

Training Teachers of Languages to Meet the Needs of Inclusive Classrooms

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crossref <http://dx.doi.org/10.5755/j01.sal.0.18.419>

Abstract. The inclusion of special needs learners into mainstream schools is a key issue on the European agenda which poses new challenges to the training of future teachers (including teachers of languages to young learners) who need to receive adequate knowledge about various special needs categories and develop professional skills for identifying, assessing and meeting the needs of special needs learners.

In response to this new demand and in relation to the growing number of primary school children with special needs who attend mainstream classrooms in Bulgaria, the University of Ruse introduces a new training pack of materials for initial teacher training. The training materials' aim is to equip the student teachers with the relevant knowledge and competences for approaching diversity in their classroom in such a way that allows all children (including those with special educational needs) to demonstrate their potential as learners.

The goal of this paper is to present the pedagogical and methodological underpinnings, planned outcomes and challenges in the design and development of the in-service teacher training materials and to motivate the need for such type of training in the Bulgarian educational context.

Key words: *trainee teachers, inclusive education, young learners, English.*

Introduction

The promotion of inclusive education and personalized learning through support, early identification and integration of learners with special needs into mainstream schools is one of the main priorities on the European agenda. This is a natural response to the many "socio-economic, demographic, environmental and techno-logical challenges facing Europe and its citizens today and years ahead" (Council Conclusions, 2009, p.1).

Each of these has an impact on the challenge of providing good education for all. Therefore, education and training policies nowadays strive to provide equal opportunities for the acquisition of basic education and key competences and to promote learners' personal, social and professional fulfillment.

It should be noted, however, that some EU countries have taken specific measures to address the needs of disadvantaged learners, while others are still using the old system of segregated teaching of pupils with disabilities. Data from National Reports on the state of education reforms in the Baltic States, South Eastern Europe and Malta show that progress in providing targeted action for pursuit of inclusive teaching of pupils with special needs is slow and combining disadvantage is still a major challenge (Commission of the European Communities, 2009, p.5).

A core condition for the successful inclusion of learners with special educational needs is the adequate support and training of teachers to meet the needs of inclusive classrooms. In relation to this, the current paper aims to:

- explore and analyze the competences and skills of Bulgarian pre-service teacher trainees of English to meet the needs of inclusive classrooms;
- present the materials designed and the methodology used for providing adequate initial teacher training of

primary school language teachers of learners with special needs or from a disadvantaged background.

Opening New Pathways to Initial Teacher Training

Teacher initial education programmes in the EU undergo some changes with regard to the implementation of the Bologna Process degree structure in teacher training. The Bulgarian higher education system is not an exception. Each university preparing primary school language teachers provides a blend of innovative approaches that include e-learning course delivery modules and traditional classes in which students are presented with the latest developments in the fields of linguistics, methodology, pedagogy, child psychology and ICT in education. However, teacher training programmes for foreign language teachers to young learners in Bulgaria are making their first steps towards the integration of topics that provide teacher trainees with the relevant knowledge and competences for working with pupils with special needs. This change is a natural response to the educational reforms in the school system that has been taking place in the country in the recent years and that attempts to establish an inclusive setting for all learners.

According to data from a study on the move towards inclusive education in Baltic States, South Eastern Europe and Malta (Students with Disabilities, 2009, p.91), the number of learners with special needs in primary schools in Bulgaria who receive additional resources in class is higher compared to the number of learners with special educational needs attending lower-secondary and upper-secondary schools (Fig. 1).

The steady increase in the number of children with special educational needs who attend mainstream schools can be further illustrated by the results of the regular monitoring of pupil movement and school work in each region in Bulgaria. These data show that, for example, in the town of

Ruse (one of the major towns in the country) the number of pupils with special educational needs in the 2006/ 2007 school year had increased by 5.1 % compared with data from 2004/ 2005 school year (Report, 2008, p.7).

