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The diverse linguistic attainment and attitude development of children learning English as a foreign language in inclusive classes

Zróżnicowane osiągnięcia językowe i rozwój postaw dzieci uczących się języka angielskiego jako obcego w klasach integracyjnych

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Introduction

Inclusion is a term which is often used to describe the process of teaching children with Special Educational Needs (SEN), i.a. SpLDs (Specific Learning Difficulties), alongside their peers whose development is proceeding harmoniously. However, inclusion is not only about having SEN pupils in the classroom. It consists of approaching each learner as an individual and ensuring him/her equal opportunities for personal development (Loreman et. al 2005). Likewise, Norwich (2008, p. 19) defines inclusion as "a systematic process which has a social meaning. It implies [reorganising] regular schools to have the capacity to offer all students what they need. It is about participation, interaction and social recognition".

Young learners' ultimate success in language learning is shaped both by their affective processes, attitudes, motivations and behaviour, and by external environmental factors, such as teacher competences and parental involvement (Pfenninger and Singleton 2019; Rokita-Jaśkow and Ellis 2019). In order to ensure the effectiveness of early FL learning programmes, there is a need to actively respond to the children's affective processes in the classroom by providing positive classroom experiences for all children and by keeping their motivation for foreign language (FL) learning high (Mihaljević Djigunović 2015). Teachers of EFL find this particularly challenging when teaching in inclusive settings as learners experiencing one of a variety of developmental disorders may have language and communication difficulties severely limiting their progress in the language classroom (Król-Gierat 2020).

Today's inclusive educational systems advocate instruction that effectively meets the diverse needs of all learners. Although the term inclusion is mainly used to describe the process of teaching children with SEN, i.a. SpLDs, alongside their peers whose development is proceeding harmoniously, the term involves more than simply the presence of SEN pupils in the classroom. Inclusion is widely used to refer to classroom practices that recognise each learner's individuality, thus providing them with equal opportunities for personal growth (Loreman et al. 2005). Importantly, the authors of this chapter understand inclusion as "a systematic process which has a social meaning. It implies (reorganising) regular schools to have the capacity to offer all students what they need. It is about participation, interaction and social recognition" (Norwich 2008, p. 19). This calls for responding effectively to all shades of individual needs of young language learners in primary classrooms today.

Individual differences and FL learning

Learning English as a FL has become part of primary school curricula throughout the world, very often beginning from grade 1 (ages 5 to 7). Research suggests that children's success in FL learning depends on a number of factors, both individual and contextual, interacting in a dynamic way (Enever 2011; Mihaljević Djigunović 2009, 2015; Pinter 2011). Young learners' individual characteristics, such as age, gender, attitudes, motivation, aptitude, intelligence, language anxiety, willingness to communicate, learning styles and strategies, vary greatly, and so does their achievement in EFL learning (Courtney et al. 2017; Enever 2011; Mihaljević Djigunović 2009, 2015). Significantly, individual characteristics, especially attitudes to a FL and motivation to continue learning it for a longer period of time, have a stronger influence on young learners' FL success at the age 10–11 than at 7–8 (Enever 2011). At the beginning of FL learning, most young learners are enthusiastic about learning a FL and highly motivated by songs and games used on a daily basis, but their attitudes and motivation may be negatively affected by anxiety or lack of challenge in the classroom (Nikolov 2009). The interaction of individual factors with the contextual ones, such as the teacher's role and a school climate, may therefore be rather dynamic (Mihaljević Djigunović 2009).

Courtney et al. (2017) tested productive oracy skills of Year 5 learners (aged 9–10) to find out the factors that influence motivation in terms of self-efficacy and attitudes. Their results were contradictory to widely held views that all

young learners are enthusiastic about foreign language learning and that all young learners find language learning easy: a significant number of children in the study held negative attitudes towards FL learning and negative perceptions of their FL abilities. Moreover, the study found that self-efficacy was strongly linked to achievement, stressing the importance of the children's feeling that they are making progress for keeping their motivation. Some studies found that motivation, attitudes, and self-concept can be unstable, being dependent on a number of contextual factors (Mihaljević Djigunović 2009). Also, as learners get older, they become more aware of their own abilities, which may cause a change in attitudes (Mihaljević Djigunović and Lopriore 2011). Mihaljević Djigunović and Lopriore (2011) found that learners' positive attitudes, high self-concept and motivation, correlated positively with their listening comprehension and lexical diversity in oral production.

Nikolov (1999) links children's motivation to learning FL's with the learning context and the ability of the teachers to gain and maintain pupils' interest in the classroom. She looked at the attitudes and motivation of 84 Hungarian children, aged 6–14, and asked them: "Why do you learn English?". Nikolov (1999, pp. 42–43) grouped the answers to the question into four broad types, namely: the classroom experience (e.g. "because it is so good/fun"), the teacher ("because the teacher is nice and kind"), external, often family-related reasons (e.g. "because my brother/sister/cousin also learns English"), and utilitarian reasons (e.g. "my mother said if we went to Italy I would interpret"). As for the teacher's role, Nikolov's observations are in accordance with those of Brown's (1998), who stated that the attitudes of the people involved in the research might cause the halo effect, translated into the subjects' positive reactions to the researcher and the new experience.

Significant difficulties experienced in a young learner classroom appear in the area of literacy development, which can negatively affect learners' attitudes and motivation (Courtney et al. 2017; Mihaljević Djigunović and Lopriore 2011). Savić (2019) found that young learners' reading proficiency correlated with their motivation and attitudes. When considering young language learners today, not all of them who have difficulties in FL learning are diagnosed as SEN learners, which emphasizes the responsibility of language teachers to get to know their learners very well so that they can adapt their instruction to respond to their diverse language levels, needs and goals, and create conditions for the whole-child approach that ensures that each learner is safe, actively engaged, supported and challenged academically. These expectations correlate with the so-called Response to Intervention diagnostic model (used e.g. in British

education), but not with the IQ Discrepancy model, which is used e.g. in Poland. With the IQ Discrepancy Testing model, changes in the teaching style are expected after the parent has provided a statement from the psychological-pedagogical counselling centre (PPCC), which specifies how to work with the student. Until then, teachers have no formal basis. Teaching strategies and inclusive teaching methods that imply positive attitudes to inclusion, are the key to quality inclusive practice (Kavkler et al. 2015).

