it (T2, 280-287).*

Mr. Fekete does indeed manage to make his students want to please him and complete not only their homework, but also some extra tasks. His secret of developing a good relationship with the learners is captured through Anna's words: "On the one hand, he is strict; on the other hand, he can get down to the level of the kids in a positive sense. I believe that he is a real, competent teacher, who simply has talent" (A1, 116-118).

The motivational strategies Mr. Fekete uses are amongst the *ten commandments* Dörnyei and Csizér (1998) proposed for motivating language learners in the EFL classroom. The researchers investigated how teachers motivate students in the Hungarian context and they listed the 10 most important motivational strategies. Mr. Fekete applies most of these strategies with his SEN students. He sets a personal example with his own motivated behavior as he tells engaging stories off the top of his head and uses playful activities. He does his best to create a pleasant, relaxed atmosphere in the classroom and presents the tasks in a way that matches the learners' needs. For Mr. Fekete, it is important to develop a good relationship with the learners. Moreover, by giving positive feedback and by offering compensatory classes, he increases the learners' linguistic self-confidence. He tries to make the language classes interesting by finding out what his students are interested in and by personalizing the learning process accordingly. Mr. Fekete's non-judgmental attitude towards students with SpLD and the methods he uses to accommodate their special needs strongly influence SEN students' language learning attitude and consequently their motivated behavior.

Anna was satisfied with how Mr. Fekete managed to motivate her daughter in a supportive environment. Mr. Fekete explored and understood the problems that Zelia was facing and was willing to experiment with alternative methods to cater for Zelia's needs so as to prevent behavior problems or loss of motivation. Mr. Fekete's attitude to Zelia, the applied motivational strategies and his understanding of the nature of Zelia's problems led to a positive change in Zelia's attitude to language learning.

5. Conclusion

The presentation of this case was intended to provide an insider's perspective and greater understanding of how a mainstream language teacher copes with including a SEN student in a mainstream EFL class. The presented data clearly show that such a situation constitutes a challenge for an average teacher. While the data revealed that the selected EFL teacher did not feel formally prepared to teach students with SpLD in the integrated classroom, his perception was not shared by his SEN student or by the student's parent. On the contrary, the materials, teaching methods and classroom techniques employed by Mr. Fekete worked effectively and were appreciated. Even though Mr. Fekete had received no professional training specifically addressing students with learning differences, he instinctively coped with including a student with special needs in his regular EFL class like a professional.

His words and actions lead to the conclusion that the key to Mr Fekete's success lies in his high sense of commitment and responsibility for his students. Through Zelia's example we can see that he takes the recommendation of the Pedagogical and Psychological Counsel into account. He allows Zelia more time to complete her tasks in class. To compensate for the student's poor memory skills, he uses such techniques as overlearning and regular revision. He offers remedial classes to deal with individual problems and boost students' self-confidence. Last but not least, Mr. Fekete motivates SpLD learners in a way that positively affects their attitude to the foreign language and enhances their motivated language learning behavior. However, we can also see that although he instinctively uses methods and procedures recommended in the literature on teaching languages to SpLD learners, his repertoire is limited to a handful of techniques. A training course on SpLD learners could increase his awareness of why something works with these students and could also enrich his stock of techniques and activities.

It is well known that the role of a case study is not to produce generalizable results (Creswell, 1998), but to offer *transferability of findings*, that is, the knowledge and understanding that one gains from doing or reading a case study should be transferable to similar situations. Any reader or teacher can meet the

same kind of SEN students in their mainstream FL classes as Mr. Fekete. Thus, the understanding gained through Mr. Fekete's case can be transferred to other teachers' situations working in similar EFL contexts. Mr. Fekete's case demonstrates that an accepting attitude, a deep sense of responsibility, and a genuine desire to provide help can prevent SEN learners from failing and dropping out of their FL classes.

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