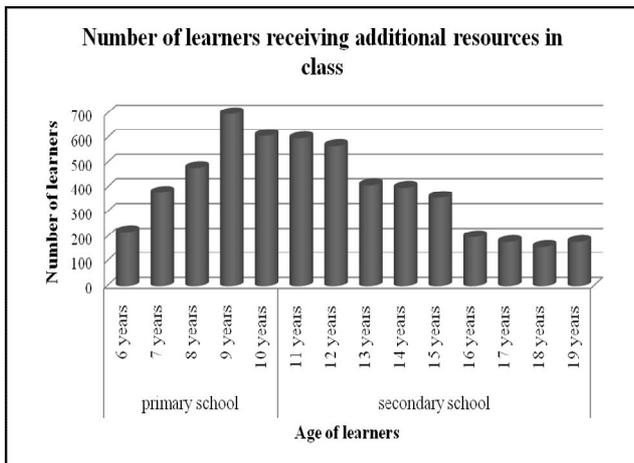


Fig. 1. Number of Learners with Special Needs in Bulgarian Schools Receiving Additional Resources in Class.

That motivates the need for enhancing the quality of initial teacher education. Effective in-service teacher training programmes have to prepare teachers who are not only highly qualified in their professional area but who are also equipped with:

- knowledge of different learning disabilities and the possible approaches for providing adequate education of learners with special needs;
- skills which would enable them to successfully select, modify, adapt and grade the teaching materials they use so that all learners benefit from the teaching and learning taking place in the classroom;
- a wide range of teaching strategies that would suite the varying needs of their learners;
- the skills and competences required to guide and support learners with diverse learning styles, needs, language skills and motivation.

Prospective Foreign Language Teachers and Their Readiness for Special Needs Education

The challenge for training teachers of foreign languages to young learners for

teaching effectively heterogeneous classes of pupils from diverse social and cultural backgrounds and with a wide range of abilities and needs (ETUCE Policy Paper, 2008, p.20)

has been faced by the teacher trainers at the University of Ruse.

The need for developing trainees' knowledge and competences for identifying, assessing and meeting special educational needs of children in primary schools has been confirmed by the results of a survey carried out during the 2008/ 2009 academic year. The participants were 22 third year students from the *Primary school pedagogy with a foreign language* programme at the University of Ruse. They were given to fill in a questionnaire comprising of 15 questions on the knowledge, skills and level of confidence

of trainee teachers for working with learners with special needs. The questionnaire was distributed to students in March 2009 when they had just had their first week of teaching practice and have delivered their first English language lessons in Bulgarian primary schools

Taking into consideration the constraints of the current paper we would focus on the analysis and interpretation of the feedback received on three of the survey questions. The gathered data on those questions are indicative of the level of confidence and preparation of student teachers for approaching diversity in their classrooms.

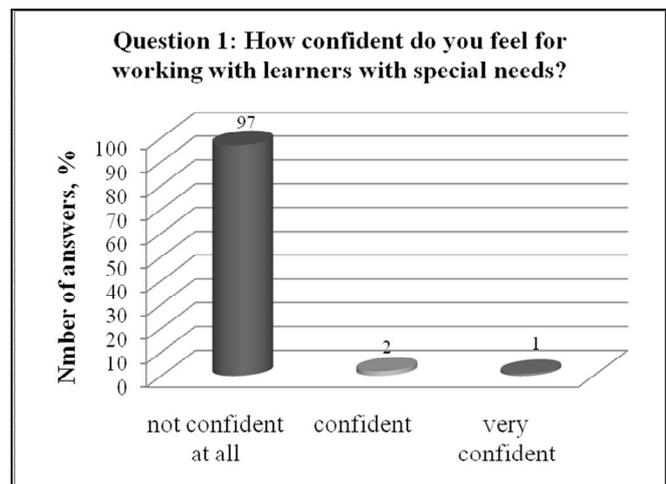


Fig. 2. Level of Student Teachers' Confidence for Working with Learners with Special Needs.

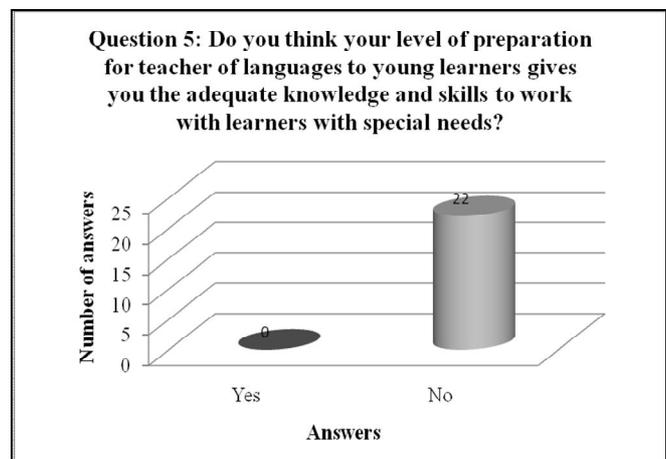


Fig. 3. Student Teachers' Preparation for Working with Learners with Disabilities.