Some studies indicate that even in FL classrooms with favourable learning conditions and inclusive, non-competitive and supportive atmosphere, young learners may feel anxious when performing certain classroom tasks (Nilsson 2018), which can further affect their motivation and impede their learning and success. This stresses the role of the teacher as a key factor of effective FL teaching: they can remove the barriers to learning by giving information in multiple representations and modes, giving all learners opportunities to learn through personal engagement and participation in classroom activities, and motivating them in multiple ways (CAST 2011).

Research method and procedure

Action research (AR) was chosen as the research method due to its three basic features, as indicated by Gabryś-Barker: "It is situational and context-grounded, by focusing on identifying and diagnosing problems, and by designing and implementing treatment, finding solutions to these problems in a specific context for a particular group of learners in a particular teaching/learning situation" (Gabryś-Barker 2011, p. 14).

In the case of the study discussed in the present paper, the action research facilitated a hands-on experience, being a requirement for the identification and diagnosis of the problems encountered in each inclusive class. Teachers of FL's have to find proper solutions to the difficulties encountered in particular situational contexts for given pupils, or in a group of them on a regular basis. No method is better than personal immersion in a specific teaching situation in order to understand the daily endeavours of teachers working with struggling children. "It assumes cooperation between teachers, and also, which needs to be emphasised, between the learners involved in the enquiry and the teacher" (Gabryś-Barker 2011, p. 14).

AR gave the researchers the opportunity to cooperate with teaching assistants while conducting lessons. These were invaluable opportunities to see when

and to what extent the assistants were needed. Moreover, AR allowed the researcher to work with the pupils involved in the enquiry, to know them personally, and thus be better able to understand their SEN. The time devoted previously to observations was also of great help, but getting into direct contact with pupils turned out to be of even greater value. AR allowed the researcher to put theory and practice together, to verify and evaluate prearranged procedures. "It brings change into a classroom which ideally results in the elimination or at least the progressive minimising of the diagnosed problems" (Gabryś-Barker 2011, p. 14).

AR was pre-planned and aimed at the progressive minimising of problems previously diagnosed in each inclusive class, when it comes to both individual pupils and group processes. Several linguistic and attitude tests were also conducted to obtain measurable and comparable quantitative data. While some of the data gathered in the research can be presented in numerical and diagrammatic form, the whole project was first and foremost a process-oriented, qualitative endeavour to improve the inclusive educational conditions in which children with SEN learn foreign languages.

During the action research 80 English lessons were conducted: one of the researchers taught 20 English lessons, 45-minutes long, with each of the four inclusive classes. Additional time was devoted to pre- and post-testing. When it comes to coursebook selection, it was a popular textbook series titled Bingo (Wieczorek 2021), applying active teaching methods based on the natural desire for children of this age to participate in games, activities, recite nursery rhymes and sing songs. Two different issues of the Bingo series were used for the 1st and 3rd grades. Being a guest at the school, the researcher was expected to cover at least some of the units, but modifications and the addition of extra topics could also be made, which brought the project closer to the original everyday school realities.

Research questions

The general aim of the empirical action research was to detect linguistic and attitude differences in EFL learning between children with diagnosed SEN and with no diagnosis of SEN and the factors causing them. It was expected that the data collected would allow the researchers to answer the following research questions:

RQ 1: What is the FL linguistic attainment of children with SEN? How does it compare with that of non-SEN children?

RQ 2: What is the attitude to learning English of children with SEN pre- and post--intervention? How does it compare with that of non-SEN children?

Participants

The participants were 74 young learners, of whom 28 with SEN (38%) (see Table 1). The study took place in an inclusive primary schools in Krakow, Poland and it was conducted in four classes, two 1st and two 3rd grade ones. There were 11 SEN pupils in classes 1a and 1b (26%), and 17 in classes 3a and 3b (55%). The participants' identities are kept hidden in the paper through changing their names embedded within the paper.

Table 1. Participants in the action research

Class	SEN Participants n (%)	Non-SEN Participants n (%)	Total (n)
1a	7 (33)	14 (67)	21
1b	4 (18)	18 (82)	22
3a	7 (54)	8 (46)	13
3b	10 (55)	8 (45)	18
Total	28 (38)	46 (62)	74

Source: own study.

Out of the total number of 22 pupils in class 1a, 21 were treated as participants of AR. Out of them, 7 participants (33%) were considered by the researchers as having SEN, as follows: there were 4 participants with psycho-pedagogical statements of the need for special education due to physical disability – aphasia (n = 3) and, autism (n =1), and 3 others with psycho-pedagogical opinions issued due to social maladjustment (n = 2) and ADHD (n = 1).

There were 22 pupils in class 1b, of whom 4 (18%) had SEN. They had psycho-pedagogical statements of the need for special education, due to physical disability (n = 1: a flaccid muscular system, articulatory disorders, behavioural problems, learning difficulties, a low degree of emotional and social maturity), physical disability (n = 1: hyperactivity with concentration deficits, low linguis-

tic ability on the borderline of mild intellectual disability, inharmonious development), autism (n = 1), and mild intellectual disability (n = 1).

Strictly speaking, 15 pupils attended class 3a, of whom 13 were treated as research participants. Two children with autism did not participate in English lessons. There were 3 participants (23%) who had PP statements due to the risk of social maladjustment (n = 1), mild intellectual disability (n = 1), and physical disability (n = 1: deformation of skull bones, epilepsy, behavioural disorders). Additionally, on the application of the class tutor, 7 special cards with pupils' individual needs (PL: Karta Indywidualnych Potrzeb Ucznia) were issued, due to difficulties in communication with peers (n = 1), a speech impediment (n = 1), educational failures (n = 1), learning difficulties in Polish language education (n = 1), strong mathematical talent (n = 3). Although gifted pupils fall into the SEN category, their mathematical talents did not manifest themselves during English lessons in either positive or negative ways, so they were not treated as SEN cases in that research. Overall, 7 pupils from grade 3a (54%) were treated as SEN subjects.

