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# Teaching Foreign Language to special needs children in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina

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This article examines the current situation related to foreign language teacher education and challenges faced by foreign language instructors in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) in teaching different language skills to young children with special needs. This investigation highlights difficulties they encounter and shows strategies they use depending on types of special needs their pupils have. Data were collected using the responsive interview approach and the credibility of this qualitative study is enhanced by participatory and reflective framework provided by the investigators who are FL educational experts fully engaged in education and the training of pre-service FL teachers in Serbia and BiH.

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**Mots-clefs :**

Training, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Special needs, Language, Educational contexts

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## Introduction

The empirical evidence does not support the notion of a foreign language disability (Sparks, 2009, 2016) and the inclusion of students with special educational needs (SEN) in foreign language education becomes a *social justice issue* (Graham-Day et al, 2020, p. 136) since these students are often excluded and do not receive sufficient support. Schwarz (1997), one of the pioneers in research on Foreign Language Education (FLE) for learners with special needs, once aptly expressed the reason why more interest should be paid to the area of FLE for SEN learners: “For the student unencumbered by a learning disability, foreign language study is indeed an enriching and rewarding experience. For the learning disabled student, however, it can be unbelievably stressful and humiliating”(p. 1). All students can benefit from foreign language instruction from a young age including students with disabilities (Kleinert et al, 2007) and the use of individualized FL education program plans with defined learning targets is suggested to help maximize learning for students with SEN (Konrad et al, 2014). Therefore, foreign language teachers must be prepared to meet the needs of all students in an inclusive setting “with the confidence provided them in strong pedagogically-based teacher preparation programs and through administrative support” (Lucero, 2020, p. xi).

The aim of this paper is to examine the current situation related to foreign language teacher education and challenges faced by foreign language instructors in Serbia and

Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) in teaching different language skills to young children with special needs. This investigation highlights difficulties they encounter and shows strategies they use depending on types of special needs their pupils have. Data were collected using the responsive interview approach (Rubin and Rubin, 2012) and the credibility of this qualitative study is enhanced by participatory and reflective framework (Roulston, 2010) provided by the investigators who are FL educational experts fully engaged in the education and training of pre-service FL teachers in Serbia and BiH.

Unfortunately, for the reasons that will be exposed in the following sections, we are not able to give a detailed overview of the FL pre-service teacher education in this field, since it is extremely reduced and not adapted to their future tasks. We will however aim to describe their efforts to fulfil their responsibilities, in spite of the lack of formally acquired knowledge in this nuanced and complex domain.

## **The situation in Serbia**

In the Republic of Serbia, five state universities (Belgrade, Kragujevac, Novi Sad, Niš, and Novi Pazar) and several private higher education institutions offer programs for studying Foreign Languages, Literature and Linguistics. After completing a B.A. degree a student can choose to continue with postgraduate studies in order to obtain a master's degree. Master's graduates are expected to possess advanced knowledge of a specialized body of theoretical and applied topics.

The most gifted students enroll in a Ph.D. program, which enables them to dedicate themselves to scientific research, but they can also focus on teaching technics and didactics. But so far there is not a single doctoral student researching foreign language learning by pupils with intellectual or physical disabilities in Serbia even though there are some published papers on challenges immigrants and children face living in multilingual environments (Vučo, 2018).

Unfortunately, the courses both at the B.A. and master's levels are much more oriented towards theoretical issues than towards practical knowledge. Hence, the students learn much more about syntax, semantics, and literary analysis than about pedagogical methods. As a rule, they have only two one-semester methodology courses: one in the 4<sup>th</sup> year of studies and one at master's level. In these courses, they learn about the teaching process, lesson planning, learning strategies, shapes of working with pupils. In addition, they also study the structure of lessons, forms of testing and evaluation. They become simultaneously familiar with traditional and modern teaching methods such as direct method, grammar translation method, audio-lingual method, immersion method, total physical response, communicative approach, and computer assisted language learning (Davies and Pearse, 2000). However, they are never trained to apply these technical aspects to pupils with disabilities.

The mandatory part of master's program is a school internship. This student teaching

consists of observation and analysis of FLE lessons and other strategies for teaching. It also includes teaching carried out under the direct supervision of a high school teacher, who guides, motivates and helps students improve their work. At the same time, he/she assists them in writing curricula and organising the content of the readings.

