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Second Language Learning for Students with Specific Learning Difficulties

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Masters of Arts in Inclusive and Special Education

Second Language Learning for Students with Specific Learning Difficulties

Rita Jorge Brennan

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Master of Arts in Inclusion and Special Education

Abstract

This research is a case study carried out in a secondary school in Ireland. The main aim of the study was to investigate the issues related to learning a second or third language for students with Specific Learning Difficulties. The research's main questions related to the views of teachers regarding the language learning for students with SLD and related issues. Furthermore, this research paper investigates effective methodologies and strategies to break down the barriers for students with SLD when learning a second or third language. Some of these strategies include differentiation, the use of visual, oral and aural resources and the use of technology. Professional development, flexibility regarding examinations, rethinking Irish exemptions and component lessons were suggested as solutions. The methodologies used in this case study were semi structured interviews and online questionnaires. The participants were management, SET teachers and language teachers. The findings concur with current literature in looking at language learning as an opportunity for students with SLD, concluding that students with SLD can not only learn languages, but thrive and enjoy this learning journey.

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Dad, for encouraging and empowering me since I was a little girl.

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Rita, the module lead that supported me all the way.

The participants in the case study.

The friends and fellow teachers who supported and encouraged me.

Dedicated to all the children who face barriers and lack of access in education.

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Glossary of Terms

Department of Education and Science (DES)

European Union (EU)

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA)

National Council for Special Education (NCSE)

Special Education Needs (SEN)

Special Education Teacher (SET)

Specific Learning Difficulties (SLD)

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

1.2 Aims and Setting

1.3 Overview

1.4 Conclusion

“He who does not know foreign languages knows nothing about his own.” Goethe

1.1 Introduction

Inclusive education principles are at the forefront of the provision of education that is accessible to all learners so they can achieve their full educational, academic, emotional, and social potential. This research is centred on how these principles can be extended to the learning of Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) for students with Specific Learning Difficulties. Specific Learning Difficulties (SLD) affect the way information is learned and processed. These difficulties are often neurological, rather than psychological and occur independently of intelligence. They can have a significant impact on learning and acquisition of literacy skills (The Dyslexia Association, UK). This research focuses on students with literacy difficulties or dyslexia who will be referred to in this thesis as students with SLD. Internationally and in Ireland, students with SLD are not always encouraged to learn a second or third language. However, learning languages can have a beneficial impact on a person’s memory and it promotes greater attentional control. (Costa, 2017) In February 2024, the *Oireachtas* published a report that suggests that language exemptions might not be fit for purpose. The report recommends a new approach to teaching and learning of languages with extra support and resources in place of a language exemption. (Joint Committee of the Irish, the *Gaeltacht* and the Irish Speaking Community, 2024) Throughout this thesis, the words the words exemptions, exceptions and withdrawals are used interchangeably to mean that students are not studying a modern foreign language.

1.2 Aims and Setting

Following the pragmatism paradigm, the main research aim of this thesis is to investigate the issues regarding language learning for students with SLD from teachers' perspectives. The expected outcome of this study is to have a deeper understanding of the issues surrounding language learning for students with SLD. To achieve the research aim, the research objectives of this study are to understand the views of the Principal, the Special Education Needs (SEN) Coordinator, language teachers and SEN teachers on additional foreign language learning for students with SLD and to explore the challenges these students face when learning foreign languages. To meet these objectives, this research will focus mainly on two research questions (1) What are teachers' views on second or third language learning for students with SLD? and (2) What strategies and resources do teachers use that might facilitate language learning for students with SLD?

This case study will be carried out in a rural European School in Ireland which is part of a mainstream Irish secondary school. The European school currently has 42 students enrolled as part of a population of 1148 students in the mainstream second level school. This secondary school has 19 language teachers, one SEN coordinator and four SEN teachers. There is a number of additional teachers providing support for students with SEN. I am a language teacher who also provides support to students with SLD at second level.

1.3 Overview

Chapter two will present a literature review to examine findings on the topic of additional language acquisition for students with specific learning difficulties. The literature review chapter will look into educational policy at international and national level in terms of language learning and SLD. This chapter will present the most recent evidence-based views on language learning and SLDs, the benefits and challenges of learning language and the roles of the teachers and schools in promoting language learning for students with SLD. Additionally, the literature review chapter investigates effective strategies suggested in literature to promote and support language learning for students with SLD.

The third chapter will outline the Research Methodology of this project. This chapter will look at the ethical basis for this research and its research design. There will be a focus on the rationale behind the data collection methods used and some of the limitations of these methods. The educational context will be considered, and data will be collected using semi-

structured interviews in person and online questionnaires. This research collected both quantitative and qualitative data. Five semi-structured interviews were undertaken with the Principal, the Special Education Needs (SEN) Coordinator, language teachers, and SEN teachers. Questionnaires were sent to fifteen staff members. The participants were teachers with experience of teaching students with specific learning difficulties and/or language teaching. Exclusion criteria were teachers who have not taught students with specific learning difficulties. Confidentiality, anonymity, and the right to withdraw were adhered to and every effort was made to assure validity and reliability. Reflexivity will be a constant during this process.

Chapter four will present the findings of the case study. This chapter relates the data to the research questions and reports on the themes arising from the data. This chapter narrates the most significant findings and topics with direct reference to the insights given by the participants in both the interviews and the questionnaires.

The final chapter of this thesis is the discussion chapter. In this section, the researcher will relate the findings to the literature through an exercise of reflexion. Hopefully this chapter will provide answers to the research questions and present in a clear manner the views of the participants regarding students with Specific Learning Difficulties (SLD) learning a second or third language and related issues. Furthermore, this chapter will also present the most effective strategies suggested by the teachers to promote language learning for students with SLD and thus inform on recommendations to improve the learning journey of students with SLD that want to and have the opportunity to learn a second or third language.

1.5 Conclusion

This research thesis aims to shed a light on how learning languages for student with SLD is perceived by teachers and what are the issues that in practice can hinder the students' learning progress. Ultimately this research hopes to contribute to disseminating valuable information about language learning and SLDs and provide recommendations to improve the practice of teaching and learning a second or third language for students with SLD. Finally, this research hopes to contribute to the deconstruction of misconceptions that students with SLD cannot learn a second or third language. Evidence-based research suggests that it is not only possible for students with SLD to learn a second or third language, but that they can make progress and thrive in their language learning.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

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2.5 Current Exemption Issues

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2.7 Conclusion

2.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the literature review pertaining to research about learning a second or additional language for students with Specific Learning Difficulties (SLD). It looks at the international and national policies and it investigates language learning and SLD. This literature review examines the current exemptions from language classes. It aims at presenting effective strategies to adapt language teaching and learning to the needs and strengths of students with SLD.

Every child has a right to access a balanced curriculum, which includes language learning (Essex and MacAskill, 2020). The benefits of learning a new language have been widely recognised in educational research. However, the benefits and processes of language learning for students with SLD have received little attention (Kormos, 2017). Additional research is needed to focus on the experience of language learning for students with SLD (Essex and MacAskill, 2020).

Specifically, and relevant to this case study, learning a language has a positive impact on students with additional needs and there are no detrimental effects of bilingualism or

multilingualism for children with SLD (Uljarević, M., Katsos, N., Hudry, K., & Gibson, J. L. (2016). Learning a language is positive for students with SLD, albeit dependent on their own individual circumstances, needs and strengths.

2.2 Language Policy

2.2.1 European Policy

Learning languages is a key value within the European Union framework, as it helps to promote diversity and multiculturalism. Language learning is at the forefront of the European Union's policy to promote mobility and multicultural understanding. "One of the objectives of the EU's language policy is therefore that every European citizen should master two other languages in addition to their mother tongue" (EU Language Policy, 2017). The first European legislation on languages dates back to 1958 when the official languages of the European Committee were designated. It has been amended to include the twenty-four official languages of the EU, in pursuance of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU). This treaty emphasises that 'action shall be aimed at developing the European dimension in education, particularly through the teaching and dissemination of the languages of the Member States', while fully respecting cultural and linguistic diversity (Article 165(1) TFEU).

2.2.2 Irish Policy: Languages Connect

In accordance with the European Policy, Ireland designed its Strategy for Foreign Languages in Education, entitled Languages Connect (Department of Education and Skills, 2017). This strategy promotes the vision of learning languages as a means to understand different countries and cultures (DES, 2017). This policy document, as well as the European Framework of Key Competences for Lifelong Learning (2007), recognises the ability to speak other languages as crucial for personal, professional, social, and economic development. The Languages Connect strategy intends to improve the linguistic ability of the Irish student population. This strategy aims not only to promote the learning of foreign languages, but also to implement supports at national and local level to develop the learning of modern foreign languages.

The Languages Connect policy identifies the strengths and challenges of language learning in Ireland. The strengths are exposure to bilingualism, the reform of the senior cycle, the long-

standing tradition of learning languages and the position of Ireland as a global economy (DES, 2017). However, some challenges have also been identified such as the globalisation of the English language, the lack of recognition of languages as an economic and professional advantage, the low uptake of languages at third level and the lack of qualified language teachers (DES, 2017).

2.2.3 Irish Policy: Modern Foreign Languages

In 2020, the Department of Education and Skills published an extensive report on the teaching and learning of Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) at second level (DES, 2020). The document is based on inspectors' reports, and it aims to provide guidance and support to second level schools in the field of modern foreign languages.