Out of the total number of 18 pupils in class 3b, 10 (55%) were considered by the researchers as having SEN. There were 4 SEN participants who had psycho-pedagogical statements due to behavioural disorders (n = 2), mild intellectual disability (n = 1), and physical disability (n = 1: pineal gland cyst, epilepsy, retardation of fine and gross motor functions). There were 4 more participants with psycho-pedagogical assessments due to school difficulties (n = 1), difficulties in mastering reading and writing skills (n = 1), difficulties in mastering learning strategies and of being at the risk of dysorthography and dysgraphia (n = 2). Additionally, 6 special cards with pupils' individual needs were issued by the class tutor due to a talent for mathematics and natural history (n = 1), mathematical talent and an interest in reading (n = 1), artistic talent (n = 1), a talent for mathematics, natural history, Polish-language education and an interest in reading (n = 1), difficulties in social relations and a low degree of emotional maturity (n = 1), and difficulties in social relations and in conforming to group norms (n = 1). Again, only two pupils from this group who had difficulties in social relations were treated as SEN participants in the study.

Research instruments

The numerical data answering the first research question concerning the linguistic attainment of children with SEN and its comparison with that of non-SEN children were collected from language tests administered during the

action research project. The participants' linguistic achievement was measured by means of tests for measuring lexical (both receptive and productive), translation, spelling, and reading achievement.

The receptive (passive knowledge, word comprehension) and the productive (active knowledge, word production) linguistic results of children with and without SEN in grades 1 and 3 were examined. In each class 70 vocabulary items were tested. Additionally, the 3rd-graders were also evaluated on their writing/spelling and reading comprehension skills. These abilities were not tested in grade 1, because younger children were only taught orally.

The data for the second research question were gathered in an oral attitude test, which was carried out at the beginning as well as at the end of the action research project to see any changes in the subject's attitude before and after the intervention. This test involved 10 statements concerning learning English as a foreign language and a three-degree rating scale for expressing personal attitudes.

Results

The rate of the ultimate linguistic attainment

In Figures 1 and 2 the word-comprehension and word-production results are shown for grade 1 classes. Figures 3 and 4 demonstrate receptive and productive lexical results for grade 3 classes. Figure 5 shows 3rd-graders' spelling abilities, while Figure 6 presents their reading comprehension skills.

The green line marks the mean score in percentage terms of children without any psychological-pedagogical (PP) diagnosis, whereas the orange line defines the mean for all children with SEN. In addition, the mean scores of individual pupils with SEN have been included in order to see the distribution of their results relative to the two group mean values, i.e. non-SEN and SEN, as well as to spot any discrepancies in linguistic achievement.

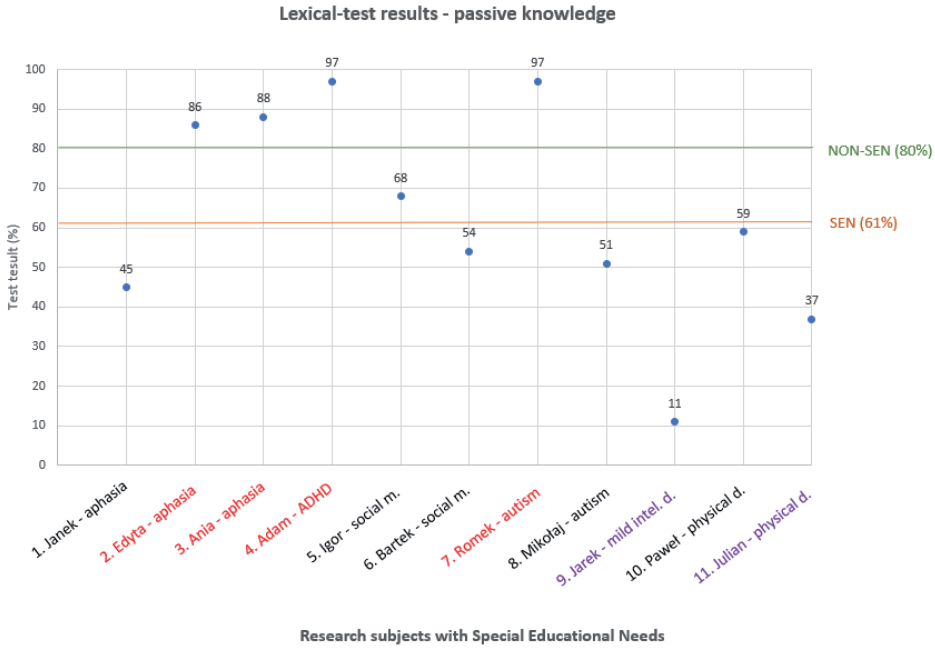

Figure 1. Lexical-test results in grade 1 – passive knowledge

Source: own study.