After obtaining his/her degree in education, a person who starts working as a teacher gets the status of a probationer. Thus, with the help of their assigned supervisors, graduates are prepared for autonomous educational and pedagogical work and for passing the licensure exam. This exam contains both the written and the oral part, in which a student must organise a lesson. The examining board consists of several experts (both in pedagogy and linguistics) and it evaluates the new teacher's readiness to start working independently and successfully.

Interestingly, this certificate should confirm that the teacher possesses the following capacities, although some of them are hardly mentioned in the preparation program:

1. Planning, programming, implementing and evaluating educational and pedagogical work;
2. Observing and encouraging the pupils' development and progress;
3. Cooperation with colleagues, pupils' family and local community. This concerns, in particular, the situations of socially vulnerable families and Roma population whose children are not included in education (FRA, 2016);
4. The knowledge of official regulations and his/her rights and obligations;
5. Understanding the importance of the professional specialisation and continuous acquisition of new knowledge in order to improve his/her teaching results;
6. Being informed about different methods of inclusion of the special needs children in the teaching process, being capable of creating a supportive and cooperative atmosphere in the classroom, knowing how to organize special activities for facilitating the mastering of the subject, understanding the importance of individualizing the learning process for pupils with difficulties.

It must be mentioned that it seems that FL teachers are not sufficiently trained to teach and explain cognitively complex issues such as syntactic and semantic relations between words. Even children with no learning difficulties complain about the troubles they have in acquiring grammar and idiomatic constructions particularly when they do not need them for basic communication (which is their main motivation). The key point here is to know whether the prescribed programs are too ambitious or whether new methods are needed, especially the ones based on pragmatic and sociolinguistic grounds.

# The situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina

The formal foreign language (FL) teacher education and training in Bosnia and Herzegovina is very similar to education in Serbia and the FLE programs do not prepare the future teachers to meet the needs of SEN children. Unlike Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina has a cumbersome educational set-up defined by 13 laws on Higher Education: two at the level of entities and District Brcko and 10 cantonal laws as a direct result of the post-war government organization. There are eight public universities (Bihać, Banja Luka, Tuzla, Zenica, Sarajevo, East Sarajevo, Mostar and “Džemal Bijedić Mostar”) offering bachelor’s and master’s degrees in FL teaching. There are no national qualification standards directly aimed at FL teachers, and knowledge and competencies from the qualification standards for teachers in elementary and high schools do not include SEN education (Feden, 2018).

Teachers are aware of the issues and difficulties related to a complex, but inefficient educational set-up. Institutes for Education in charge of elementary education are currently in the process of revising the curricula in order to propose changes to appropriate authorities including an introduction of mandatory pre-school education. The problems for FL teachers in BiH, like in Serbia, are centered around how to prepare specific programs for SEN children and how to organize teaching in the inclusive context. Personal assistants are approved for SEN pupils in some cases by the Ministry of Education, but in general parents must hire and pay them out of their own pocket to help their children at school. There are also public special education schools but there are no public school programs for the talented/gifted or the vulnerable. Very often additional classes are offered by external partners or NGO programs to try to fill the gaps left by the public system.

Some public elementary schools have special teams to help adapt teaching programs for these children who are enrolled in general elementary school programs, but it is mostly the duty of the homeroom teachers or the individual FL teachers to modify and adjust their work. The number of students attending a particular class is reduced, if a SEN student is attending it.

Pre-service teachers are aware that they are not trained to teach the SEN students (Dankić and Matic-Raguz, 2014) and efforts must be undertaken to correct this practice to both help teachers to identify and handle the challenges of working with children with different needs, and to meet the educational goals of all students attending foreign language classes.

# **An attempt to overcome the disadvantages and shortage in the teaching programs**

As explained above, although the licensure exams both in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina imply that teachers are prepared to work with special needs children, their pre-service training and practice actually do not provide any kind of preparation for this challenging activity. Naturally, teachers are aware of this lack of skill. They even claim that they cannot recognize different learning disorders, let alone deal with them (Mitić et al, 2011). Even the university courses in psychology and pedagogy do not mention these issues. This means that the whole system of teaching foreign languages to special needs pupils relies on in-service practice, seminars, and individual efforts. Teachers usually do not have ready-made responses and models and must research and try various methods and techniques in order to find out empirically what they consider to be the best options for their SEN pupils.

The remedy for the inadequacy of the university programs could be workshops organized by the Ministries of Education and Institutes for Education, dedicated to teaching pupils with learning difficulties and inclusive practices in the classroom. A review of the offered workshops over the last three school years shows that a number of accredited training programs for educators in Serbia and BiH were organized. They are generally based on the explorations and good practices in the SEN field in the Western Europe.