One of the main initiatives that mark the progress of the Irish education system in the promotion of language learning is the Framework for Junior Cycle in which a single junior cycle specification in modern foreign languages was introduced in 2017. This framework promotes the focus on oral skills and competences when learning a language. One of the most significant recommendations from this report is that there should be more opportunities for student centred activities to allow for the use of the target language. The DES introduced new curricular languages in 2020. The new languages, Lithuanian, Polish, Portuguese, and Chinese, have been promoted by the Post Primary Languages Ireland (PPLI) as part of the Language Connect initiative. This initiative supports the view of welcoming new languages and cultures as part of the new immigrant population in Ireland. The MFL report mentions the support for students with special educational needs (SEN) and found the majority of classrooms do provide good to very good support. The recommendation of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) would be extremely beneficial to all learners, and it is hoped that it is introduced gradually in most learning environments.

2.3 Special Education Policy

2.3.1 Special Education

The EPSEN Act (2014) is the legal framework for the assessment of needs and educational planning for children with special education needs. It was landmark document in changing the perspective on special needs and in the provision of an inclusive educational environment (Carey, 2005).

The EPSEN Act was the basis for the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) Policy Advice Paper “Supporting Students with Special Educational Needs in Schools”. The NCSE presented a comprehensive description of the system in place for students with SEN, suggested changes and made recommendations to foster a more inclusive education for all students in the Irish system. Through their recommendation of including students with SEN within mainstream classes “where the student with special educational needs receives additional attention from the class teacher through differentiation of the curriculum and/ or additional teaching support provided by a resource/learning support teacher or through co-teaching, where required”, the NCSE supports the view of developing a student’s full potential based on their individual needs (NCSE, 2013).

In 2017, the DES published the Guidelines for Post-Primary Schools - Supporting Students with Special Educational Needs to provide guidance to teachers, parents, and other stakeholders to support students with SEN. It aims to provide practical advice and recommend new strategies with the new allocation model of resources and supports for students with SEN. This document focuses on a whole-school framework for inclusion and collaboration between educators, students, and parents (DES, 2017).

2.3.2 School Policy

The School Special Educational Needs school policy is reviewed annually. It outlines the structure and guidelines for the provision of inclusive education. Its aims are to support students with additional needs and to provide efficient resources to maximise the students’ potential. This document describes the roles and responsibilities of the SEN team, which includes the Principal, the SEN Coordinator, the Learning Support teachers, and the Resources teachers. Students with SEN are supported in mainstream classes by subject teachers and sometimes by SEN teachers or Special Needs Assistants (SNA’s) in various ways such as target setting and supports such as help with note taking.

Teaching and learning experiences are differentiated depending on the strengths and needs of students. Targets are set collaboratively with all involved including the student. Students are informed of the supports which are available to them and have access to differentiated materials. Some students may be withdrawn for learning support. This is done in collaboration between the class teacher and the learning support teacher.

The policy is in line with the national framework and follows the Guidelines for Learning Support issued by the DES and NCSE. The policy reflects the importance of collaboration, and it aims to include all stakeholder in the identification of needs and resources for students with SEN. It aims to provide “access to a broad and balanced curriculum including extracurricular activities as appropriate and full access to the National Curriculum” (DCC SEN Policy, 2023).

2.4 Specific Learning Difficulties and Language Learning

2.4.1 Specific Learning Difficulties

The NCSE defines Specific Learning Difficulties as a difficulty in a particular area of learning such as reading, writing, spelling and arithmetic. Although some indicators may be present from an early age, most children are diagnosed when they are in primary school (NCSE, 2014).

SLD are characterised by particular difficulties with one or more of the processes required for fluent reading, writing and number work. These challenges may be difficulties with memory, organisation, and co-ordination. Examples of SLD are dyslexia and dyscalculia, with dyslexia being the most commonly diagnosed. The characteristics of these conditions overlap and vary in degree between individuals (University of Galway, 2023).

Farnsworth (2016) cites the challenges of identification of SLD and of separating SLD from the characteristics of dual language students. He points to the risk of misunderstanding both SLD and bilingualism, which can lead to the incorrect identification of a learning disability or language learning difficulty.

2.4.2 Benefits of Language Learning

“One language sets you in a corridor for life. Two languages open every door along the way” (Smith, 2014). Smith (2014) defines learning additional languages as opening new doors throughout life. There are many benefits to learning a new language and the European

Commission (EC) policies outline them as follows: (1) individuals who learn more languages have better personal and professional opportunities, (2) multilingual societies foster cultural awareness, mutual understanding, and social cohesion and (3) multilingual workers with intercultural competences are a vital resource for helping businesses succeed and grow in global markets (European Commission, 2012).

Costa (2017) also focused on the advantages of learning a language. He states that there are clear linguistic and cultural advantages. Additionally, learning languages improves decision-making skills and reasoning.

Likewise, Howard (2023) states that second language acquisition is positive for learners with additional needs, and it can be significantly beneficial in their learning trajectory. Howard suggests that language learning is an opportunity that should be offered to all learners to access and thrive in. Language learning develops the learners' linguistic and cultural awareness, their working memory. It improves the understanding of sentence structure, grammar, and vocabulary. These skills can be transferred from mother tongue to additional languages (Tinsley and Comfort, 2012).

Learning languages for students with SLD improves the students' knowledge of the language, and of areas such as history, geography, and science. Foreign language classes should be planned with a variety of areas in mind which gives the students an opportunity in language and culture learning and in other areas of knowledge (Howard, 2023).

Moreover, the British Dyslexia Association corroborates the view that students with dyslexia should be given the opportunity to learn languages, even though these students might find them harder, and the process may be longer. The International Dyslexia Association (IDA) recommends adapted methodologies and sets the individual learning profile and the journey of the students at the core of the language teaching and learning. Students with dyslexia can be very well suited and capable for language learning due to their particular strengths. (IDA, 2021)

2.4.3 Challenges of Language Learning for Students with SLD

Lack of specialised training is a challenge for teachers, and it impacts on learning opportunities and outcomes for students with SLD. Afitska and Said (2022) suggest that teacher education programmes internationally still devote little attention to language teachers' competencies in teaching students with SLD. There is a need to prioritise the

understanding of students' differences and to adapt teaching methodologies to individual skills and needs. The authors reflect on international evidence and conclude that these challenges are common in different countries and educational settings (Afitska and Said, 2022).

To meet this challenge, Ireland has recently introduced inclusion and differentiation in Initial Teacher Education and Special Education Training (SET) placements for student teachers (Walsh, 2020). SEN Coordinators benefit from specialised training too and Cowne (2005) found that SENCOs feel more confident and skilled once they attend specialised training. Furthermore, other challenges are misconceptions about dyslexia and other learning difficulties. When reflecting on their language learning experience, learners highlighted concerns with teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and practices (Azero, 2022). Difficulties may arise for some students with SLD while learning a language, because of the phonological or visual processing difficulties. Some students can experience difficulties acquiring and understanding vocabulary as they may have a poorer working memory (Schneider and Crombie, 2012). Such differences can lead to less engagement and lack of motivation, with some students with SLD reporting a negative attitude towards language learning (Kormos and Csizér, 2014).

Along with students and teachers, school leadership plays a key role in promoting inclusion and tackling some of these challenges. Kugelmass and Ainscow (2004) suggest that distributed leadership and participative decision-making increase participation and access in school (Kugelmass & Ainscow, 2004). Spillane advocates distributed leadership and sees schools as collective agency for change where leadership, teachers and students work together to increase access and participation (Spillane, 2005). Management plays a role in decisions such as student choices, timetabling, flexibility of subject options.

2.5 Current Exemption Issues

Notwithstanding the well-known benefits of language learning, one common issue is that languages are frequently the first subjects from which students with SEN are withdrawn. For example, students with SLD are often granted exemptions from studying the Irish language at Primary level. (DES, 2022). Howard (2023) argues against language exceptions stating that students with learning difficulties should not routinely be removed from the foreign

languages classroom but should be offered the choice and opportunity to learn languages (Howard, 2023).

Much recent research argues against systematic withdrawal of students with SEN from foreign language classes (Ayres-Bennett and Carruthers, 2019; Wight, 2015). Stevens and Marsh (2005) challenge the misconception that students with SEN should not learn languages and suggest that there is an ethical imperative to promote access to language learning classes to all learners. In the same vein, Wight (2015) affirms that many students with disabilities do not benefit from the educational opportunity that is learning a second language. He suggests this would seem contradictory to inclusive beliefs. The author claims that language exemptions are based on personal beliefs and preferences and on a lack of data about the success of learners with SEN in language learning (Wight, 2015).

Another issue is that the parents, school leaders, teachers and other professionals often recommend or seek language exemptions based on intelligence tests, attainment tests and assumptions or tests about the language skills of learners. However, research demonstrates these are not accurate predictors of students' language performance and achievement in another language (Goodman, Freed and McManus, 1990; Sparks, 2006). However, educational psychologists and/or speech therapist sometimes advise parents against bilingualism or language immersion. This leads to a number of parents choosing only the community language for their children, hence not facilitating access to language learning classes for children with SLD/SEN (Nic Aindriú, 2022).

Additionally, research in the United Kingdom shows the students do not respond well to being withdrawn from MFL classes. Not only do they want to stay with their peers, but they also see language classes as fun, interesting and practical. In some cases, students with SEN have achieved better results in exams in German than in English. (Training and Development Agency for Schools, 2009)

2.6 Language Learning Strategies for Students with SLD

As with all students, understanding an SLD student's individual needs, strengths and circumstances is crucial to developing effective teaching strategies. It is important to consult the students Individual Educational Plan (IEP) and to collaborate with all stakeholders involved in the student's education. Listening to the students, giving them choice and

autonomy is best-practice and effective in supporting them in an independent learning path (Brennan, King and Travers (2021).

The Universal Genre Sphere (UGS) is a model of teaching proposed by David and Anderson as a method of improving language teaching. The UGS model aims to help teachers to adapt their methodologies and to look at their students interests as key to the teaching and learning process. This model suggests dividing the learning process in smaller parts or components, adjusted to the learners' interests and abilities thus making learning languages accessible to all learners (David and Anderson, 2022).