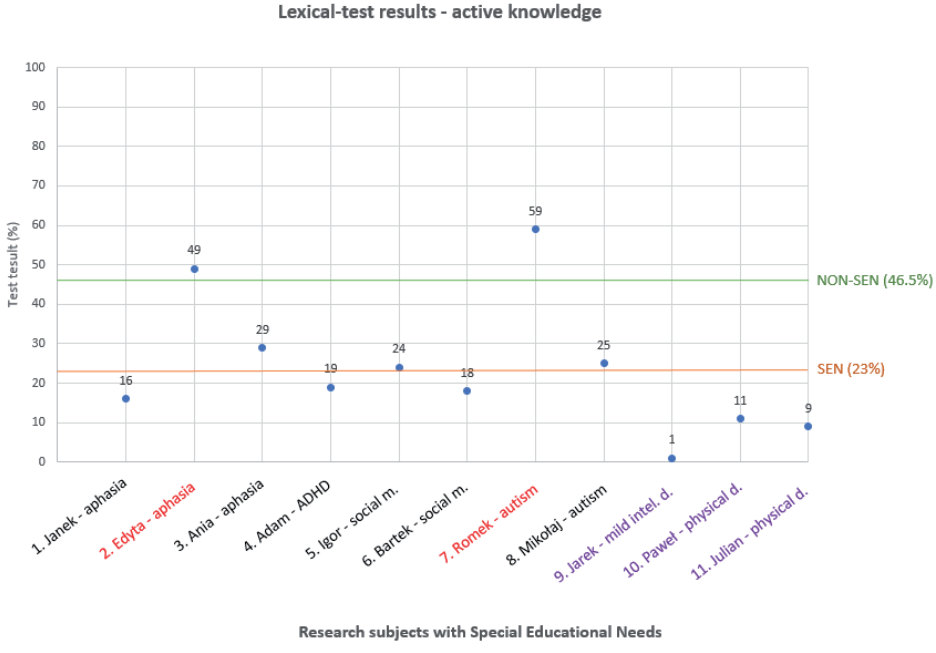

Figure 2. Lexical-test results in grade 1 – active knowledge

Source: own study.

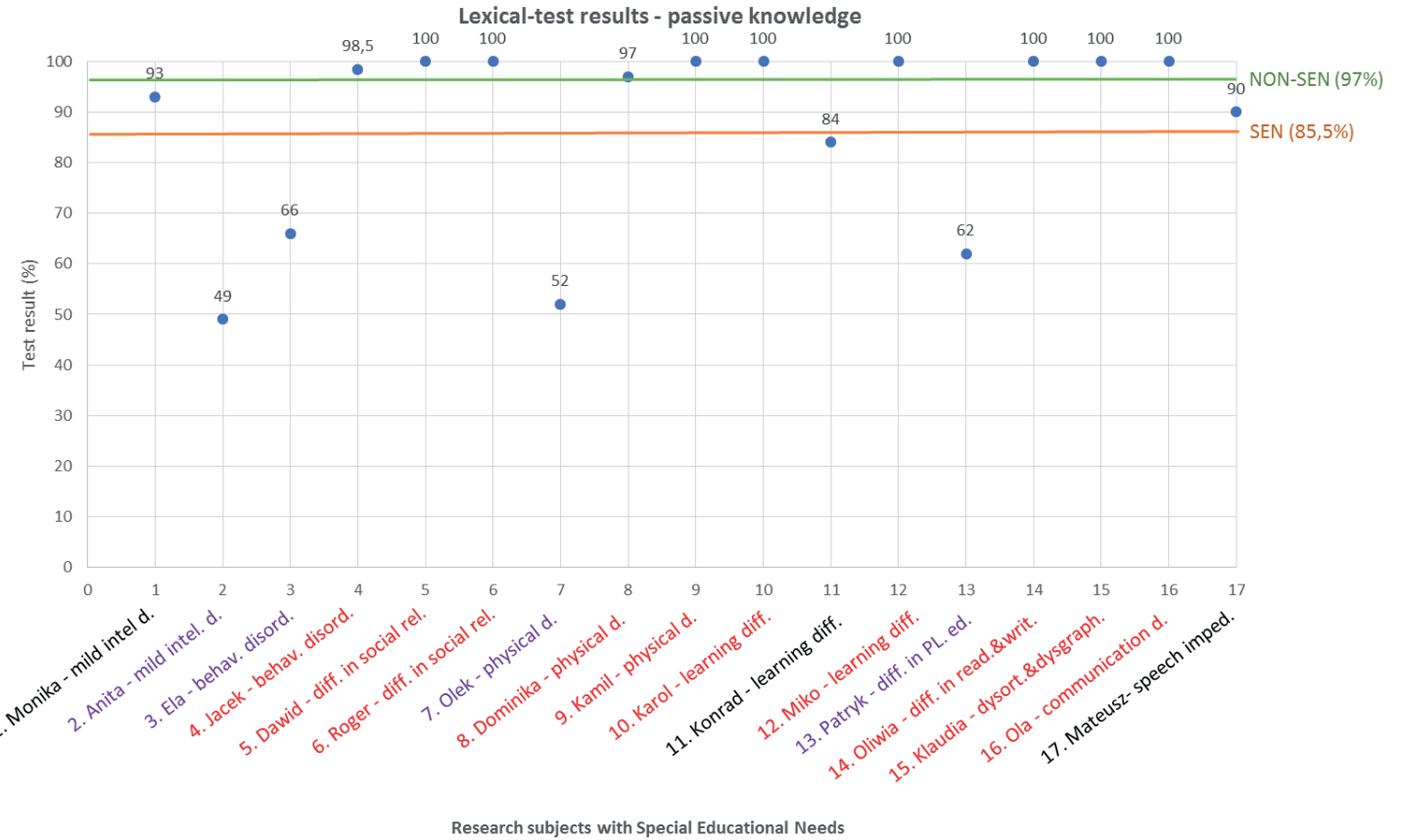

Figure 3. Lexical-test results in grade 3 – passive knowledge

Source: own study.