The survey findings illustrate the idea that the general level of confidence of the prospective teachers for inclusive language teaching is very low. 97 % of all trainees report that they do not feel self-assured for approaching diversity in their classrooms. That is easy to understand as 100 % of them claim that they have not received adequate training for special needs language education. And that is the reason why about 80 % of them believe their knowledge and skills for working with learners with disabilities is not adequate.

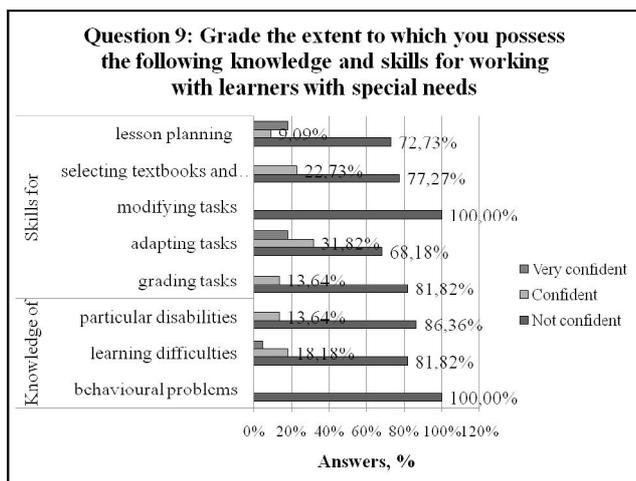


Fig. 4. Level of Student Teachers' Knowledge and Skills for Working with Learners with Special Needs (*1 = very confident; 2 = confident; 3 = not confident*).

The survey results were not unexpected. Rather, they reflected the current status quo of the initial teacher training at the University of Ruse — limited number of training sessions that facilitated the acquisition of key skills for teaching languages to special needs learners and for creating a child-friendly class that accommodates the diversity among learners. This, along with the contemporary realities of the Bulgarian primary school classrooms, served as a driving force and a trigger towards the creation of a new set of training materials.

The Training Package

The training package of materials designed to be used in the training sessions with primary school foreign language teacher trainees at the University of Ruse is a product of 18 months' intensive work. The first stage of the development of the pack of materials involved the collection and analysis of information about: a) the ways in which special needs education has been implemented in the language classes of primary schools in Bulgaria; and b) about special needs education programmes for foreign language young learner teachers offered at universities in Bulgaria. The second stage was sharing of ideas on the structure, aims, topics and outcomes of the training materials followed by the actual design of the pack. The third stage included the piloting of the materials with student teachers at the university, their revisiting and the production of the final version of the training package.

The training package of materials that will be presented below is addressed to teacher trainers who prepare teachers of languages to primary school children but it could be used by any teacher trainer who is interested in the issues covered and who is willing to adapt the materials to the level and needs of his/ her trainees.

Structure

The training package of materials comprises of five components. The first of them is the **Training Handbook** which contains a description of the *Aims and Outcomes* of the training sessions along with the *Materials, Time, Preparation* and *Procedures* of the *Tasks* accompanied by an *Answer key*. It is used by teacher trainers as a guideline

for the preparation of the training sessions. The second component is the set of **Handouts**. They are photocopyable and are designed with the aim to help trainee teachers reflect on their own pedagogical practices in the young learner foreign language classroom. The handouts aim to help trainees build their teaching repertoire to suit the learning needs and styles of their pupils. The **Individual tasks** are directly linked to the first two components and allow for self-evaluation and extension of topics discussed in the training sessions.

An essential part of the training materials are: the **Glossary** of the terms used, the **Core reading resources**, **Further reading resources** and **Useful websites** which could be given to teacher trainees as a reference and as sources for further reading on a topic.

