

# Teaching English Language to Children with Special Educational Needs

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**Abstract** – The goal of this study is to determine the most appropriate methods and techniques used for Teaching English to children with special educational needs and to determine whether they should take the courses in foreign languages in mainstream education or with a supporting teacher. The study is based on a questionnaire applied to teachers of English and on questionnaires answered by children with special educational needs and children without learning difficulties. The theoretical part covers suggestions for teaching English to children with special educational needs and the practical part is a comparison between the answers provided by the interviewed teachers and students. The findings conclude that teachers are able to teach regular children simultaneously with mainstream children, though these are reluctant regarding the education of children with special educational needs in mainstream education.

**Keywords** – children with special educational needs, teaching methods, English as a foreign language, mainstream education.

## 1. Introduction

The study tries to determine whether children with special educational needs (SEN) should learn foreign languages with teachers from mainstream education or with supporting teachers. Another aim of the research is to highlight the best methods and techniques which can be used with these children in their attempt to learn a new language, in this case English.

From the beginning, one has to understand that children with SEN have special needs in terms of education. In Romania, there are special schools that care for the education of children with special needs. However, the Law of National Education 2011 [1] and other national and international laws have tried to integrate these children in mainstream education. The number of children attending special schools has diminished and they are attended especially by children with severe disabilities. The legislation talks about *inclusive education*, referring to the inclusion of children with SEN in mainstream education. The question that arises from both teachers and parents of regular students is, whether this situation is beneficial for anyone. Children with SEN struggle

hard to fit in a hostile environment where they are being mocked, where they have to make substantial effort to learn something and where teachers are not properly trained to handle these situations and offer the children the best educational support. Teachers, on the other hand, feel uncomfortable working with these students because they feel the curricular pressure. They think that cannot cover the curriculum with regular students and also feel that regular students are deprived from a high standard and quality education. They believe that too much time is consumed in the attempt to explain something to children with SEN. Parents of regular students and the students themselves have the same opinion: that too much time is wasted with these children and in the end they still don't know anything. The results of a questionnaire on the efficiency of inclusive education will be presented in this study later on.

The situation of children with SEN has changed in Romania in the past years. They attend mostly mainstream education, only severe cases being enrolled in special schools. Due to financial problems, special schools have been underfinanced and therefore they lack modern teaching materials and other useful educational tools. However, teachers in special schools have suitable training for working with SEN children. They have graduated *Special Psychopedagogy*, a field of study which trains teachers of children with SEN. Mainstream education teachers don't have that training. This is the reason why the Ministry of education appointed the so-called *itinerary teachers* or supporting teachers. They work with one or several schools which have enrolled children with SEN. Their mission is to support children who have learning difficulties in all their school subjects. These teachers have a degree in *Special Psychopedagogy* and they work with all children with SEN from a school. They explain the lesson at a slower pace, help them with their homework, play with them and even counsel the children when needed. The supporting teachers can also attend classes and help teachers during the lesson. Due to the reluctance of Romanian teachers, who usually don't accept a stranger in their classroom, supporting teachers perform their tasks just with children with SEN. However, it is believed

that a supporting teacher would be of great help in a regular class because the teacher won't have to slow down the pace and give supplementary explanation and the child with learning difficulty would understand the lesson easier.

It is believed that inclusive education is better for children with SEN than special school education. Therefore at the end of 1995, the Ministry of Resort has adapted the "action plan in favour of children" which stipulates the integration of children with special needs in the community. The document provides models for organizing schools which are regulated on an international level:

- cooperation between special schools and mainstream schools
- organizing a special class in regular schools
- preparing a special classroom with resources for children with learning difficulties
- itinerant teacher, etc.

In order to understand who children with SEN are, Vršmaš, E [2] mentions the most frequent disorders they face:

- attention deficit: they cannot focus on the lesson;
- movement deficit: they cannot coordinate their movement;
- difficulties in processing visual and acoustic information: many students have difficulty in recognizing the sounds of a language but recognize easily the letters and written words;
- difficulty in developing cognitive learning strategies: certain students are incapable of organizing their activity and developing their own learning style;
- oral communication disorders: they are the result of poor linguistic abilities, speaking disorders and underdeveloped vocabulary;
- reading difficulties: they have difficulty in recognizing, decoding and understanding the read words;
- writing difficulties: they cannot complete tasks which involve writing
- mathematical difficulties: they have poor mathematics skills, they lack notions of space and time which are used in this subject.