These seminars have attracted a great amount of teachers. Their main disadvantage is that they are general – by presenting strategies that address the needs of an impaired child in learning and not in acquiring specific skills such as mastering foreign languages. The emphasis is also on the integration of these pupils into inclusive classrooms. Despite these efforts, foreign language instructors expect more expert and professional advice from these workshops. The good point is that they can use these workshops to exchange their own experience, problems, and solutions.

It should be noted that the Faculty for the Special Education and Rehabilitation in Belgrade provides courses for the instruction of Serbian and mathematics for intellectually impaired pupils but nothing about foreign language teaching. One of the reasons is a prejudice that there is no reason to introduce a new language to children who already have problems in mastering the structure of their mother tongue, notably for reading and writing.

At the Teacher Training Faculty of the University of Belgrade, the subject of methods of working with children with special needs was introduced as mandatory, along with the possibility of students specializing in working with children with special needs as an optional course. But this also has nothing to do with foreign language teaching. This

seems quite surprising, for we live in times when SEN children are in direct contact with foreign languages (especially English) *via* mobiles phones, television and social networks, thus explaining their interest in usage and understanding of typical and frequent expressions.

We would like to underline that foreign language teachers in Serbia and BiH have to face two types of challenges, one is how to prepare specific programs for pupils with learning difficulties and the other is how to organize teaching in the inclusive context, since SEN children either go to special educational institutions or are enrolled in ordinary mainstream schools. In the second case a teacher is obliged to perform two parallel tasks, following a normal curriculum for regular students and helping a special needs child to achieve the best possible results. It is indeed extremely demanding to track the individual progress, problems and achievements of each pupil during a lesson. If instruction is not modified to address the students' specific needs, the difficulties of the inclusive approach may become more serious over time. Unless the special needs pupils receive appropriate interventions, they will continue to struggle, and the gap between their achievement and that of their peers will increase over time. This can create a lot of stress and a negative feedback in the classroom.

A solution for that is to appoint teaching assistants who would be solely financed by the government. Their mission is to support children in attending classes, doing assignments and helping them with their homework. They also help children with physical impairment to move, write and take care of themselves. But their tasks have to be supervised by the main teacher who should give them precise instructions and monitor their work.

However, it must be emphasized that it is crucial for a special needs child not to feel isolated and to participate as much as possible in group activities in the classroom such as singing, acting and doing conversational exercises. It is important for teachers to be capable to recognize differences and not to single out students. They can find ways to include, lead, and harmonize the contribution of all students, thus stimulating and creating a pleasant and positive atmosphere. Teachers should find appropriate methods of achieving cooperation among students. Nevertheless, in language teaching, it is sometimes more useful to make homogeneous groups to whom the instructor will give easier tasks, making them suitable for particular types of students. For example there is no sense in giving mixed groups complicated grammar exercises which SEN children cannot understand even with the help of their colleagues. This can only discourage them and decrease their attention.

In Special Education Schools<sup>1</sup>, teaching is often individualized and includes activities realized at home or in hospitals. This can be an advantage for a teacher who can dedicate himself/herself completely to finding ways to increase a special child's language performance. Tasks and activities can be individually paced to fit individual needs and abilities of every child. The home teaching also involves a strong cooperation with parents who (if they are able) can help children with doing homework and create more situations in which the foreign language is used.

It is understandable that home lessons can be boring for pupils whose normal and natural need is to socialize in the school context. They can become easily distracted and can try to persuade their teacher to play with them using their mother tongue instead of doing foreign language exercises. A similar situation can be observed in hospitals where pupils are distracted by other young patients who are not involved in the same activities.

## Individual education plans

A promising development occurred in 2015 when a new curriculum policy was introduced in Serbia and in 2020 when new directives on inclusive elementary education were presented in BiH. The policy and directives include individual education plans (IEPs) and teams for additional learner support. IEPs are highly appreciated by the diverse stakeholders. Up to two learners with specific educational needs can attend a single class in a mainstream school. The curriculum can be partially adjusted or changed entirely for these learners. This facilitates the organization of the lesson, and leaves enough space for completing the standard program.

In special education schools, the IEP can center around the whole group of pupils with similar problems.