Using technology online and face to face is effective for teachers and learners to enhance language learning (Afitska and Said, 2022). Online quizzes and audios, for example, are proven to be very effective to help students with SLD to learn new vocabulary. (DAI, 2021)

The DAI suggests strategies to adapt language classes to be more accessible and inclusive. These strategies include role-playing, rhymes, songs, and visual aids. Most importantly, they suggest that feedback from the learners is vital to make language learning as comfortable as possible to learners with SLD. (DAI, 2021)

Additionally, when exploring specific teaching accommodations, strong evidence was found on the benefits of multisensory techniques, for example for spelling skills and motivation (Flaten Jarsve and Tsagari, 2022). The UK's toolkit for teachers of MFL suggests modifications and adjustments to planning and activities, through the use of differentiation. It is beneficial to provide alternatives to written activities such as signs and symbols, so that the students work towards the same language outcomes but in different ways. Frequently, these strategies are best practice for all students, not only students with SLD or SEN. (TDA, 2009)

2.7 Conclusion

Having reviewed the literature, it seems relevant to investigate the issues regarding language learning for students with SLD from teachers' and other stakeholders' perspectives. This research will point towards solutions to the issues and effective strategies and resources for teachers, some of which have been identified in this literature review. To do so this research will focus on the views of school leaders, language teachers and SEN teachers in order to identify the challenges these students face when learning foreign languages.

This research aims to identify effective strategies to break down barriers for students with SLD who would like to learn a foreign language. These strategies as well as teachers views and considerations on the subject will hopefully add to the current body of research in the area of language teaching and learning for students with SLD.

By consulting different stakeholders, the data collection will provide an insight on the current practice in a specific educational context and provide information on the areas for improvement on the teaching and learning of foreign languages. The methods for collecting this data are outlined in the next chapter.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

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3.2.3 Confidentiality and Anonymity

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3.1 Introduction

This methodology chapter describes the philosophy underpinning the research, the research design, the sampling strategy, data collection methods, and data analysis techniques used in the study. It explains how the research question was addressed and how the data was analysed to generate the findings.

As the research aim of this study is to investigate the issues related to language learning for students with SLD, the research methodology that seemed most appropriate was a case study.

The interviews and questionnaires were used to gather the teachers and stakeholders' insights on the issues related to language learning for students with SLD. The interviews

provided in-depth views on the topic and the questionnaires allowed for data collection from a wider number of teachers. The focus of both methods was to address the research questions.

3.2 Philosophy

3.2.1 Ethical Considerations

This case study follows the Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research published by the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018). The main ethical principles to guide educational research are prevention from harm, which means the participants will not be at risk of any emotional or physical harm by taking part in the project; informed consent, in which the purpose of the research is clearly stated and explained to participants in order for them to consent to participate in the study having clear information on the purpose of the research; the right to withdrawn at any time without having to provide a reason or explanation, that also needs to be made clear to the participants when inviting them to be part of the research; and lastly anonymity and confidentiality, to assure participants that they will not be identified in any way, that their views and experiences will remain confidential and that all data will be securely stored and protected.

The rights of the participants were upheld by providing clear information on the project and by designing a consent form that assures the ethical principles and freedom to withdraw. To conduct ethical research, one should design and follow research methods that abide by the professional conduct rules, to treat and store data in a secure manner, for example with encrypted documents and to maintain a professional and respectful work ethics throughout the entire research process.

Participants in face-to-face interviews were provided with printed consent forms. These forms were given to participants before the interview to allow participants enough time to read the information sheet and to agree to participate based on informed consent. The consent forms were stored separately to the interview recordings and transcripts.

Participants who took part in the research by filling in online questionnaires signed a consent statement digitally. The consent statement was at the initial stage of the questionnaire, and it was signed ahead of the sections with the questions.

3.2.2 Validity and Reliability

To assure reliability, this case study is sustained by peer-reviewed literature with clear questions, both in the interviews and questionnaires. To ensure reliability all interviews were recorded and transcribed. The researcher followed the principles of internal validation, through constant reflexivity and external validation, with the support of the thesis supervisor. The researcher assured the objectivity of this research by constantly checking and mitigating bias.

Validity of this research was assured by following the ethical educational research principles of respecting the participants' right to no harm, informed consent, confidentiality, and minimal risks associated. Appropriate research methods such as confidential interviews and anonymous questionnaires were used in an effort to enhance validity. Data analysis that is free of bias and accurate can also improve the validity of the research. The researcher followed the key validation criteria presented by Whittemore, Chase and Mandle (2001): a) Credibility: Are the results an accurate interpretation of the participants' meaning?; b) Authenticity: Are different voices heard?; c) Criticality: Is there a critical appraisal of all aspects of the research?; and d) Integrity: Are the investigators self-critical?

3.2.3 Confidentiality and Anonymity

Assuring the protection of the participants above all reflects the "trustworthiness" (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) which is crucial to any educational research. The researcher made sure that all research participants were aware of their right to confidentiality and anonymity of any information and opinions they may provide during the research. The researcher complied with the GDPR guidelines, and all data was treated with the utmost care.

The researcher adhered to Privacy and Data Protection laws and guidelines in place in Ireland. Pseudonyms were used instead of real names and direct identifiers were removed from all material. Locations were broadened and aggregated, hence the precision of locations was reduced.

3.3 Research Design

3.3.1 Paradigm

This case study was sustained by the pragmatism paradigm. This was a mix-method between the positivism and interpretivism paradigm as both qualitative and quantitative research methods were used. The pragmatism paradigm acknowledges that reality is constantly negotiated and that both the traditional research techniques of positivism and the different perspectives of the interpretivism are relevant to educational research.

3.3.2 Research Methodology

Research methodology refers to the overall approach or strategy adopted by the researcher to undertake a study. Case studies are often used to gain a deeper understanding of complex issues and phenomena, through the detailed analysis of context (Coimbra and Martins, 2013). This methodology is the most appropriate for this research topic as it aims to understand the issues related to language learning for students with SLD. The case study methodology allowed to explore these issues and to understand the experiences of principals and teachers.

The stages of doing a case study were setting the stage, where the case study was identified as the most appropriate methodology; determining what we know, through the literature review; selecting interviews and questionnaires as the most appropriate methods; gathering information from multiple sources, such as the Principal, SEN Coordinator, language teachers and SEN teachers and finally presenting and analysing the findings.

3.3.3 Research Methods

This case study collected both qualitative and quantitative data. Quantitative data was collected through semi-structured face-to-face interviews and quantitative data was gathered using online questionnaires.

The interviews aimed to explore in depth the views of the participants and to record peoples' attitudes, feeling and behaviours. They were intended to be a "conversation with a purpose" (Burgess, 1984). These interviews allowed for some flexibility and were semi-guided by the researcher. The researcher defined the topics but provided an opportunity for discussion. Limitations of semi-structured interviews are they can be time-consuming, there

can be interviewer bias and participants may not be able to articulate their answers as well and they hoped.

“Survey research designs are procedures in quantitative research in which investigators administer a survey to a sample or to the entire population of people to describe the attitudes, opinions, behaviours, or characteristics of the population” (Cresswell, 2020). The questionnaires were aimed at a larger group of language teachers and SEN teachers. The surveys were sent by email and required more straight forward answers. The questions were carefully designed and aimed at objective answers. The first sections of the questionnaires were the consent form and information on the research.

3.3.4 Reflexive Thematic Analysis

The data gathered in this research was analysed using the Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) approach. This approach is based on the identification of themes and patterns emerging from the response of the participants and consequent reflection on these results. In RTA the researcher is encouraged to critically reflect on their biases and assumptions, ensuring that the findings are grounded in the participants' experiences while acknowledging the researcher's influence on the interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2023, Terry et al., 2017). Firstly, the researcher analysed the data using RTA and use the process of coding to identify the most important key themes, words and expressions that come up in the data. Then the process moved to the interpretation and grouping of the data into categories and in order to identify the emerging main themes. Using RTA, the data was grouped into themes according to their relevance to the research aims and questions.

3.4 Sampling

3.4.1 School Profile

This research was carried out in a mainstream Irish secondary school in a rural setting. This school includes a European school for the teaching and learning of languages. The second level mainstream Irish school has a student population of around 1100 students. Five semi-structured face-to-face interviews were carried out. The questionnaires were sent out to staff members that were either language teachers or SEN teachers. Contact was made with twelve language teachers and four qualified SEN teachers.

3.4.2 Participants

Upon permission from the Principal, participants were recruited officially through written communication. The researcher intended to involve two Principals, the SEN Coordinator, ten to twelve language teachers, and four SEN teachers. The participant teachers have experience of teaching students with specific learning difficulties and/or language teaching. Exclusion criteria were teachers who have not taught students with specific learning difficulties.

Firstly, the Principal was contacted via a gatekeeper's letter to ask for approval to initiate the project. The Principal was given an information sheet with detailed information on the project and research. Following the Principal's approval, the researcher asked the Principal to circulate the information sheet to the staff.

Although all measures were in place to minimise the risk to participants, some risks remained. Participants might feel they could not answer the questions fully or that they needed to withdraw from the research. Mitigation measures included informed consent, privacy and data protection, freedom to withdraw and voluntary participation.

3.5 Data Collection

3.5.1 Face-to-face Interviews

Five semi-structured interviews were planned and one piloting interview took place in advance. The researcher interviewed the Principal of the mainstream second level school, the Principal of the European School, the SEN Coordinator, one language teacher and one SEN teachers.