For teachers of English, the most common difficulties they have to face are oral communication disorders, reading and writing difficulties [3]. They do not have any preparation for teaching English to children with special educational needs and therefore

they lack skills and knowledge on how to teach foreign languages to children who don't yet master their mother tongue. Perhaps, it would be useful to introduce a lecture during the teachers' academic preparation on how to teach children with SEN. Supporting teachers cannot take over the English teacher's job because most of them don't have enough English language knowledge. However, in teaching English, the English teacher has to benefit from support: the parents', the supporting teacher's and even the school psychologist's.

There are certain strategies that an English teacher has to take into account. For instance, the lesson should be planned according to the following criteria [4]:

- the methodology used in teaching English should be made appropriate for children with SEN
- the teaching material should be catchy and attractive, but also appropriate
- the teacher should plan extra working time with the child
- the curriculum should be adapted for children with SEN (namely, the pressure to cover the entire curriculum should be excluded and the focus should be on developing a few skills)
- the teacher along with the inclusive education specialist should draw up an individual study plan for children with SEN

The English lesson should be very interactive; emphasis must be placed on singing, playing, dancing, drawing. Movement activities are extremely beneficial for children with SEN as most of them have difficulties in staying focused or sitting down. The atmosphere should be pleasant as children feel uncomfortable working under pressure, in stressful situations or in a boring activity. Abstract concepts, rules, grammar rules should be avoided as they bring about tension [5]. It is better to avoid correcting mistakes too often because it can demotivate children. Lexical or grammar chunks should be repeated as much as needed. A foreign language is learnt by direct exposure to it, therefore children with SEN should be familiarized with English by listening and reading activities. Children have different learning styles, even the healthy ones. For this reason, it is advisable for teachers to be familiar with the SEN child's learning style. Kinesthetic children prefer movement while learning, visual children prefer reading and pictures, interpersonal learners like group work and classroom discussions while intrapersonal children prefer working individually [6]. It is very important that teachers adjust their

lesson to the child's learning style, especially when working with children with SEN. The typical English lesson for children with SEN should focus on listening, playing, speaking, miming, singing, dancing, acting, arranging element, etc. The types of interaction used can be individual or group work. Teachers should constantly encourage their students. The teacher's dedication and determination are very important in teaching English to children with SEN.

## 2. Goals of study

The goal of this study is to prove that children with SEN can learn English as a foreign language in mainstream education, if teachers adapt the curriculum to the children's needs and learning style. The study [7] is conducted on 10 English teachers, 90 parents, 90 regular children and 10 children with SEN from the 6<sup>th</sup> grade.

### *Research questions*

A questionnaire has been applied to the teachers containing the following questions:

1. Do you find inclusive education useful for children with SEN? Give reasons to support your decision.
2. Should teachers of English teach children with SEN without any prior training?
3. Do you consider that children with SEN slow down the teaching pace? Give suggestions to change this situation.

Another questionnaire has been applied to parents of regular children.

1. Do you think that inclusive education is beneficial for mainstream education?
2. Do you think that your child is affected by the presence of a child with SEN?
3. Would you approve your child's friendship and collaboration to a child with SEN?

The questionnaire applied to children with SEN contains the following questions:

1. Do you like learning with children who are better at learning than you?
2. Do you find English interesting? Would you like to learn it?
3. Would you prefer learning in a smaller group than with the whole class?

Regular children answered the following questions:

1. Do you consider children with SEN disturbing?

2. Do you think that you would learn more if there weren't any children with SEN in your classroom?
3. Would you agree to take part in activities used for Teaching English to children with SEN?

## 3. Methods

The study is based on the answers provided by a number of 10 English teachers, 90 parents of regular students, 90 regular students and 10 children with SEN. The study has been conducted in "Adam Muller Guttenbrunn" High School of Arad, with the 6<sup>th</sup> grade (A, B, C), between May 1 and 15, 2014. The questionnaire has been applied to understand the teachers', parents' and students' perception of children with SEN. After the results have been analyzed, a pre-test has been given to the sample students (25, 20 regular students and 5 students with SEN). Then the experimental stage has taken place. An English teacher has worked with the experimental group and applied methods for teaching English to children with SEN. The experimental test has revealed unexpected results.