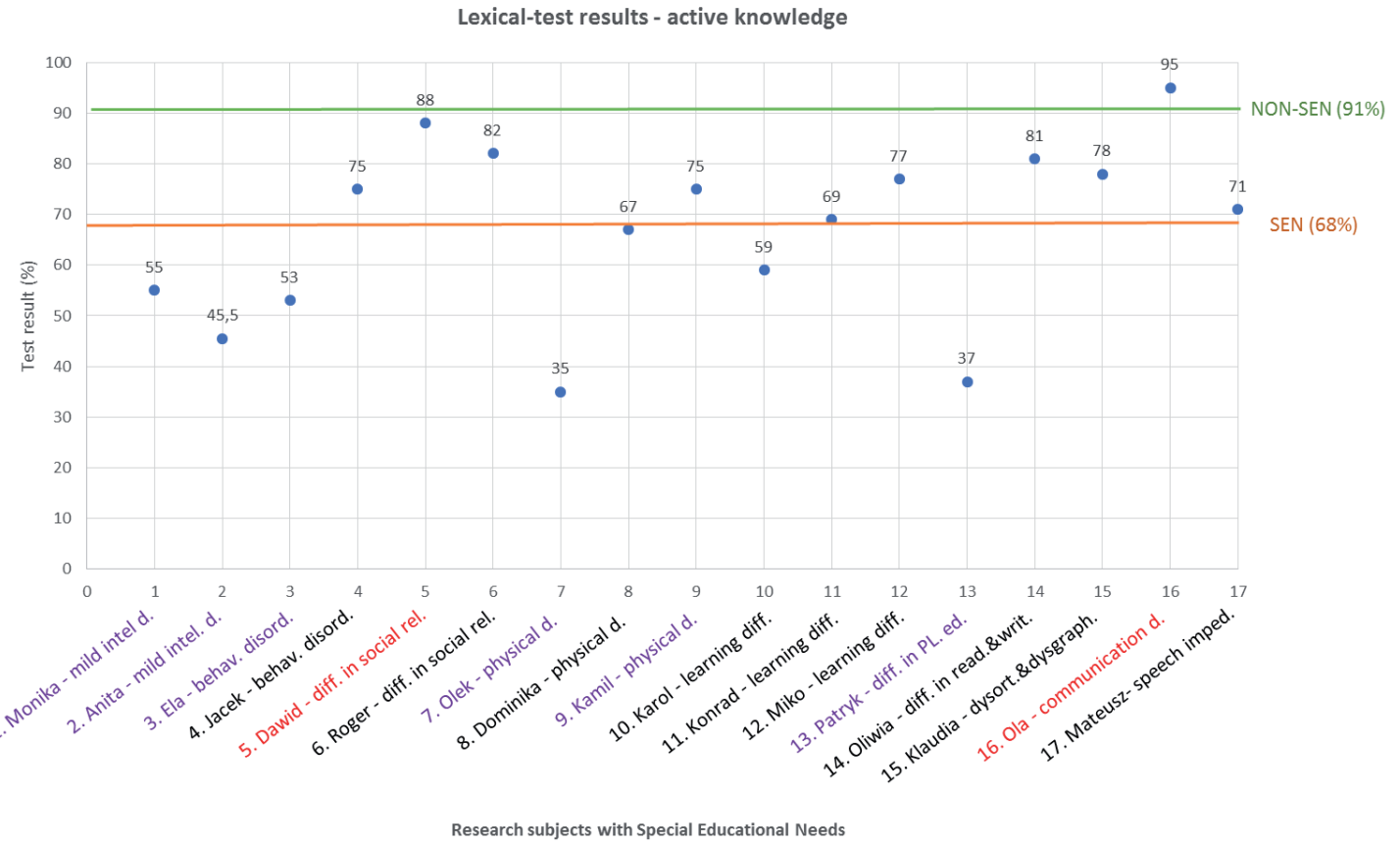

Figure 4. Lexical-test results in grade 3 – active knowledge

Source: own study.

When it comes to the lexical-test results of 1st-graders (Figures 1 and 2), the mean percentage scores of SEN children as compared with the non-SEN children are lower by 19% in word-comprehension and 23.5% in word-production tests. Also, there are noteworthy differences in the total amount of lexis acquired either passively or actively within each group – SEN (61% as opposed to 23%) and non-SEN (80% as opposed to 46.5%). The SEN group's mean score in word-production tests is lower by 38%, while the difference in the non-SEN group is 33.5%. These observations demonstrate that in general SEN children perform worse than their peers with no PP diagnoses, although with a few exceptions. Moreover, a great discrepancy in the mean scores can also be noted. The results of SEN participants ranged from 11% to 97% in the receptive and from 1% to 59% in the productive testing.

When looking and the lexical test results of the 3rd graders (Figures 3 and 4), it can be concluded that their linguistic gain in the intervention time was greater than that of the 1st-graders. Undoubtedly, their age, as well as longer experience in FL learning, played a role.

As for the linguistic performance of SEN pupils, many of them (10 out of 17) achieved equal or even higher scores as compared to the mean of the non-SEN children in the passive knowledge of target lexical items. Still, the mean percentage scores of SEN children as compared with the non-SEN children were lower by 19% in comprehension and 23.5% in production tests. Likewise, in grade 1, there were differences in the total amount of lexis acquired either passively or actively within each group – SEN (85.5% as opposed to 68%) and non-SEN (97% as opposed to 91%). However, the discrepancy of scores was much higher in the SEN group (17.5%) – ranging from 49% to 100%, than in the non-SEN group (only 6%). This means that children with no PP diagnoses were able to recall the learnt words and phrases with greater ease. Whatever was understood and remembered (Figure 3), could be retrieved from memory and uttered (Figure 4) or written down (Figure 5).

Research participants in grade 3 were also tested on their spelling skills (Figure 5). While the performance of non-SEN pupils was satisfactory, with a mean level of correctness around 91%, the mean result of SEN pupils was lower by 45%. For instance, Anita diagnosed with mild intellectual disability, Olek with physical disability and Patryk having difficulties in the Polish language education underperformed. Anita was not able to write any target words correctly, while Olek's and Patryk's scores were only 12% and 17%, respectively.

