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Editorial: Learning foreign languages: experiences of persons with disabilities and special educational needs and their teachers

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Editorial on the Research Topic

[Learning foreign languages: experiences of persons with disabilities and special educational needs and their teachers](#)

Introduction

In an increasingly interconnected world, foreign language proficiency has shifted from an educational advantage to a fundamental necessity. Languages function not only as tools for communication but as gateways to cultural understanding, educational opportunity, and social inclusion. Yet, a critical gap persists in language education research: understanding how students with diverse learning needs and their teachers navigate foreign language classrooms. This Research Topic, *Learning foreign languages: experiences of persons with disabilities and special educational needs and their teachers*, addresses this gap by examining experiences of students with various disabilities and learning challenges across Europe.

This Research Topic presents cross-national perspectives on how students with visual or hearing impairments, physical disabilities, and special educational needs (SEN) engage with foreign language learning. It offers insights into students' attitudes and strategies, while also exploring educational approaches, technological supports, and pedagogical innovations that either facilitate or hinder their progress.

Research context and significance

Foreign language learning presents distinct challenges and opportunities for students with diverse learning needs. Unlike many academic subjects, language learning engages multiple sensory and cognitive processes—from auditory processing and visual recognition to memorization and social interaction. For students with sensory, physical, or cognitive differences, traditional methods may pose substantial barriers to participation and achievement.

Theoretical framework

This research draws on a multidimensional framework integrating inclusive education, foreign language acquisition, motivation theory, and disability studies. Rather than framing SEN as individual deficits, we view them as emerging from the interaction between personal characteristics and environmental contexts.

Students with diverse learning needs are not a homogeneous group. Each brings unique strengths, challenges, and preferences to the language learning process. We have aimed to avoid overgeneralizing findings while still identifying meaningful patterns to inform responsive educational practices.

Research methodologies

The studies employ a complementary mix of methodologies. Readers will find quantitative analyses of engagement, qualitative explorations of student perspectives, case studies of innovative practices, and mixed methods integrating multiple data sources.

This methodological pluralism provides both breadth and depth in understanding inclusive language education. Quantitative data reveal broad patterns, while qualitative components capture contextual nuances and lived experiences.

Special attention was given to making research methods accessible. Traditional approaches often exclude participants with certain disabilities. We adapted instruments and procedures to ensure meaningful participation across varied needs.

Key themes and findings

Several overarching themes emerge, offering insight into inclusive language education in Europe and suggesting paths for improvement.

First, students with diverse learning needs often show positive attitudes toward language learning, even when engagement and achievement vary. Chapter 1, *Beyond Barriers: Exploring Foreign Language Learning Experiences of Students with Diverse Learning Needs in four European countries*, by Karatsiori, Lontou, Domagała-Zysk, Vogt et al., shows that learning attitude scores exceed engagement scores, suggesting barriers are more related to access and delivery than to motivation. This challenges deficit-based assumptions and highlights untapped potential.

Second, assistive technologies can enhance access when properly implemented. As shown in Chapters 2 entitled *Enhancing EFL writing skills for adult Deaf and hard of hearing individuals* written by Chomicz, many students report limited instruction in using these tools, signaling a need for better training and support.

Third, research underscores the critical importance of multimodal and differentiated approaches to language instruction. Traditional methods relying heavily on auditory or visual input create barriers for students with sensory or cognitive impairments. Chapter 3, *Literature for all in Poland? Opportunities and challenges of easy to read standard in special education for the d/Deaf students in primary school - preliminary remarks* by Ruta-Korytowska and Wrześniewska-Pietrzak, chapter 4, “Language means freedom to me” perspectives of Deaf and hard-of-hearing students on their experiences in the English as a foreign language classroom by Urbann et al., chapter 5 *Learning outcomes of project-based learning activities on access to functional diversity terms*, by Campoy-Cubillo, chapter 6, *Teaching a second language to learners with mild intellectual disabilities – a Hungarian case study*, by Nemes, and chapter 7 *English learners with dyslexia benefit from English dyslexia intervention: an observational study of routine intervention practices* by Middleton et al.—each of them explores how diversifying instructional approaches and assessment methods can improve access for all.

Fourth, teacher preparation remains a challenge. Across all countries studied, many educators lack training in adapting instruction for students with SEN. However, Chapter 8, *Learning styles and strategies of D/deaf and hard of hearing students in foreign language acquisition—a research report* by Olszak and Borowicz demonstrates that with appropriate support, teachers can help students to develop effective and creative learning styles and inclusive language strategies.

Finally, motivation is influenced by factors beyond the classroom. Chapter 9, *Internal motivation vs. learning environment support in EFL: evidence from students with diverse learning needs across four European countries*, by Karatsiori, Lontou, Domagała-Zysk, Poredoš et al. draws attention to the fact that internal motivation is not only tied to teacher or peer support, highlighting the crucial role of family encouragement.

Implications and future directions

This research has important implications for policy, teacher preparation, and classroom practice. It challenges narrow views of inclusion as mere physical placement, advocating instead for meaningful participation. Instead, it points toward a more nuanced understanding of inclusive language education that recognizes both common principles and the need for individualized approaches.

We hope this work contributes to systems that support all students in becoming confident, capable users of foreign languages. In a multilingual world, language proficiency is a key to global participation. Students with diverse needs deserve educational pathways that respect both their challenges and capacities.

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