Firstly, the answers given by teachers reveal that most of them believe that inclusive education is not beneficial for anyone. They think that regular children are affected by the indiscipline of children with SEN, time is lost due to their difficulty of understanding certain concepts, the overall school performance of a class is lowered by the grades obtained by children with learning difficulties and the curriculum is not completely covered because a lesson needs to be repeated several times. On the other hand, children with SEN lose their self-confidence in mainstream education; they are demotivated, feel underestimated and are bullied by regular children. In other words, most teachers believe that children with SEN belong in special schools and consider that they should be trained by specialized teachers.

For the second question, they consider that the difficulty of working with children with SEN lies in the teachers' lack of experience in handling these situations. Therefore, most of them agree to attend a lecture on working with students with SEN, if special education remains part of mainstream education. They believe that someone should teach them how to approach English for special educational needs; otherwise it is a waste of time. Methods and techniques should be presented during these workshops and teachers should be taught the best possible methods used with these children.

Most teachers believe that children with SEN slow down the pace of teaching because they need more time, more explanations and also different exercises than regular children. They also admit that sometimes they ignore the needs of children with SEN because they work under the pressure of a curriculum which has to be covered by the end of the year.

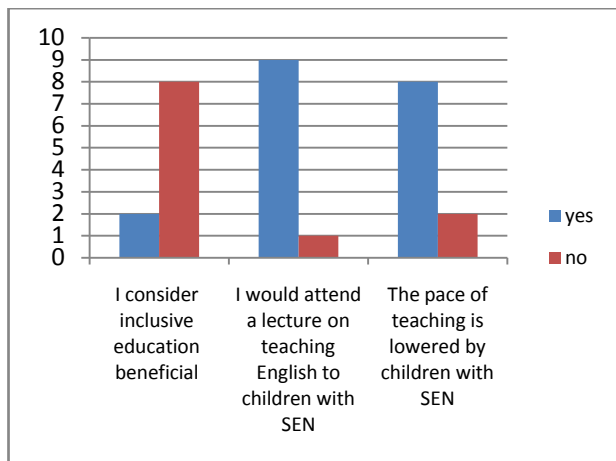


Figure 1 Results of teachers' answers

The answers provided by parents of regular students show no other attitude towards children with SEN. Parents have the same opinion as teachers related to inclusive education; they believe it is not a good idea. They also consider that their children waste time during the lessons because teachers have to give extra explanations to children who don't understand and when it comes to socializing, they would not want their child to be friend with a child with SEN. They don't consider these children dangerous, they only believe that children with SEN may have a bad influence on their child's school results. 90 parents have been questioned and the results are the following:

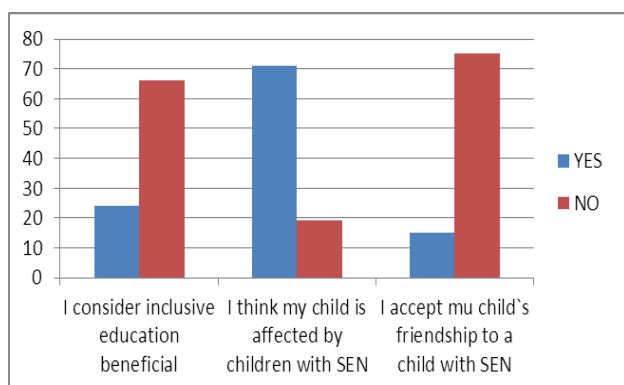


Figure 2 Parents' answers to the questionnaire

Students with SEN from the 6<sup>th</sup> grade (A, B, C) have also been asked to state their opinion. Their opinions are not as assertive as the parents' and teachers'.