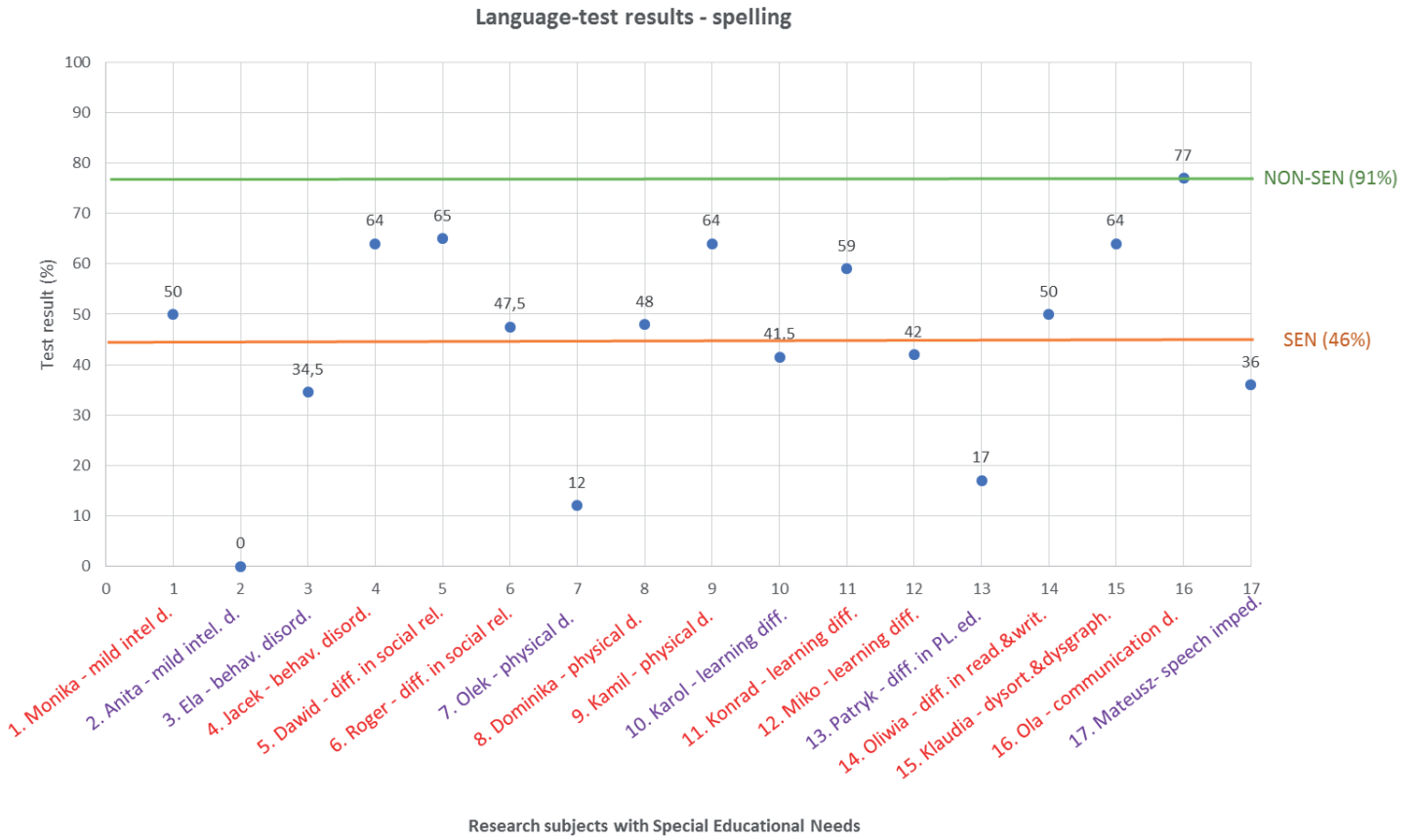

Figure 5. Language-test results in grade 3 – spelling skills

Source: own study.

Table 2. Examples of spelling errors made by children with SEN

SEN	Examples of spelling errors						
	Ommiss.	Substit/	Trans-Posit.	Insert.	Capital.	Ll-d.	Assoc.
Mild intel. dis.	*Japn* for *Japan*, *smel* for *smell*	*Erance* for *France*					
Behav. disord.	*arport* for *airport*		*caly* for *clay*	*traine* for *train*	*spain* for *Spain*	*patata* for *potato*, *pejper* for *paper*	*her* for *hear*
Diff. in social r.	*Spin* for *Spain*, *tiket* for *ticket*, *plan* for *plane*	*buc* for *bus*				*czard* for *card*	*English* for *Great Britain*, *boot* for *boat*
Physical dis.	*Span* for *Spain*, *hert* for *heart*	*plastis* for *plastic*		*coard* for *card*	*france* for *France*	*czard* for *card*, *potejto* for *potato*, *stempl* for *stamp*, *tiuzdej* for *Tuesday*, *stadion* for *station*	*test* for *taste*, *Italia* for *Italy*, *penelope* for *envelope*
Learning diff.	*wod* for *wool*, *wol* for *wool*	*bax* for *box*, *totato* for *potato*			*japan* for *Japan*, *italy* for *Italy*	*Łendej* for *Wednesday*	*espania* for *Spain*
Diff. in Polish	*stap* for *stamp*	*Great Dritain* for *Great Britain*				*kotlet* for *chocolate*, *brytany* for *Great Britain*	
Diff. in reading &writing		*max* for *wax*, *cley* for *clay*, *cord* for *card*, *Grecce* for *Greece*		*parper* for *paper*		*aport* for *aiport*	*small* for *smell*
Diff. in dysort.& dysgraph.	*lather* for *leather*	*wox* for *wax*, *smeel* for *smell*			*poland* for *Poland*	*łol* for *wool*	
Comm. dis.						*szokoled* for *chocolate*	
Speech imped.				the *AUSE* for *the USA*			

Source: own study.

In order to illustrate the types of error which recurred in the study, Cook's (1999) typology will be used, which distinguishes four main types of spelling error: omission, substitution, transposition and insertion (OSTI). Additionally, capitalization errors, L1-dependent errors and errors stemming from associations with other similar FL words will be included. Table 2 presents some examples of errors made by children with various SEN. Based on the analysis of SEN learners' written tests, the researcher observed the following main types of spelling error: phonological (when a phoneme is not represented by a grapheme, e.g. "stap" for stamp), orthographic (when the letter/letters used to represent the phoneme is/are incorrect or a spelling rule is not applied, e.g. "cley" for clay), transposition (when the correct representation of phonemes is selected but two adjacent phonemes occur in the wrong sequence, e.g. "haer" for hear), L1-dependent (e.g. "łol" for wool).

In the AR, 3rd grade participants were also tested on their reading comprehension skills of a simple text when aided with pictures illustrating the context. As shown in the results from Figure 6, SEN learners did not differ much from non-SEN peers and the vast majority of them understood the text, which they proved by answering detailed questions.

What the researcher observed, however, is that some (5 out of 17) SEN learners would use a pencil or another tool (e.g. a ruler) to help themselves read and not lose track. No child without SEN adapted this strategy or objected to taking the test. On the contrary, 4 SEN participants took evasive action before undertaking the reading task in the end.