Three types of IEPs can be established:

- IEP1 characterized by adjustments in teaching methodology and organization of additional assistance, and compensatory activities.
- IEP2 includes the provisions of IEP1 and also arrangements for reduced learning outcomes and modified teaching program. Its purpose is to define the maximum that can be expected in terms of accomplishments and also describe the ways in which it can be realized.
- IEP3 is used to enrich the education program for gifted learners especially by focusing on preparing them to participate in competitions.

In order for a child to enjoy all the benefits of an IEP, his/her special needs must first be analyzed. This process involves a commission that includes experts in *Special Education*, a defectologist (school psychologist), an individual representing the school system, and the child's parents. This team endeavors to recognize and meet the child's crucial needs in order for the child to achieve the best academic results despite learning difficulties. The conclusion of this team meeting leads to a specialized plan with precisely defined goals and objectives that need to be reached in the school year, stating the assistance the child will receive. In the domain of teaching foreign languages



this can be reduced to acquiring basic communicational competence with no focus on grammar, reading and writing. These courses can help children with severe disabilities to gain social and life skills (the emphasis is either on the phatic role of language but also on using foreign words to instruct a child to perform an everyday task in context), and understand that there are different cultures and ways of interacting, even if they do not make significant academic progress.

Given the failure of philological faculties in Serbia and BiH to prepare their students to work with pupils with learning disabilities, we interviewed instructors (7) both from special educational institutions and mainstream schools. They try to make it possible for every child to enjoy contacts with foreign languages and to learn, at least to a certain extent, some interlinguistic differences (concerning phonology, syntax and vocabulary). We wanted to get acquainted with all sorts of the problems our language teachers encounter in their work with special needs pupils and with the ways of dealing with them. These findings can be briefly summarized and presented as follows:

1. The most efficient modification is the reduction in the number of program objectives to contain only essential elements followed by a considerable slowing down of the instruction rhythm, teaching only the basic vocabulary, constant revision, and the incorporation of the maximum of stimulation and the multisensory support. Teachers can help the child by letting him/her practice a particular language structure by repeating it as many times as needed (via well-structured exercises), being very patient and not interrupting the child and correcting all the time the mistakes he/she makes.
2. The instructors should recognize the pupils' achievements and insist on developing them and at the same time accept limitations and pay less attention to their weak points unless they can find a way to get over them with specific methods. Some children can become very fluent with excellent pronunciation skills while remaining weak in terms of grammar and written expressions. They should be stimulated to talk as much as possible. Some of them can be capable of reading and understanding texts but poor in oral conversation. This can be related to the psychological or articulation to problems related to their specific disability. They should be given written assignments such as questionnaires about the content of the stories they have read.
3. For pupils with special needs the inductive method of mastering grammar (based on the idea that it is possible to acquire foreign language in the same way we acquire our mother tongue) is much more effective than explicit and formal teaching of syntax and morphology rules. Extensive contact with a foreign language will result in an innate mastery of its principles.
4. One thing is certain: students should consistently receive immediate positive

feedback for successful improvement of targeted behaviors. Praise is encouraged, but students also benefit from a well - chosen reinforcement. A possible reward, as a French teacher working with special need children told us, can be watching a favorite cartoon or playing a computer game.

## **How can FL teachers deal with different impairments affecting FL development?**

In this section, we discuss different impairments affecting FL development, present observations and suggestions made by interviewed teachers regarding how approaches to meet the needs of these pupils could be adjusted in the FL classroom.

### **Dyslexia**

This language impairment generally affects the oral and written language skills that are essential for success in learning a foreign language. Besides the difficulties of reading and spelling that are generally associated with dyslexia, there are difficulties in recognizing language patterns that are presented orally. This makes the discovery of grammatical and/or lexical word patterns difficult or sometimes almost impossible without specific interventions. The accommodations made by a teacher should enable the person to demonstrate what they know without the necessity to read or write directly. The emphasis should be on a pupil's oral performance. A tendency to combine parts of speech without any logic can be partially overcome by developing stronger metacognitive thinking skills, self-correction strategies and intensive practice. A teacher should also insist on vocabulary development.

### **attention deficit disorder**

Students with attention deficit disorder may have high level of intelligence and creativity. However, their short attention span and distractibility make it hard for them to concentrate and complete the tasks. They should be given short assignments and allowed to have longer pauses between intellectual tasks. These pupils prefer discussions on different compared to grammar exercises. With the proper motivation and teacher attention, they can show a good progress in foreign language learning. They also need specific classroom conditions including a quiet area free of distractions.