Only 10 children have been questioned because this is the number of children with SEN enrolled in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade. They don't find disturbing the fact that other children are better at learning than they are. They like coming to school and mostly appreciate subjects such as Sport, Art and Music. It proves to us that they are kinesthetic and visual learners in the detriment of mathematical intelligence. Referring to English, most of them state that they cannot speak English because it is very difficult, there are too many words to learn, too many rules and that teachers get angry when they make mistakes. They also say that teachers work with those children who speak English well. Though, they would like to understand English because they love watching short movies on YouTube, which are not translated. They would like to sing and play during their English lessons. They also listen to English songs and they would like to understand the lyrics [8]. Although, children admit being bothered by their classmates because they are not so good at learning or other classroom activities, most children with SEN wouldn't like to learn in smaller groups or in another school. They even find lessons with supporting teachers disturbing because they skip other classes and their classmates consider them "lessons for dummies". The supporting teacher comes into the classroom at the beginning of a lesson and takes them into another classroom where she explains the Mathematics, Romanian or Science lesson. This fact is perceived as embarrassing by the children with SEN. Their results can be seen in Fig. 3 below.

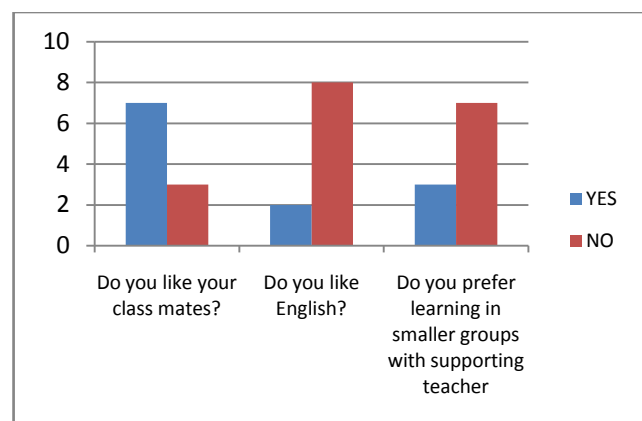


Figure 3 The results of students with SEN

The last questionnaire was applied to regular students. Their answers revealed that they don't find their classmates disturbing, though sometimes they are annoyed because the teacher has to repeat the explanation several times. They even find it amusing when children with SEN start walking during the lesson or ask questions with no relevance for the topic. They don't think that they would learn more if there weren't children with SEN in the classroom.

They even say that teachers don't pay particular attention to them and when they have difficulties, the supporting teachers offers them extra activities and explanations. Regular children would like to take part in activities for teaching English to children with SEN because they believe they are easier, funnier and perhaps more challenging.

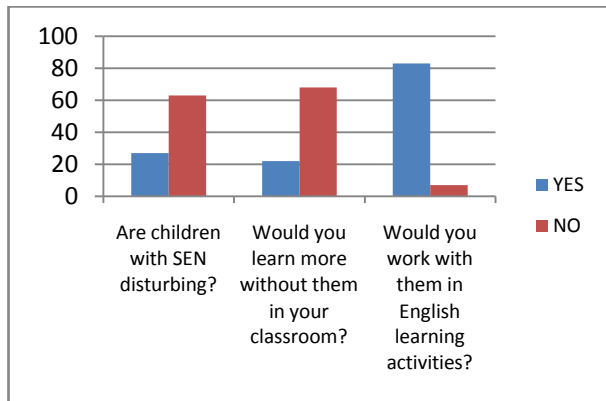


Figure 4. Results of the questionnaire applied to regular students

As seen from the answers provided by our sample, teachers should pay more attention to children with SEN, parents should be more tolerant because children find a mutual way to tolerate and understand each other. Both categories of children accept the others, find pleasure in working together and are willing to find communication bridges.

#### 4. Results

A sample of 25 subjects was selected for the experiment. 20 are regular students and 5 are children with SEN. The pre-test was applied on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of May 2014 and it consisted of four subjects: one grammar subject, one vocabulary subject, a reading task and a composition. After the pre-test had been assessed, the experimental group took English classes with a teacher who had taken a course in teaching English to inclusive classrooms. The other students continued to work with their teachers. Table 1 presents the results of the pre-test. The Romanian grading system consist of marks from 1-10, where 1 is the lowest and 10 the highest grade.