- Jacek (behavioural disorders) – "I can't [read]. I can only slap others in the face." (PL original: „Nie umiem [czytać]. Umiem tylko dobrze lać po pysku.");
- Ola (communication difficulties with peers) – was not willing to read because of a previous disagreement and conflict with Karol, at whom she shouted: "Shut up! Your mother is a big mother!" (PL original: "Zamknij mordę! Twoja mama to big mama!");
- Patryk (difficulties in Polish-language education) – "I'm not going to read, because my knee hurts." (PL orignal: "Nie będę czytał, bo boli mnie kolano.");
- Anita (mild intellectual disability) – "My mother doesn't buy me books. But she might buy me one today, if she gets the [welfare] benefit… When she gets some money." (PL original: „Mama mi książek nie kupuje. Ale dzisiaj chyba kupi… Jak dostanie z opieki [społecznej]. Jak pieniądze mama dostanie.").

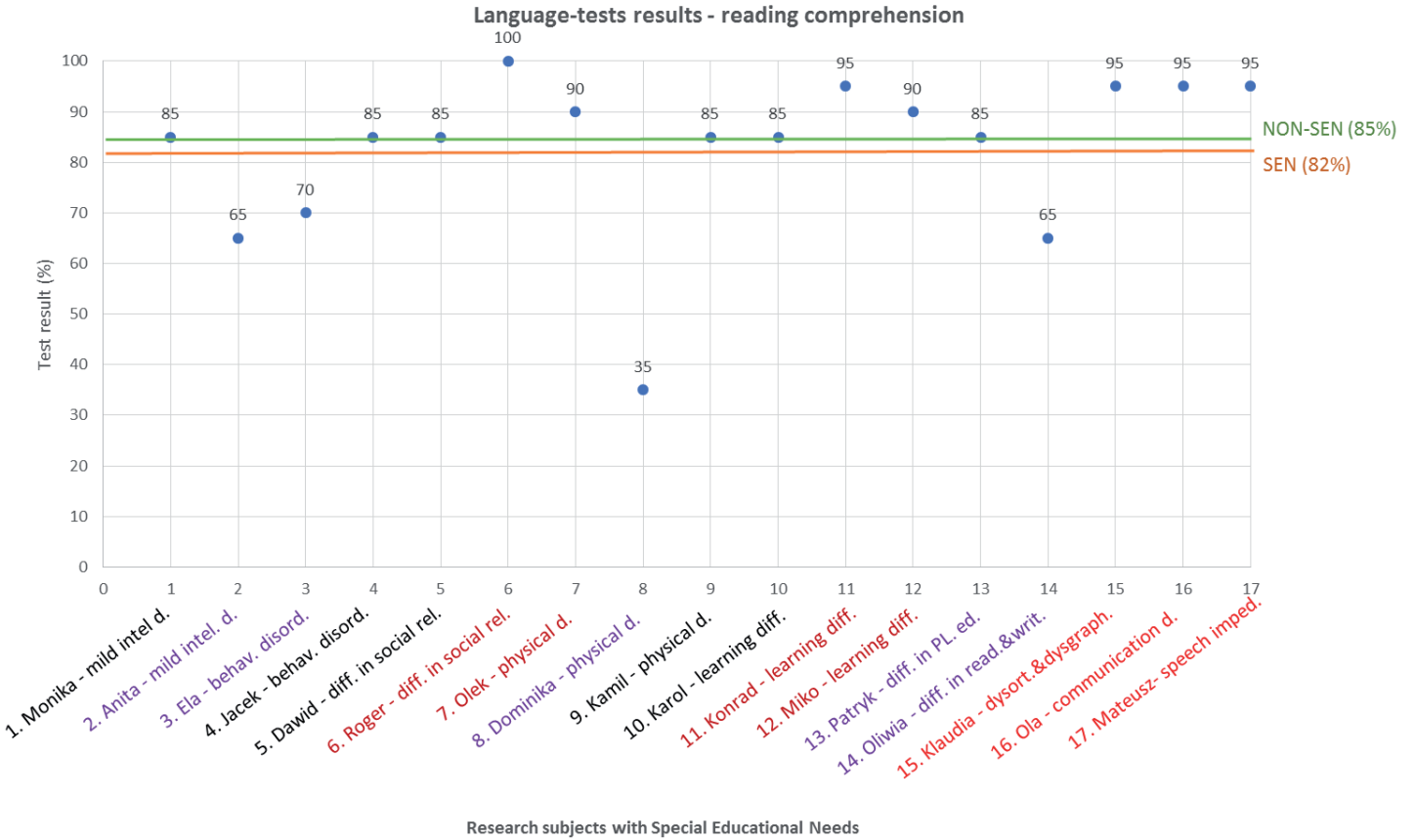

Figure 6. Language-test results in grade 3 – reading comprehension skills

Source: own study.

The results presented in Figures 1–6 and in Table 2 will be analysed and discussed in the Discussion section.

The attitude to learning English pre- and post-intervention

The data for answering research question 2, concerning the attitude to learning English of children with SEN pre- and post-intervention, and how it compared with that of non-SEN children, were obtained in two oral attitude tests. The tests were carried out in Polish, the children's mother tongue, before and after the action research. The aim of this part of the study was to see whether there was any change in the attitude to learning English of the research participants as a result of the intervention.

Each child was asked to take a stance on 10 statements concerning learning English as a foreign language, stating YES, NO, or SO-SO:

I. I like learning English.
II. English is easy for me.
III. I prefer learning English with the whole class/with other classmates, to learning alone.
IV. I like learning new words.
V. I like singing songs in English.
VI. At home, I like boasting about what I learned during English lessons.
VII. I like it when the teacher reads books, tells stories in English.
VIII. I like watching cartoons in English.
IX. I like drama activities in English.
X. I like playing games in English.