The participants in face-to-face interviews were sent the Research Information Sheet, the Consent Form, and a draft of the questions in advance (Appendices 1 and 3). The questions were of an open-ended nature and the structure of the interview allowed for new or different topics to be introduced at the time of the interview. There were eleven questions initially and the interviews lasted an average of 30 minutes (Appendix 5). Interviewees signed a consent form on paper ahead of the start of the interview. All interviews were recorded and recordings were deleted straight after transcription.

3.5.2 Questionnaires

The questionnaires were designed using Google Forms and sent out to the participants by email (Appendix 4). Google Forms is not only an efficient software, but it is also considered to be very safe both for users and data storage. Questionnaires were sent to fifteen staff members.

The questionnaires aimed to explore the research questions and gather views of different teachers. The questions involved Yes or No answers, linear scales, multiple choice, and short paragraph answers. The quantitative data of the questionnaires will be detailed and presented with tables and graphs in the next chapter of this thesis.

The questionnaires had an informed consent section in which consent was given by ticking a box. This consent section followed a section on information on the research. After the consent section, there was a section on defining SLD and then two demographic questions, pertaining to the qualifications and years of experience of the teachers.

These questionnaires were anonymous, and data remained confidential. The responses were only accessible to the researcher and the thesis supervisor, upon request. Participants had the option to request a copy of their answers.

3.5.3 Data Storage

The researcher had custody and access to the data. The Thesis Supervisor could access the data for agreed analysis, using encrypted documents and folders. All files were stored electronically with encrypted password protected folders. Files on paper were kept in a fireproof cabinet. Consent forms were kept separately from all other research materials. All data was kept in a personal computer. No data was shared over email or stored in USBs.

3.5.4 Data Analysis

In the next chapter the main themes and patterns from quantitative and qualitative data will be presented with tables, descriptions, summaries, and comparisons. Participants' views on the issues surrounding language learning for students with SLD will be presented alongside ideas on what can be done to minimise these issues. Some of the strategies which seem most efficient in breaking down the barriers for students with SLD when learning a new language are also presented.

3.6 Conclusion

This chapter presented the rationale behind the research methodology used in this thesis and it provided an in-depth look at the best methods to achieve the research aim. It was key to look at Reflexive Thematic Analysis as the guiding theory behind the case study and to develop the research methods. It is evident that interviews and questionnaires' are effective in gathering different views and perspectives, as well as identifying challenges and effective strategies to tackle said challenges.

Chapter 4: Findings

4.1 Introduction

4.2 Participants' Roles and Teaching Experience

4.2.1. Experience Teaching Students with SLD

4.3 SEN Policy

4.4 Teachers' Views on Language Learning for Students with SLD

4.5 Issues and Challenges of Language Learning for Students with SLD

4.5.1 How to Improve Access to Language Learning for Students with SLD

4.5.2 Subject Choice

4.6 Effective Strategies

4.7 Themes

4.8 Conclusion

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents data collected from a case-study which took place in May and June of 2024. Both qualitative and quantitative data are presented and summarised. The data is based on five face-to-face semi-structured interviews and responses to online questionnaires from 15 participants (Appendices 4 and 5). In its entirety, the data reflects the views and responses of twenty participants.

The main themes arising from the interviews and questionnaires are presented and grouped according to their relevance to the research aims and questions. Firstly, the experience and roles of participants are introduced. This is followed by a summary of the views of the participants on the SEN policy, subject choice and issues and challenges of learning a language for students with SLD. Furthermore, findings are presented on teachers' thoughts on how to improve access to language learning for students with SLD. Finally, a list of strategies which teachers deemed as most effective to facilitate language learning for students with SLD is presented.

4.2 Participants' Roles and Teaching Experience

Twenty participants took part in this research; five were interviewed and fifteen responded to an online questionnaire. All twenty participants gave written consent to participate in the research and zero participants withdrew from the study. Out of the twenty participants, eleven are language teachers, seven are SEN teachers, one is a SEN coordinator, and one is a principal.

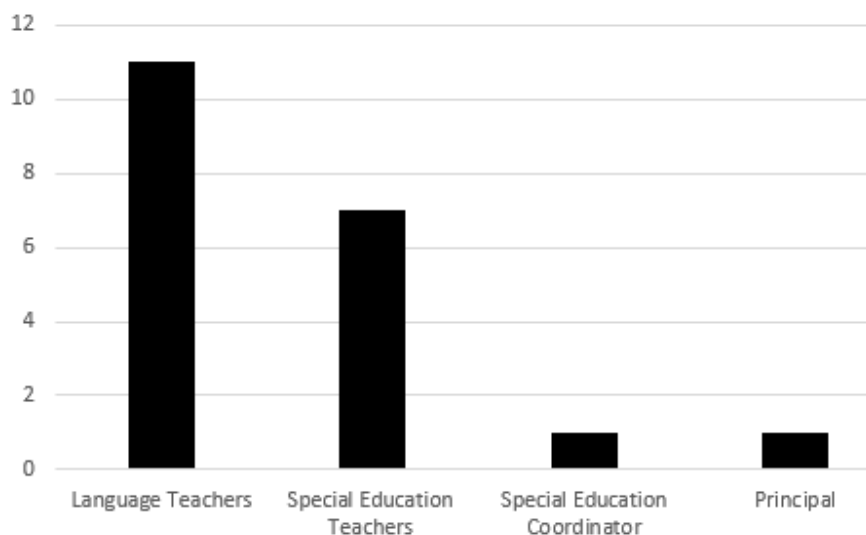


Figure 1: Roles of Participants

Regarding the teaching experience of the participants, ten out of the twenty participants (50%) have been teaching for more than fifteen years; 30% have been teaching between five and ten years; 15% have been teaching between 10 and fifteen years and one participant has been teaching for less than 5 years. (Figure 2)

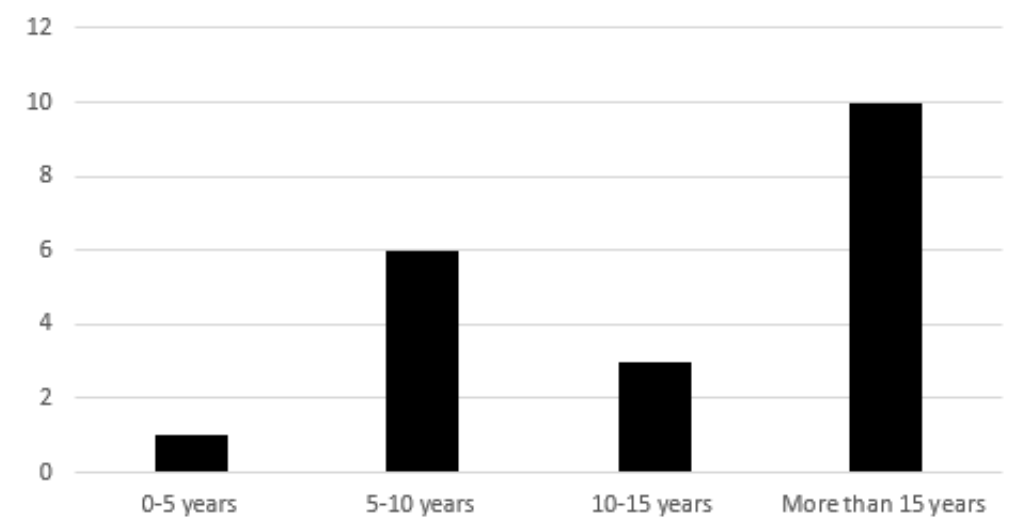


Figure 2: Participants' Teaching Experience

4.2.1. Experience Teaching Students with SLD

When asked to rate their experience of teaching students with SLD, on a scale from 1 (Very Challenging) to 5 (Excellent), 46% of the teachers rated the experience as Good, 26% as Challenging and 26% as Very Good (Figure 3).

1. Has your experience of teaching students with SLD been:

15 responses

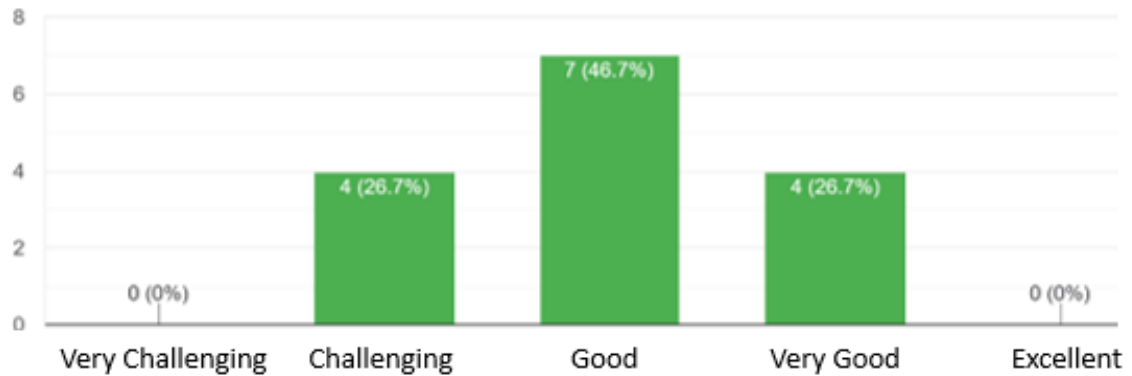


Figure 3: Experience Teaching Students with SLD

4.3 SEN Policy

80% of participants (16 participants) were aware of the SEN Policy in place in the school. 66.7% of the respondents of the questionnaires thought that the policy had an impact on access to language subjects for students with SLD (Figure 4).