Aims

The varied content the pack of materials is aimed at both **teacher trainees** and **teacher trainers**.

The covered topics and practical ideas on teaching children with disabilities attempts to sensitize **teacher trainees** to the nature of different learning disabilities and the teaching styles and practices suitable for each special needs condition. Moreover, the training pack intends to help trainees build, manage and transfer the knowledge, skills and experience gained to various learning environments in which they nurture the potential of every learner.

At the same time, it also aims to provide **teacher trainers** with guidelines and practical suggestions and activities to train the future teachers achieve the best learning conditions for all pupils. The training packs also acts as a stimulus for teacher trainers to get thorough knowledge of the practice in the field of education of learners with special needs and keep close contact with schools, so that their theory is not separated from practice.

Methodological Approach

As one of the fundamental objectives of the training set of materials is to develop teacher trainees' skills and competences for teaching English to primary school learners with special needs, the **skill-based approach** is used as a basis for the organization of the training materials because it:

- enables trainers to choose new materials or to adapt existing materials so that they suit the needs, interests and level of their trainees;
- allows one and the same material to be used in a variety of ways. This gives freedom to the trainer to experiment with it;
- does not merely provide information on selected topics but advises teacher trainees to be active learners committed and responsible for their learning.

The proactive orientation of the training materials facilitates the development of trainees' capacity for *autonomous learning* which is in line with the changing dynamics of teacher education in all European countries as the trainer is no longer "the traditional purveyor of information, but rather a councilor, facilitator and resource" (Little, 1991, pp.44–45). Learning is seen as a matter of supported

performance that corresponds to the Vygotskian psychology according to which the teacher (in our case the trainer) creates and maintains a learning environment which provides learners with the conditions to be autonomous in order to become more autonomous. This not only makes learning more productive but leads to an *affective challenge* — trainees get equipped with the necessary understandings, skills and positive attitudes to be effective communicators who appreciate differences and who are able to engage in self-reflection on their own learning.

The *affective dimension* of the professional training of future teachers is linked to the inter-culturality of language education because language teachers act as mediators between two cultures (Buttjes and Byram, 1990) and apart from the linguistic competences that they foster in their learners, they also promote an increased understanding of learners' own and the target language cultural practices, social relations, heritage, values, beliefs etc. The recognition of and empathy to 'otherness' are key factors that would allow the trainee teachers to approach special needs education with openness, curiosity and readiness to accept that "people are the way they are" (Murphy-Lejeune, 2002, p.217).

Clearly, the raised knowledge of trainees of the diversity around them and the development of respect for the diversity in their classrooms would change their perception of inclusive education. Prospective foreign language teachers would be able to see inclusive education

as a delicate balancing act of building on what all have in common, yet, at the same time, recognising, celebrating and developing the diversities of every learner (Marsh, 2005, p.142).

Skills Developed

A diversity-oriented attitude to the wide spectrum of individual characteristics that learners bring with themselves is a necessary condition for creating an inclusive classroom but the development of generic teaching skills is the necessary prerequisite for "achieving good practice in special needs education and foreign language learning" (Marsh, 2005, p.25). Therefore, apart from providing input on disabilities and special needs education conditions, the training pack materials provide opportunities for the teacher trainees to raise their awareness of *teaching techniques* such as: *personalizing language learning, modifying the level of difficulty of language tasks, grading and adapting materials and tasks*. The advantages of those teaching techniques are summarized in Table 1.

It should be noted, however, that apart from the above mentioned skills the training pack also focuses on the provision of some "generic" teaching skills. The first of those skills is *Planning lessons and units of work*. It is related to the acquisition by teacher trainees of knowledge and skills for designing lesson aims and objectives, planning lesson stages and sequencing of activities, choosing language materials, planning the pace of the lesson, the timing of activities etc. Another central teaching skill is *Classroom management*. It facilitates the raising of knowledge and capacities of in-service teachers for managing the physical environment in the classroom, for using different interaction patterns, giving instructions, correcting

errors, grading and assessment of learners, using appropriate classroom language, establishing classroom routines and rules, etc.

Table 1. Advantages of the Teaching Techniques Used in the Training Pack of Materials.