Table 1 Grades obtained by children in the pre-test

Subj ect	Grade 1-3	Grade 4-6	Grade 7-8	Grade 9-10
1	5	10	7	3
2	6	8	8	3
3	7	9	7	2
4	8	11	4	2

We can notice that the results are not very high, especially for children with SEN. They have scored between 1-3 and 4-6, which is low.

The experiment was conducted for two weeks and contained a unit from the English textbook Upstream Elementary A2. Children from the 6<sup>th</sup> grade use it throughout the school year.

The unit chosen for the experimental stage is *Food and drinks* [9]. At the end of the unit, students have to be able to use vocabulary connected to food and drinks in their own sentences, make short dialogues, describe dishes and talk about their favourite food. The detailed lesson project is not the goal of this study; therefore only important techniques are going to be discussed. The teacher used a lot a realia and visual images because the students have visual intelligence [10]. They are asked to repeat the words after the teacher, to draw them and to identify the food item stated by the teacher among other items from a worksheet or PPT presentation. They also use mime games, where students mime the object they have on a card. They listen to songs about food and drinks and try to memorize them. Although some songs are not for the 6<sup>th</sup> grade but rather for the 4<sup>th</sup>, everyone listens and sings along happily. Then they receive worksheets with words removed from the song, which they have to fill in. As they might encounter difficulties, they sing along while completing the task. The teacher trains their reading skills too. Children read a short dialogue between a waiter and two guests in a restaurant. They take turns in reading it and then act it out. The groups are homogenous, consisting of regular and children with SEN. The furniture is rearranged and students are allowed to move during the class, making children with kinaesthetic intelligence feel more comfortable. Speaking is also encouraged through speaking activities such as presentations or guessing games. The teacher describes an item and the students have to guess or a child describes an object while the rest of them have to guess it. Competition games are not encouraged as they might be too demotivating for children with SEN. The general atmosphere is pleasant and calm.

After two weeks, children retake the test. The test items are varied and designed according to modern assessment methods such as: multiple choice, dual choice, true/false and blank completion.

Four exercise were given to the children: in the first exercise they had to list certain words under the correct heading, in the second exercise they had to complete the blank spaces with one suitable words, in the fourth exercises they had to read a text and

answer the questions with true/false and in the last exercise they had to describe their favourite dish.

The results improved and children have a better, more positive attitude towards English. They say that English is fun, that it is great listening to English songs and understanding what they mean, being able to express something in English, etc. All children loved working in pairs and groups and regular children appreciated the interactive activities performed with the teacher.

The results are the following:

Table 2 Grades obtained by children in the experimental test

Subject	Grade 1-3	Grade 4-6	Grade 7-8	Grade 9-10
1	0	2	11	12
2	0	3	13	9
3	0	2	12	11
4	0	6	10	9

For a better illustration, the results of pre-test and experimental test have been compared. The average grade for each task of the pre-test has been calculated and compared with the average grade of each task of the experimental test.

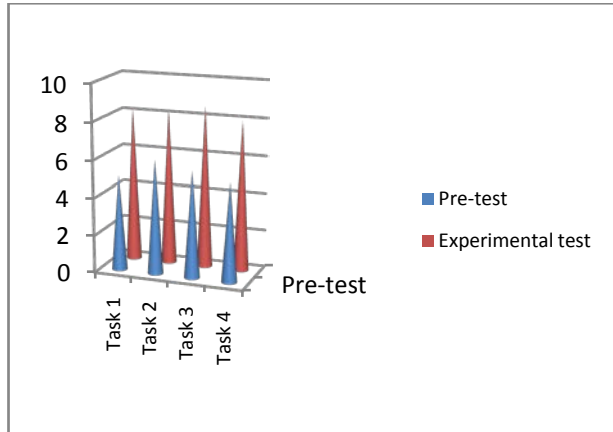


Figure 5 Compared results between pre-test and experimental test

## 5. Conclusions

The experiment concluded that English can be taught to children with SEN without placing them in special schools. Though certain teachers believe that a foreign language should not be taught to children who still have difficulties with their mother tongue, it is a bad decision. Learning a new language opens their minds, helps them create cognitive relations, organizes their mind and brings satisfaction. English teachers should adapt their lessons to children with SEN, should engage them in classroom activities and use interactive methods. These methods are beneficial for regular students too, because they are challenging, favour communication and interaction.

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