4. Do you think the policy has an effect on access to language subjects for students with SLD?

15 responses

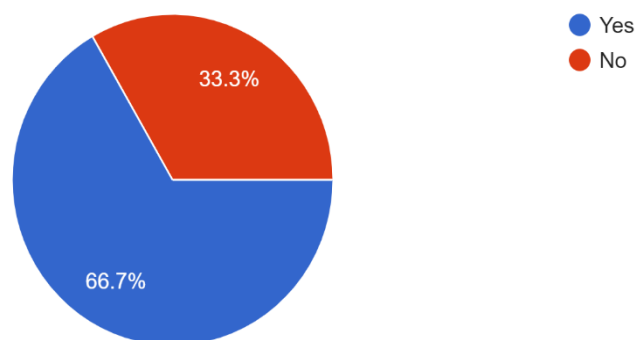


Figure 4: Teachers' Views on Whether School SEN Policy Affects Access to Language Subjects

The importance and impact of the SEN Policy was discussed further in interviews. All five interviewees stated that a clear policy is essential to promote access to education for all students and to “make sure all students have an opportunity to learn” (Participant 1). The SEN policy is seen as an essential set of guidelines to promote collaboration between all stakeholders. “It draws on the importance of the Individual Educational Plan and that all teachers involved with a student with SEN meet regularly to review the plan and the progress” (Participant 2).

Regarding language learning for students with SLD, the SEN Policy states that all students should try a language subject at Senior Cycle. “This policy encourages all students to take on a language, regardless of their difficulties or of having an Irish exemption. It thus promotes the inclusion of all students” (Participant 4).

4.4 Teachers’ Views on Language Learning for Students with SLD

When asked about their views on second and third language learning for students with SLD in the online questionnaires, while 53% of the teachers responded that it is a valuable opportunity for the students, 33% of the teachers thought that learning a second or third language is challenging for students with SLD. 33% of the teachers mentioned the importance of teachers’ training and methodologies and 27% mentioned that targeting individual needs and strengths was key to achievement and enjoyment for students with SLD’ when learning a second or third language. (Figure 5)

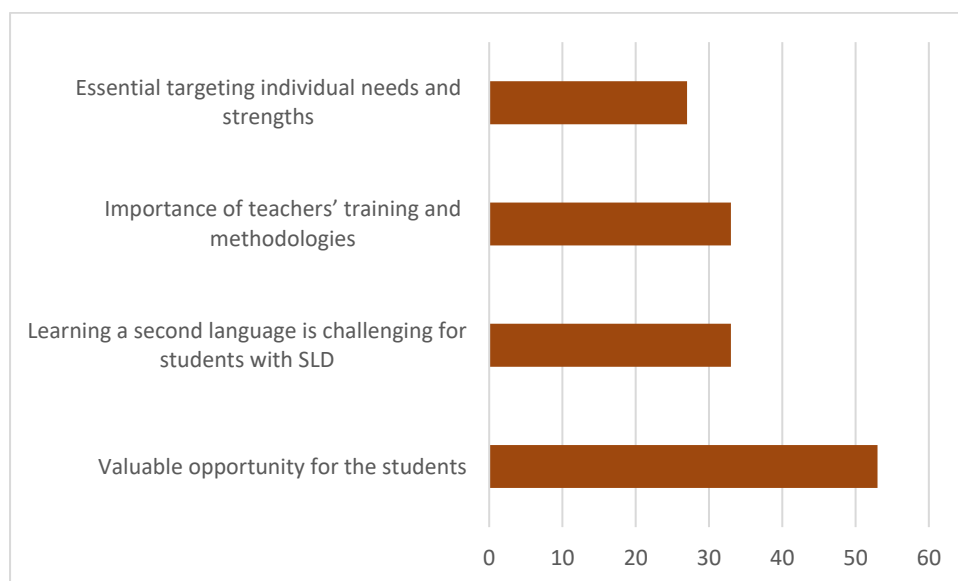


Figure 5: Teachers’ Views on Language Learning for Students with SLD

20% of the teachers indicated that a student's level of English was crucial to their learning of new languages, indicating that students with SLD should "master the English language as much as possible before learning other languages" (Participant 5); "Without a solid knowledge of English, adding a second or third language places an extra burden on the student (Participant 9).

13% of the teachers responding to the questionnaires believed that students with SLD should not start a new language in Primary school while 33% of the teachers stated that, in spite of the challenges of learning a second or third language, students with SLD can enjoy the process, thrive in it, and achieve success. Regarding when to start a second or third language, teachers had different opinions. Some advocated for an earlier start of language learning, "It might be easier for students with SLD if they started a second language at a younger age" (Participant 12).

Most teachers responding to the online questionnaires felt that learning a second or third language is a very good opportunity for students with SLD and that "every student should be given the chance to try out and be exposed to a second language" (Participant 8).

A significant number of teachers saw learning languages as challenging for students with SLD, indicating that this can cause "undue stress and anxiety" (Participant 3). Teachers agreed that the difficulties faced by students with SLD are "different for each individual student" (Participant 8).

In a question on methodologies, a significant number of teachers mentioned teacher training, differentiation, and different methodologies as key to promoting language learning for students with SLD. Participants suggested that teachers should have high expectations for students with SLD learning languages, with "individualized, specific strategies and tools" (Participant 10). "If learning is presented in their preferred learning style, it mostly proves for successful outcomes and higher achievements" (Participant 13).

Teaching the different components – oral, aural, reading and writing- separately at times was also suggested as effective, because even if students with SLD have difficulties with reading and writing "the aural and oral components are a great opportunity to showcase their knowledge" (Participant 4). One teacher mentioned that "teachers should be able to use differentiated materials and be open to different methods of teaching and classroom management" (Participant 2).

Overall teachers see language learning as having a positive impact on students with SLD, despite some possible challenges and difficulties. “Although students with SLD might encounter extra difficulties when learning a second or third language, they can achieve success and even excel with the appropriate support and strategies” (Participant 6). In agreement with this colleague, another teacher said that “All students should have an opportunity to access language learning. Some might find it challenging, but some might thrive. It can ultimately be an opportunity and a new area of interest” (Participant 15).

4.5 Issues and Challenges of Language Learning for Students with SLD

Regarding the issues and challenges of language learning for students with SLD, all participants indicated that parental attitude was key. Students with SLD often have an Irish exemption which makes the parents fearful of encouraging their children to learn an additional foreign language. In terms of the students with SLD, low confidence was the most significant factor hindering their achievements when learning a language.

Below is a table with all the issues indicated in the research with the percentage of the participants’ responses (Table 1).

Table 1: Participants’ Opinions on Issues and Challenges of Language Learning for Students with SLD

Issues and Challenges	Responses
Parental attitude against learning languages	100%
Low confidence	40%
Difficulties with literacy in English	20%
Spellings	20%
Phonics/ phonological awareness	20%
Poor working memory	20%
Need more time/slower pace	20%
Increased workload	15%
Lack of motivation	15%
Overwhelming/stressful/causes anxiety	15%
Attitude towards learning	10%
Reading/vocabulary	10%
Exam pressure	10%

4.5.1 How to Improve Access to Language Learning for Students with SLD

When asked about how to improve access to language learning for students with SLD, specialised training was one of the most significant suggestions made by 50% of the participants. “It is essential to have well trained enthusiastic teachers who are able to adapt their lessons and meet the needs of their students” (Participant 2). In line with training, the need for more adapted resources was mentioned by 40% of the participants. 5 out of the 20 participants, which makes for 40% indicated the need for smaller classes: “In my opinion, languages should be taught to groups of maximum 5 students” (Participant 7).

Better communication with parents and the SEN team was suggested by 27% of the participants as a way to improve access to language learning for students with SLD. Teachers felt that if the students have an Irish exemption, parents do not encourage them to learn other languages. “There is a misconception among parents, teachers and students regarding the ability of students with SLD to learn a language; we need to break down those stigmas and barriers” (Participant 6).

Additionally, other ideas to improve access to language learning were increased funding (15%) and team teaching (10%). 15% of the participants indicated that removing the pressure of exams and written assessment would be beneficial to facilitate language learning for students with SLD. “I think teachers should adapt the way in which they assess students’ competencies. Assessment could be done through digital quizzes and oral presentations instead of written tests” (Participant 17).

4.5.2 Subject Choice

During the interviews, participants were asked about their thoughts on whether choosing subjects before students come into Secondary School influences subject choice. This question was aimed at gauging data about students with SLD having the choice of selecting languages when starting secondary school as part of their options.

Three out of five participants suggested that students could have a taster class in a language; suggestions for these taster classes ranged from one term (Participants 2 and 3) to a longer taster module until Easter (Participant 5). Participants stated that most students with SLD receive an Irish Exemption in Primary school, and this leads to students with SLD opting out of studying languages at second level.

One participant raised the point that timetabling can be an issue when trying to offer different options and it would make it challenging to offer taster classes or to accommodate change in subject choices throughout the school year (Participant 4).