Teaching Technique	Definition	Advantages for the Foreign Language Classroom
PERSONALIZING LANGUAGE LEARNING	Drawing on the personal experiences, thoughts, feelings and opinions of the learners	Creates a safe and secure learning environment Allows learners to receive coordinated support from the teacher which is in accordance with their language abilities and skills
MODIFYING THE LEVEL OF DIFFICULTY OF LANGUAGE TASKS	Creating more challenging version of one and the same task	Fosters children's learning capacities in mixed-ability classes Provides children with the opportunity to benefit from the lesson and feel that they have achieved something
GRADING TASKS	Identifying the level of difficulty of tasks and arranging them in order of difficulty	Allows the teacher to offer his/ her learners tasks that suit their level
ADAPTING MATERIALS AND TASKS	Editing the language teaching materials used in the classroom by tailoring them to the level, needs and age of learners.	Provides learners with texts and activities that correspond to their language level and which, therefore, are not demotivating or discouraging

The next skill is the *Development of learners' learning to learn skills*. It is directly linked to the key competences for lifelong learning and introduces teacher trainees to the learning to learn strategies and provides them with hands-on experiences on approaching them in class. The last skill included is *Using ICT in the young learner foreign language lesson*. It provides insight knowledge on how multimedia and ICT technologies can help teachers supplement their regular face-to-face teaching with on-line resources or develop their own teaching materials using computer programmes.

The teaching skills implemented in the training pack reflect the *methodological approaches* common to all special needs education categories as summarized by the European Agency for Development in Special Needs

Education (Key Principles for Special Needs Education, 2003), namely:

- a) *cooperative learning* — learners work in pairs or in small groups and help each other which leads to the development of interpersonal skills for communication and allows learners with different levels and abilities to benefit from learning together;
- b) *collaborative problem solving* — teachers and learners negotiate classroom rules and values, topics of lessons and tasks;
- c) *mixed ability grouping of learners* — this increases the level of cooperation among learners and demands from teachers a differentiated approach to language teaching;
- d) *individual planning* — when teaching mixed-ability classes teachers need to plan their lessons in such a way that allows a different rate of progress and that is oriented towards all learners' needs (including the needs for additional support).

That is why a considerable attention is paid to raising teacher trainees' attention to teaching techniques such as: *multisensory teaching techniques, stimulating metacognition, activating learner's personal strengths and interest by providing with individual space for development, over-learning, demonstration, role-plays, teaching strategies implementing the total-physical response method etc.*

Topics Included

The authors of the training pack have identified four basic areas of themes that provide structured input on the special needs categories as:

- *Cognition and Learning Difficulties* — dyslexia, dyscalculia, dysgraphia, dyspraxia;
- *Emotional, Behavioural and Social Difficulties* — Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), Hyper Attention Deficit Disorder (HDD);
- *Communication and Interaction Difficulties* — Autism, Speech and Language Difficulties;
- *Sensory and Physical Difficulties* — hearing impairment, visual impairment, physical or medical difficulties.

The range of themes is related to the covered references of special needs categories in *The Bibliography of Modern Foreign Languages and Special Educational Needs* (Wilson, 2009).

The tasks designed upon those themes approach them in a variety of ways by including activities as *critical reading and/ or listening, comparing and contrasting, matching and sorting, case studies, plenary discussions etc.*

The themes in the training pack present an opportunity to trainees to extend their knowledge of special needs categories and generic methodological approaches and get acquainted with some specific methodological solutions for teaching foreign language to young learners with special needs.

When designing the training materials the authors have considered the following important factors:

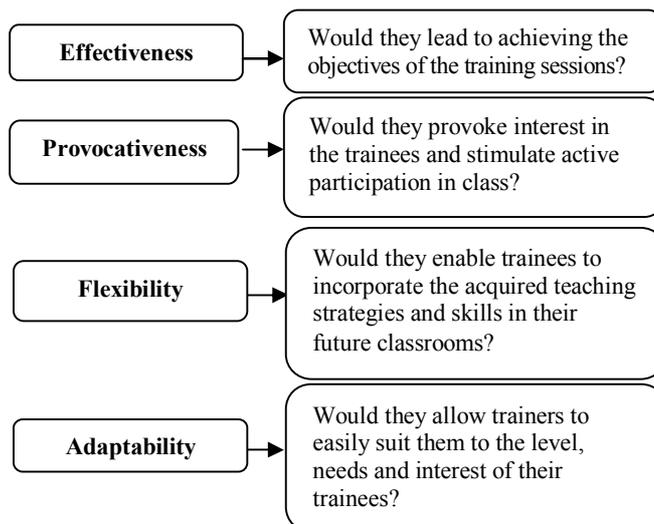


Fig. 5. Factors Considered when Designing the Training Pack Materials.