### **autism**

If a child affected by autism is capable of using speech as a means of communication, it means that he/she can master a foreign language to a certain extent. They can understand concrete concepts but have difficulties in the comprehension of abstract

concepts or metaphors. Usually, visual images rather than verbal language can catch their attention. The best way for teaching a foreign language to them is to make them repeat the words for objects presented on the pictures or encourage them to learn short songs or poems. They also like to learn words for numbers or repeat typical expressions from favorite cartoons.

## **INTELLECTUAL DISSABILITY**

Since their thinking ability is less mature than expected for their age, they will have difficulty in generalization, classification, association, abstract thinking and application. Their memory capacity is limited and the memorization process is slow. Direct and explicit teaching of linguistic encoding and decoding skills in the foreign language cannot give satisfactory results.

It is still however possible to teach them basic conversational forms, songs and play with them using simple words. Incorporating more physical learning experiences and encouraging music in the classroom is very motivating for them.

### **cerebral palsy**

Pupils affected by cerebral palsy with no intellectual disability only have problems in word pronunciation and speech fluency. Sometimes they need to use laptops or to record lessons because they are unable to write with pencils but in general they can follow general education programs. Since they frequently have eye coordination problems, they prefer listening to reading. They often need lots of attention and emotional support, for their physical disability can make them depressed and unmotivated.

### **blind pupils**

Blind pupils usually have excellent memory capacities. Teachers suggest that they prefer acquiring syntactic rules by being exposed to speech to being taught grammar explicitly. The reason for this is that they lack visual representation of the sentence structure. They are capable of memorizing a great amount of words and expressions and love listening to stories and learning poetry by heart.

### **Asperger syndrome**

A very specific case represents teaching foreign languages to pupils with the Asperger syndrome. Most of these pupils are gifted for mathematics and like learning formal rules of grammar. When the teachers talk to them they have to be very explicit, avoid using metaphors since they are incapable of processing them. They have a very literal understanding of language and think people always mean exactly what they say. Hence there is no point teaching idioms to them. Quite often they are introverted and not very much interested in others and do not easily participate in conversation but enjoy reading and analyzing texts.

# Final comments

Based on these qualitative findings, it can be suggested that foreign language education for children with special needs in Serbia and BiH must employ a multimodal, collective and research-oriented pedagogical approach. Without this, it cannot advance to foster an inclusive teaching environment. It can be structured on already successfully employed models and formative instructional practices (Konrad et al, 2014; Graham-Day et al, 2020) and this study can serve as a call for all stakeholders in these two countries to initiate the necessary systematic actions to strengthen FL teacher preparation programs and administrative support. It also requires development of the social and political contexts in the region, which would allow expanding the view of higher education as “primarily the institution supporting post-conflict economic recovery, and building the nation or state in the post-conflict setting” (Zgaga et al, 2013, p. 72). Here appears the importance of a master’s degree in teaching foreign languages to pupils with special educational needs: through learning and practice, each future teacher should acquire knowledge about methods of teaching various contents to heterogeneous classes. The students should also be introduced to unique aspects of different disabilities, as well as approaches and strategies for teaching students with these disabilities. Therefore, courses should provide both the explanation of different challenges future teacher might encounter and ways how to address them. Teacher preparation should also include more classroom management training with an emphasis on time allocation and attention maintenance.

The philological faculties in Serbia and BiH need wider and deeper reforms in higher education curricula in the area of teacher education. A combined master’s degree or a specialized program for FL teaching and SEN education should be offered. Effective educators and policy makers at all levels within the inclusive educational practices will lead to development of engaged citizenship so that every child will be provided with all educational opportunities including foreign language instruction.

In addition, a professional network for sharing practices for identifying SEN/exceptional children before formal primary education and at the beginning of primary education could be established for teachers to immediately respond and meet the needs of these children. It would also be helpful to establish formal categorization of SEN children in relation to FL and the second language acquisition issues.

Due to many challenges related to FL teaching and SEN children, the increased number of exceptional children, but also the influx of refugees and immigrants, it is crucial to organize a research network between EU partners and regional researchers and practitioners to propose and submit EU research and professional projects in the future to effectively address the issues put forth in this paper.

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1 “Dragan Herzog” from Serbia is an example of a special education school discussed in this section. It is a specialized institution for the first level education for children with development problems and chronic diseases. Teaching is carried out in hospitals or at home. Cf. <http://www.osdrdraganhercog.edu.rs>