4.6 Effective Strategies

Looking at strategies considered effective to facilitate language learning for students with SLD, 100% of the participants mentioned differentiation, making it unanimously the most effective strategy for all 20 participants of this research. Other successful strategies for language learning for students with SLD were the use of visual aids and oral and aural activities. Below is a graph with all the strategies mentioned by the participants and corresponding percentages. (Figure 6)

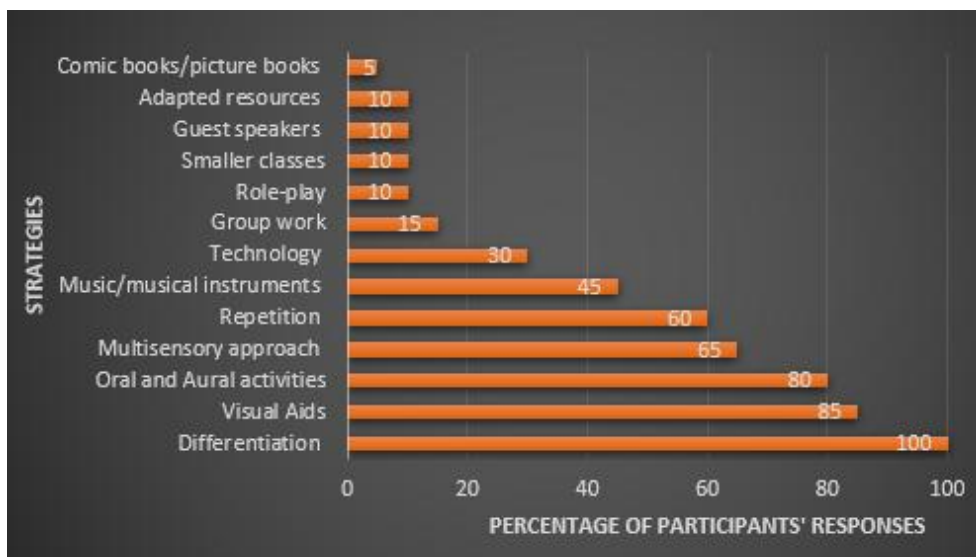


Figure 6: Effective Strategies in Language Learning for Students with SLD

4.7 Themes

Following on from the data collection and analysis stages of this research, below is a list of the most relevant themes which emerged regarding views, issues, and strategies of language learning for students with SLD. (Table 2)

Table 2: Views, Issues, and Strategies of Language Learning for Students with SLD

1.	Language learning for students with SLD might be challenging, but it is seen as a great opportunity for the students. Some students with SLD can thrive and achieve success in language learning.
2.	Awareness and focus on the individual profile, strengths and needs of students with SLD are key to an effective learning and teaching of languages.
3.	Specialised teacher training and awareness of adapting teaching methodologies are crucial to promote language learning for students with SLD.
4.	The main challenges to the learning of languages for students with SLD are students' low confidence and parental attitude possibly due to the Irish language exemption.
5.	The most significant difficulties when learning a language for students with SLD re phonological awareness, reading and writing.
6.	The level of proficiency in the English language is crucial to students' progress in learning a second or third language.
7.	Teaching the different components of the language using different methodologies has a significant impact on language learning for students with SLD. More focus should be given to oral and aural components to achieve success.
8.	Differentiation is the most important strategy for effective teaching and learning of languages for students with SLD.
9.	Visual resources, technology and a multisensory approach are essential strategies to language learning for students with SLD. Using adapted resources and authentic, adapted texts is very important.

4.8 Conclusion

The findings of this chapter reflect the views of teachers in this case study on second or third language learning for students with SLD. The data derived from questionnaires and interviews gives a deeper understanding of the issues surrounding language learning for students with SLD, which was the research aim. In this case study, teachers' responses indicated that learning a second language is an opportunity for students with SLD and an area in which students with SLD can thrive. Challenges that can arise were also highlighted, such as the impact of students' lack of confidence in their learning of a language and difficulties with phonological awareness and writing. These issues will be discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter 5: Discussion

5.1 Introduction

5.2 Teachers' Views on Language Learning for Students with SLD

5.2.1 A Great Opportunity

5.2.2 Professional Development and Adapting Teaching

5.3 Issues and Challenges of Language Learning for Students with SLD

5.3.1 Parental Attitude

5.3.2 Irish Exemption

5.3.3 Misconceptions About Language Learning for Students with SLD

5.3.4 Dominant Language

5.3.5 Student Confidence

5.4 Effective Strategies and Resources

5.4.1 Differentiation

5.4.2 Visual Aids

5.4.3 Oral and Aural Activities

5.4.4 Multisensory Approach

5.4.5 Repetition

5.4.6 Music

5.4.7 Technology

5.5 Recommendations

5.5.1 Promote Awareness

5.5.2 Professional Recognition

5.5.3. Continuous Professional Development

5.5.4 Irish Exemption

5.5.5 Subject Choice

5.5.6 Introducing Languages in Primary School

5.6 Conclusion

5.1 Introduction

The final chapter aims to present the main points for discussion arising from the case study and findings. The research aim of this thesis was to investigate the issues regarding language learning for students with SLD from teachers' perspectives. To achieve this aim, this case study focused on the following research questions (1) What are teachers' views on second or third language learning for students with SLD? and (2) What strategies and resources do teachers use that might facilitate language learning for students with SLD?

This chapter discusses the teachers' views on learning languages for students with SLD, namely that it is a great opportunity for the students, albeit challenging. Furthermore, this chapter critically analyses the issues related to language learning for students with SLD, specifically lack of specialised training, language exemptions, parental attitude and access to language classes.

This chapter discusses effective strategies to mitigate these issues, for example, differentiation, visual and audio supports and adapted resources. Lastly, this chapter provides recommendations that can support the improvement in the teaching and learning of a second or third language for students with SLD.

5.2 Teachers' Views on Language Learning for Students with SLD

5.2.1 A Great Opportunity

One of the most significant findings of this case study felt that the majority of teachers see learning a second or third language is a valuable opportunity for students with SLD. This view is in line with both the European and Irish policies for the promotion of language learning (DES, 2017; EU Language Policy, 2017). The idea that learning an additional language is a valuable opportunity for students with SLD is an idea that is confirmed by research, namely Howard (2023), who views second language acquisition as positive and significantly beneficial in the learning trajectory of students with SLD.

Most participants thought that learning languages is not only an opportunity, but an area that students with SLD should have access to. This point about equal access to second and third languages is reflected in the Languages Connect Policy (DES, 2017). This policy is

consensual with the views of the participants that some students with SLD will thrive and succeed in learning another language.

However, a number of participants in this case study noted that learning a second or third language can be challenging for students with SLD. These challenges were reported to be related, for the most part, to difficulties with phonological awareness, leading to difficulties with reading and writing. This is in line with findings by the NCSE about the nature of difficulties in students with SLD (NCSE, 2014).

The majority of support is allocated towards maths and English and subjects taught through English. Due to the lack of teachers capable of supporting the learning of MFL, students have little access to support in second or third languages. Language teachers are needed to provide extra support to students with SLD learning a second or third language and there is a shortage of language teachers in Ireland. Alternatively, SEN teachers need training in MFL to promote access to learning support classes in second or third languages.

5.2.2 Professional Development and Adapting Teaching

Other significant issues mentioned by teachers were the importance of teachers' Continuous Professional Development (CPD) and, related to this, the use of adapted methodologies in order to best support the learning of languages for students with SLD. Teachers felt they do not always have access to professional development in the area of SLD. These issues have been noted by Afitska and Said (2022) who recommend prioritising the understanding of students' differences and adapting teaching methodologies to individual skills and needs.

Furthermore, the idea of targeting individual needs and strengths was seen by teachers as key to fostering achievement and enjoyment for students with SLD' when learning a second or third language. This view has been identified and discussed by many researchers and educators as crucial in tackling challenges for students with SLD. Adapted methodologies and individual learning profile are at the centre of the recommendations of the International Dyslexia Association (IDA) to support language learning for students with SLD (IDA, 2021). "We differentiate our PD to meet every one of the teachers' needs. We ask teachers to do the same thing for kids, so the idea that we would not do that as educators is insane" (Ward, 2024). Teachers are willing to access CPD and this should be promoted by schools' management, for example through online CPD, that allows for flexibility in terms of

time and location to access the CPD. Education Centres in Ireland provide valuable CPD that should be promoted and divulged to the staff. Teachers can also have CPD during department meetings or Croke Park hours. Guest speakers are another effective way of providing CPD in schools.

5.3 Issues and Challenges of Language Learning for Students with SLD

5.3.1 Parental Attitude

The most significant issue mentioned by participants regarding students with SLD learning a second or a third language was parental attitude. Participants felt that when a student is diagnosed with a SLD, their parents tend to discourage their children from learning languages. Students with SLD are traditionally discouraged from learning a language. However, a sense that this discouragement was also evident in school practice also arose in this case study, leading one participant to question if there may be miscommunication and some blame exchange between parents and schools about why students with SLD don't study second or third languages?

There is a direct link between this attitude and the practice of students being granted an Irish exemption in primary school, which leads to a fixed mindset of the students' ability to learning languages.

5.3.2 Irish Exemption

This research suggests that one of the main barriers to the learning of other languages by students with SLD is the granting of exemptions from studying Irish. Professionals tend to promote the idea that if students are removed from Irish classes, they should not take part in learning other languages (Nic Aindriú, 2022). However, withdrawal from language classes is not supported by the current literature. For example, Howard (2023) argues against the withdrawal of students with SLD from languages classes and defends, instead, that students with SLD should be offered the opportunity to engage with language learning.

These findings regarding the Irish exemption and it possibly hindering the learning of languages for students with SLD are sustained by the recent *Oireachtas* report by Joint Committee of the Irish, the *Gaeltacht* and the Irish Speaking Community (2024). This report recommends a new approach to teaching and learning of languages with extra support and resources in place of a language exemption. A new approach to Irish exemptions and

increased resources and support will hopefully lead to significant changes for the learning of languages for students with SLD and effect change on the misconceptions around SLD and language learning.

5.3.3 Misconceptions About Language Learning for Students with SLD

“There is a misconception among parents, teachers and students regarding the ability of students with SLD to learn a language; we need to break down those stigmas and barriers” (Participant 6). This misconception was a common reference throughout this case study as one of the barriers in language learning for students with SLD.

The misconception stems not only from the aforementioned effect of the Irish exemptions, but also from a misunderstanding of dyslexia and SLD and their different characteristics in different students. Farnsworth (2016) refers to the challenges of defining SLD and possible misconceptions related to dual language learning.