Planned Outcomes and Evaluation

In the process of writing the teacher training materials, the integration of the pack with the overall curriculum for primary school foreign language teacher training provided at the University of Ruse has been one of the priorities. We have taken into account that we would like to integrate a generic methodological training with training the prospective young learner teachers to successfully approach learners with special needs. That is why the outcomes of the training suggest a marriage of special needs education with foreign language teaching methodology and include the idea that by the end of their training student teachers would have:

- received solid theoretical knowledge about a large scale of special needs categories;
- reflected on the variety of abilities learners bring with themselves to the classroom;
- raised their openness and tolerance to 'otherness';
- developed a positive attitude towards and respect for "otherness";
- become familiar with possible problems when working with mixed ability groups and special needs learners;
- explored possible methodological solutions to problems when working with multi-level classes which include learners with disabilities.

The evaluation of teacher trainees' knowledge and competences acquired as a result of the training is considered to be an integral part of the training of the future primary school language teachers. The core belief of the authors of the materials is that the assessment of teacher trainees' knowledge and skills for working with children with special needs should be related to a particular context — for example, the prospective teacher's performance in the classroom where he/ she has to teach a mixed-ability class where there are learners with special needs. As this is not always possible because of the limitations the teaching practice in schools offers, the training pack allows for evaluation that implies the use of a variety of techniques —

e.g. *discussions, tutorials, questionnaires that include objective questions testing theoretical knowledge, portfolio assessment.*

Future Plans

The described training pack of materials is not perceived as a finished product that will be used solely in the University of Ruse teacher training programmes. It is considered to be a resource open to interested educationalist across Europe and is perceived as a pioneering step for introducing inclusive education to the attention of the prospective teachers of languages to children in Bulgaria. The training pack will be further elaborated and enriched so that it is in line with the recent developments in the field of special needs language education and we believe that will accompany the student teachers that will come in the years in their endeavour to encourage and fully support the integration of special needs learners into mainstream schools in the country.

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Kalbų mokytojų rengimas dirbti klasėse, kuriose kartu su visais mokosi ir specialiųjų poreikių turintys moksleiviai

Santrauka

Moksleivių su specialiaisiais poreikiais ugdymas ir mokymas bendrose su kitais moksleiviais klasėse yra viena iš svarbių problemų Europos mokyklose. Ši problema kelia naujus iššūkius rengiant būsimuosius pedagogus (įskaitant ir žemesnių klasių), kurie turi įgyti atitinkamų žinių apie įvairių specialiųjų poreikių kategorijas ir išsiugdyti profesinius įgūdžius, leidžiančius nustatyti, įvertinti ir tenkinti specialiuosius moksleivių poreikius.

Reaguodamas į šį naują iššūkį ir dėl vis didėjančio pradinė mokyklų specialiųjų poreikių moksleivių, lankančių bendras pamokas su kitais moksleiviais, skaičiaus, Ruse universitetas (Bulgarija) diegia pradinė mokyklų mokytojams skirtą naują mokomosios medžiagos paketą. Šio paketo tikslas yra suteikti pedagogikos studentams žinių ir kompetencijų, įgalinančių juos spręsti su įvairiais poreikiais susijusias problemas taip, kad suteiktų galimybę visiems vaikams, tarp jų ir su specialiaisiais poreikiais, reikšti savo mokymosi gebėjimus.

Šio straipsnio tikslas yra pateikti pedagoginius ir metodinius pagrindus, numatomus rezultatus ir iššūkius, kuriant ir tobulinant mokytojams skirtą mokomąją medžiagą, ir skatinti bei motyvuoti rengti šios mokymo krypties pedagogus Bulgarijos švietimo sistemoje.

Straipsnis įteiktas 2010 09
Parengtas spaudai 2011 02

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