This lack of a clear understanding of these concepts is evident in literature and it is clear to students with SLD. Namely in Azero’s study, learners highlighted concerns with teachers’ beliefs, attitudes, and practices regarding SLDs. (Azero, 2022). Again, this indicated the need for increased professional development for teachers in the area of SLDs.

5.3.4 Dominant Language

Another issue highlighted in this research is the level of the dominant language of students with SLD and its impact on the ability of learning a new language. For the purpose of this case study, the dominant language of most students was English. Teachers argued that students with SLD should master their dominant language first and that difficulties with their English language would mean added difficulties with learning a second or third language.

“Without a solid knowledge of English, adding a second or third language places an extra burden on the student (Participant 9).” This statement leads to the question of what is a solid knowledge of a dominant language and does it really impact negatively on the acquisition of other languages. Some research does not argue against this line of thought and there is evidence that students can make more progress in other languages than in English. In some cases, students with SEN have achieved better results in exams in German than in English. (Training and Development Agency for Schools, 2009)

5.3.5 Student Confidence

Students' low confidence was referred to by a significant number of participants as being an issue for their language learning and progress. Low confidence can stem from specific learning difficulties, such as poor working memory, visual difficulties or poor phonological awareness. Such differences may be the cause of less engagement or lack of motivation, with some students with SLD reporting a negative attitude towards language learning. (Kormos and Csizér, 2014) Appropriate and diversified methodologies play a key role in promoting engagement and motivation, thus improving language learning for students with SLD.

Following on from the investigation into the issues related to language learning for students with SLD, this research looked into ways of improving access to language classes.

Suggestions ranged from increased funding, to specialised training and smaller classes.

An interesting finding was that participants felt that subject choice was crucial to increasing the access to language learning. Participants noted that, in the first year of Secondary school, students should be able to choose languages as their subjects, even if they have an Irish exemption. In some schools, like the one in this case study, all students have an MFL in their curriculum, but most students with SLD opt out of these classes. According to the MFL policy for secondary schools, all students should have access to modern foreign language classes. (DES, 2020). However, exam pressure was noted as a major disadvantage to learning languages for students with SLD. It was suggested by many teachers that students with SLD could attend classes and progress in their language learning, but perhaps it would be beneficial to remove the compulsory sitting of exams, namely at Junior Certificate level.

5.4 Effective Strategies and Resources

5.4.1 Differentiation

Differentiation was unanimously referred to as the most effective strategy in language classes for students with SLD. Adapting resources is proven to facilitate progress in language learning and motivation for students with SLD. To promote inclusive language education, teachers need to predict the barriers that may arise for students with SLD and adapt their classes with strategies and methodologies that minimise these barriers and allow students with SLD to fully participate in the language classes. (TDA, 2009)

Differentiation, as well as inclusion, have been introduced in Ireland as part of teacher training Initial for Teacher Education and Special Education Training (SET) placements for student teachers. (Walsh, 2020).

5.4.2 Visual Aids

The use of visual aids was recommended by participants as very effective in supporting the teaching and learning of languages for students with SLD. The use of visual aids is common practice amongst the teachers who took part in this case study. It is an evidence-based effective support promoted by the NCSE (2021) as a means to enhance communication. In their research, Pateşan, Balagiu and Alibec (2018) state that visual aids are powerful tools that can be used to assist the teachers in teaching a foreign language. The benefits in using visuals in teaching are huge, ranging from grabbing and maintaining attention to motivating students helping them to retain information (Pateşan, Balagiu& Alibec, 2018).

5.4.3 Oral and Aural Activities

Focusing on oral and aural activities is seen by the participants in this case study as fundamental to promote and enhance the students' progress and engagement. Some teachers suggested smaller classes and classes specific to certain components of the language, for example, conversational classes or classes focused on reading. These suggestions are in line with the recent literature and research such as David and Anderson (2022) who suggests dividing the learning process in smaller parts or components, adjusted to the learners' interests and abilities thus making learning languages accessible to all learners (David and Anderson, 2022).

5.4.4 Multisensory Approach

In this study, a multi-sensory approach gathered consensus as being key to language acquisition for student with SLD. This approach is evidence-based and sustained by recent literature. In their research, Flaten Jarsve and Tzagari found strong evidence was found on the benefits of multisensory techniques, for example for spelling skills and motivation (Flaten Jarsve and Tzagari, 2022). It is important to note that these strategies are best practice for all students, not only students with SLD or SEN. (TDA, 2009) Most teachers of languages use this approach; however, they mentioned the need for more resources or

professional development. Teachers should have time made available to share their expertise and methodologies on this approach.

5.4.5 Repetition

Repetition was also widely reported as an important strategy in language learning, for all students and for students with SLD. Participants in this research use repetition often in class and see its benefits for language acquisition. However, research acknowledges that repetition should be meaningful and relevant to the learners. It should be a form of negotiation of messages and texts and not merely (or entirely) a mechanical or rote parroting of structures that does not ultimately enhance students' proficiency in the target language (Duff, 2000).

5.4.6 Music

The use of songs and musical instruments arose as a common and effective strategy amongst language and special education teachers to enhance their teaching and learning. Teachers see this as a fun and creative tool to support oral expression and retention. Music enables students to have positive attitudes, self-perceptions, and cultural appreciation so they can actively process new stimuli and infer the rules of language. The universal element of music can make the artificial classroom environment into a “real” experience and make new information meaningful, bringing interest and order to a classroom. (Stansell, 2005)

5.4.7 Technology

The use of technology is widely established as beneficial and effective in education in general and in language teaching and learning in particular and teachers in this research supported this view. Teachers mentioned the use of technology as key to increasing motivation, supporting their teaching and promoting engagement and achievement. The DAI fully supports the use of technology in language learning for students with SLD, naming online quizzes and audios, for example, as very effective to help students with SLD to learn new vocabulary. (DAI, 2021)

Lee (2001) believes that Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) can improve the students' academic ability in language learning. This improvement is probably achieved by changing students' learning attitudes and boosting their self-confidence. Accordingly,

Galavis (1998) and Dunken (1990) assert that the use of technology enhances learners' language proficiency and their overall academic skills.

5.5 Recommendations

5.5.1 Promote Awareness

First and foremost, it is imperative to promote inclusion in all educational settings. Fostering an inclusive learning environment aims to break down barriers for students with SEN and SLD and thus leads to better access to education in general and to language learning.

To achieve a more inclusive teaching and learning in the area of language acquisition for students with SLD it is vital to promote awareness and to disseminate information amongst parents and teachers on the benefits of learning new languages and, most importantly the possibility of students with SLD thriving and succeeding in language learning. Students with SLD can learn languages and can enjoy their learning path of exploring new languages.

Furthermore, access to language learning can be fostered as a means to promote a plurilingual and pluricultural educational environment.

Awareness should also be raised within the teaching community, as well as with the parents and the students themselves in relation to a deeper knowledge of SLDs and the specific characteristics of these difficulties. More awareness would lead to acceptance of the differences in perceiving and acquiring a second or third language. There are several organisations working tirelessly on this area such as the Dyslexia Association of Ireland or ASIAM. These organisations provide vital information, support and training for teachers, parents and students. However not all teachers avail of them as the information does not reach all schools and teachers.

5.5.2 Professional Recognition

It is imperative to improve the working conditions for SEN and language teachers. Often these teachers have temporary contracts and are at times payed unqualified rates which leads to the shortage of teachers and a lack in motivation or engagement with the teaching profession.

The fact that SEN is not a recognised subject by the Teaching Council has a significant impact in special education as a valuable area in teaching and it is an additional barrier for teachers and consequently for students to access support.

5.5.3 Continuous Professional Development

Continuous professional development and specialised training are at the core of successful language learning for students with SLD. Teachers feel they do not have the appropriate knowledge and skills to adapt their classes and resources to meet the specific needs of their students. Training in SLDs and methodologies specific to language learning are essential for teachers to practice differentiation and adapt their resources.

If as Ward (2024) suggests, we could promote differentiated professional development for teachers, we might make some progress towards differentiating for the students whom we teach. It would be useful for schools to create an inventory of the teachers' professional development needs at the beginning of the year and Croke Park hours could be used to provide professional development sessions for teachers.

Based on the suggestions of the participants, professional development is needed to provide deeper knowledge in SLDs, how to better adapt resources and how to better differentiate those resources to provide modified adapted activities depending on the students' strengths and needs. It is recommended that the schools develop learning communities in which professionals share and exchange knowledge and expertise.

5.5.4 Irish Exemption

The current system of Irish exemptions needs reviewing, which is already being carried out by the DES following the aforementioned report on the Irish language (Joint Committee of the Irish, the *Gaeltacht* and the Irish Speaking Community, 2024).

Parents need clarification on the type of SLDs and support with the definitions of the different SLDs. This support should be provided upon receiving a diagnosis to better inform the parents on how to support their child. As part of this support, it should be made clear to the parents that having an SLD should not stop their child from learning a new language. It is important to note that even if the students do not thrive in all components, they should have access to the aural and oral components of a second or third language in order to gain language and cultural awareness of these additional languages.

5.5.5 Subject Choice

Students with SLDs should have access to language classes and should be able to choose language classes as a subject in first year of secondary school. The option should be there for students with SLD to learn a second or third language without the obligation of sitting the exams on these languages at Junior Certificate level.

As it was mentioned by some participants, the introduction of taster languages at Primary level is ideal to promote the learning of languages and also to foster access to language learning for students with SLD.

5.5.6 Introducing Languages in Primary School

All students, including students with SLD should start learning a second or third language at primary level. The suggestion made by a number of participants that starting to learn a language earlier is more effective for students with SLD is supported by the NCCA. The DES and the NCCA are working on the redevelopment of the primary curriculum to include modern foreign languages at this level, thus consolidating not only the importance of learning languages, but also the effectiveness in introducing languages at an earlier stage (NCCA, 2019).

5.6 Conclusion

This research highlights the benefits of learning languages and that learning a second or third language is a great opportunity for students with SLD. This research provides an in-depth look at the issues related to language learning for students with SLD. I found that most language and SET teachers believe that learning a language is indeed of benefit to the development of the students' skills and it can impact their learning, not only at a linguist level, but also at a social and emotional level.

The most significant findings were firstly that professional development and thorough knowledge of SLDs is crucial for teachers and secondly that teachers are willing to adapt their teaching methodologies to address specific learning needs and strengths of students with SLD. It is obvious that differentiation and adapted resources are key to promoting learning of a second or third language for students with SLD and furthermore that most teachers are already using differentiation as a strategy in language learning.

It was a valuable experience to involve different stakeholders such as the principal, the SEN coordinator, SET teachers and language teachers to gauge a wide range of perspectives and views on learning languages for students with SLDs. Nevertheless, further investigation is needed in the area of language learning for students with SLDs. Other partners in education should be involved, such as parents and, most importantly, the students. I believe it to be of the utmost relevance to include the opinions of students with SLD regarding their learning of a second or third language in order to get their views on effective strategies and approaches to promoting language learning.

It became evident during this research that more resources are needed to strengthen teachers' knowledge and strategies in the classroom. I concluded that there is a wide variety of strategies in place to promote language learning for students with SLDs, namely the use of visuals and oral and aural resources. However, more resources are needed as well as changes to the provision and access to language classes for students with SLD. Smaller classes and component specific classes – oral, aural, reading and writing - are needed to increase access to learning a second or third language for students with SLD. In addition, provisions should be made for students to have the option of studying a second or third language at Junior Certificate level without having to sit an exam. This would encourage a lot more students with SLD to try and learn a new language.

In conclusion, it is essential to keep breaking down barriers for students with SLD in all domains of education, but especially in areas that seem unattainable for students with SLD such as languages.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Research Information Sheet

Title of Research Study:

Second Language Learning for Students with Specific Learning Difficulties

Thank you for your interest in participating in my research study on Second Language Learning for Students with Specific Learning Difficulties. This information sheet will provide you with essential details about the study to help you make an informed decision about participating. Please read the information carefully and feel free to ask any questions before making your decision.

Purpose of the Study

This case study aims to investigate the issues surrounding language learning for students with Specific Learning Difficulties (SLD) from teachers' perspectives. This research hopes to gather and understand the views of the Principal, the SEN Coordinator, language teachers and SEN teachers on additional foreign language learning for students with SLD. The purpose of the study is to explore the challenges these students face when learning foreign languages and to look at strategies to facilitate the learning of languages for students with SLD.

Study Procedures

If you choose to participate, the study will involve filling in an online questionnaire. This questionnaire contains 12 questions, and it should take approximately 30 minutes to complete. Five of the participants will be interviewed.

Risks and Benefits

While participating in this study, there are minimal risks involved, such as you may feel that you cannot answer a question. However, potential benefits include:

Supporting educational research in the fields of Special Needs Education and language learning.

Foster inclusion and inclusive education but shedding a light on the issues surrounding language learning for students with Specific Learning Difficulties

To promote teaching strategies and supports for students with Specific Learning Difficulties who want to learn a second or third language.

Confidentiality and Data Handling

Your participation in this study will be strictly confidential. All data collected will be anonymised and stored securely, accessible only to the researcher. Data will be used for research purposes only. Your personal information will not be disclosed or identifiable in any publications or reports resulting from this study.

Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary, and you have the right to withdraw at any time without providing a reason. Your decision to participate or withdraw will not affect any current or future relationships with the researchers or the educational institution.

Contact Information

If you have any questions, concerns, or would like further information about the study, please contact:

Rita Jorge Brennan

By participating in this study, you acknowledge that you have read and understood this information sheet. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to sign a consent form before starting the study.

Thank you for considering being a part of this important research. Your contribution will be crucial to provide valuable data and insight on how to best support students with SLD who want to learn a second language.

[Researcher's Signature]

[Date]

Appendix 2: Letter to the Principal

Dear Principal,

I am a teacher at xxx and currently pursuing a Master of Arts in Inclusive and Special Education at Hibernia College. As part of my studies, I am required to conduct a small-scale case-study. The focus of my study is **Second Language Learning for Students with Specific Learning Difficulties**.

To carry out this study, I would like to request your permission to access certain resources within the school. The research activities involved will include administering semi-structured interviews and online questionnaires. I hope to interview the Principal, the Special Education Needs (SEN) Coordinator, one language teacher and one SEN teacher. The online questionnaire is aimed at language teachers and SEN teachers.

I assure you that all information given by participants involved in the study will be treated with strict confidentiality and their identities will be protected. The information collected will be used solely for the purpose of this study and will be securely stored during the research process. No identifying information about the school, the teachers, or the students will be included in the thesis or any subsequent publications.

Confidentiality and anonymity are of utmost importance, and pseudonyms will be used to ensure the privacy of all participants. The collected data will be securely stored, accessible only to myself and my supervisor. Data analysis will be conducted for the purpose of completing my Master's thesis, and any potential findings may be shared in relevant academic journals.

Thank you for your interest and support in this research endeavor. If you have any concerns or require further clarification, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely,

Rita Jorge Brennan



Appendix 3: Informed Consent Form

Title of Research Study:

Second Language Learning for Students with Specific Learning Difficulties

I have read and understood the accompanying research information sheet for the study titled **“Second Language Learning for Students with Specific Learning Difficulties”**. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have received satisfactory answers regarding the study procedures, potential risks and benefits, and data handling.

I understand that my participation in this study is voluntary. I have been informed that I have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without providing a reason. I understand that my decision to participate or withdraw will not have any negative consequences for my current or future relationships with the researchers or the educational institution.

I understand that all information collected during the study will be kept confidential. I give my consent for the researchers to collect and use my data for research purposes only. I understand that my personal information will not be disclosed or identifiable in any publications or reports resulting from this study. I acknowledge that all data collected will be stored securely and accessible only to the research team.

I understand the nature of the study, including the purpose, procedures, and potential risks and benefits. I have been given ample opportunity to ask questions and have received satisfactory answers. By signing this consent form, I confirm that I willingly agree to participate in the study, **“Second Language Learning for Students with Specific Learning Difficulties”**.

Participant's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Appendix 4: Questionnaire

Second Language Learning for Students with Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD)

Section 1: Information Research Sheet (See Appendix 1)

Section 2: Consent Form (See Appendix 3)

Section 3: Participant Details

1. Are you (choose one option)

- a. A Language Teacher
- b. A SEN Teacher

2. Teaching Experience: How many years have you been teaching? (choose one option)

- a. 0-5
- b. 5-10 years
- c. 10-15
- d. More than 15 years

Section 4: Questionnaire

Specific Learning Difficulties (SLD) affect the way information is learned and processed. These difficulties are often neurological, rather than psychological and occur independently of intelligence. They can have a significant impact on learning and acquisition of literacy skills. This research focuses on students with literacy difficulties or dyslexia who will be referred to in this thesis as students with SLD.

1. Has your experience of teaching students with SLD been:

Rate from 1 to 5 (1 – Very challenging; 5 – Excellent)

2. What are your views on second or third language learning for students with SLD?

3. Have you been made aware of the policies in place in the school for students with SLD regarding learning a second or a third language? Yes/No

4. Do you think the policy has an effect on access to language subjects for students with SLD? Yes/No

5. What are the main issues and challenges associated with students with SLD learning a second or a third language?

6. How could access to language learning for students with SLD be improved?

7. Do you think parental attitude has an effect on students with SLD taking on language subjects?

Yes/No

8. What strategies and resources might facilitate language learning for students with SLD?

Choose all that apply.

Differentiation

Multi-sensory approach

Music/Musical instruments

Visual aids

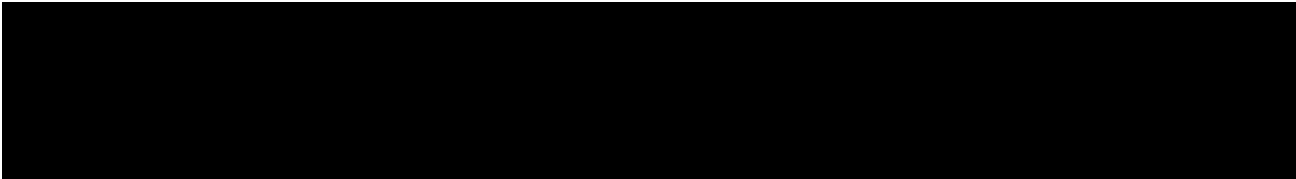
Oral and aural activities

Repetition

Other

If you chose 'Other', please explain your answer.

Section 5: Thank you.



Appendix 5: Interview Questions

Questions for the Principal, the SEN Coordinator, one Language Teacher and one Special Education Teacher.

1. What is your role in the school?
2. How many years have you been working in this role?
3. Do you know the reasoning behind the policy or how this policy came into being?
4. What do you think is the effect of the school policy on student access to language subjects for students with Specific Learning Difficulties (SLD)?
5. How does the school learn about incoming First Year students?
6. Do you have any thoughts on whether choosing subjects before students come into Secondary School influences subject choice?
7. Do you think that there are issues and challenges for students with SLD learning a second or a third language?
8. How could access to language learning for students with SLD be improved?
9. What factors prevent students with SLD from learning a second or a third language?
10. What are your thoughts on parental attitude or any other factor that impacts on students with SLD taking on language subjects?
11. Are there strategies that you think might be effective to facilitate the learning of foreign languages for students with SLD?