In order to analyse the change in the attitude of SEN subjects pre- and post-intervention, Figures 7 and 8 can be juxtaposed. As can be observed, SEN children's attitude to learning English post-AR improved in all 10 areas, which means that the intervention was effective and beneficial. Most importantly, before the intervention, only 39% enjoyed learning the FL, supporting the previous research on learners' attitudes (Courtney et al. 2017), while the percentage rose to 78% after the project. The number doubled. Also, one of the most-striking changes in attitude concerns the SEN subjects' stance on whether learning English seemed to be easy for them or not. The improvement was 56%.

Another observation is that the preference for learning English with the whole class or alone might be rather related to personality than resulting from the classroom situation. Although post-intervention more children started to

like the shared-learning experience, the percentage did not rise significantly (from 54% to 61%).

What is more, SEN subjects' attitude towards various teaching techniques became more open and curious. There were more "yes" and "so-so" than decisive "no" answers, for example more than half the SEN pupils (52%) were not in favour of watching video cartoons or performing drama activities pre-intervention. Their rather-circumspect outlook changed in the course of the action research. Only 7% of them still disliked these teaching techniques post-intervention. By the same token, children with SEN generally got to enjoy other techniques as well. Before the AR, 48% of SEN pupils liked and 15% did not mind singing songs in English, while after the project an additional 21% grew to be fond of music in the foreign-language classroom (69% in total).

All in all, the results of the study of the attitude to learning English as a foreign language of children with SEN pre- and post-intervention indicate a positive change. This observation means that the intervention lessons, based on the Polish national core curriculum and the Bingo textbook series, were effective, not only in terms of the linguistic, but also the motivational and attitudinal development of SEN participants.

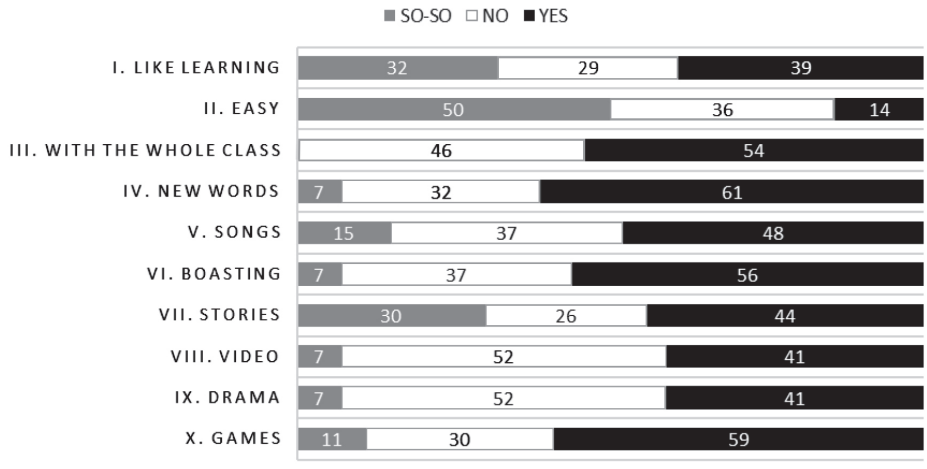

Figure 7. The attitude to learning English of SEN subjects pre-intervention (%)

Source: own study.

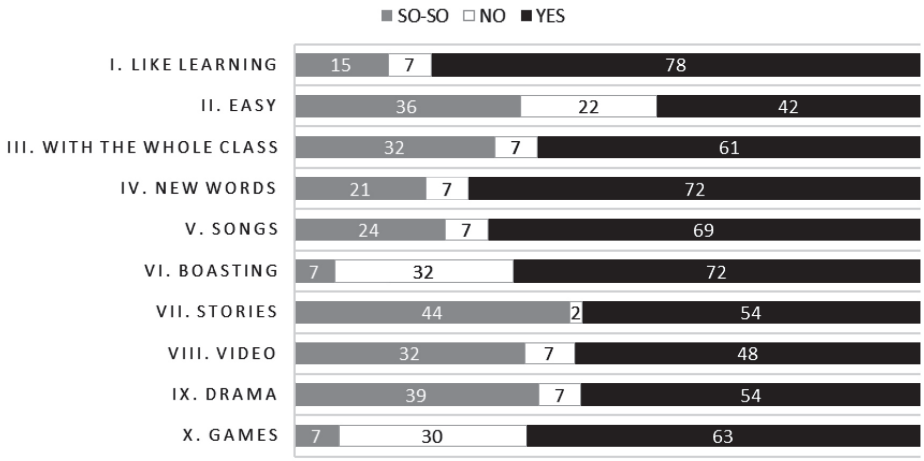

Figure 8. The attitude to learning English of SEN subjects post-intervention (%)

Source: own study.

Based on the analysis of Figure 7 referring to SEN children, as compared to Figure 9 presenting non-SEN pupils' attitudes, it can be observed that more non-SEN children than those with SEN (56% vs. 39%) seemed to definitely enjoy learning English pre-intervention. Also, a greater percentage of non-SEN pupils perceived this language as easy to learn. Still, in both groups around a half of the subjects views learning English as neither easy nor difficult.

What is interesting to note, all research subjects could say with confidence whether they preferred learning English together with the whole class or by themselves. The majority of children were in favour of learning with other classmates – 54% of SEN and 67% of non-SEN pupils.

As quite characteristic of children, no matter if manifesting SEN or not, a comparable percentage liked boasting about what they learned during FL lessons. Also, a considerable number of pupils proved to be curious about English lexis and liked learning it – 61% of SEN and 87% of non-SEN pupils.

In general, when it comes to different teaching/learning techniques (such as singing songs, listening to stories, watching videos, acting out/role plays, playing language games), non-SEN children seemed to have a more positive and open attitude, which is indicated by the longer black lines in Figure 9 than in Figure 7.

In order to check whether attitudes towards learning English as a foreign language of non-SEN participants changed post-intervention, Figures 9 and 10 can be comparatively analysed. Indeed, the young learners' attitude did im-

prove. After the intervention, 28% of them grew fond of learning the language – 56% pre- as compared to 84% post-study, and it seemed to become slightly easier. At the beginning, more than a half of the participating children (52%) claimed that English was not easy to learn. However, the level of challenge decreased in their eyes in the course of the AR.

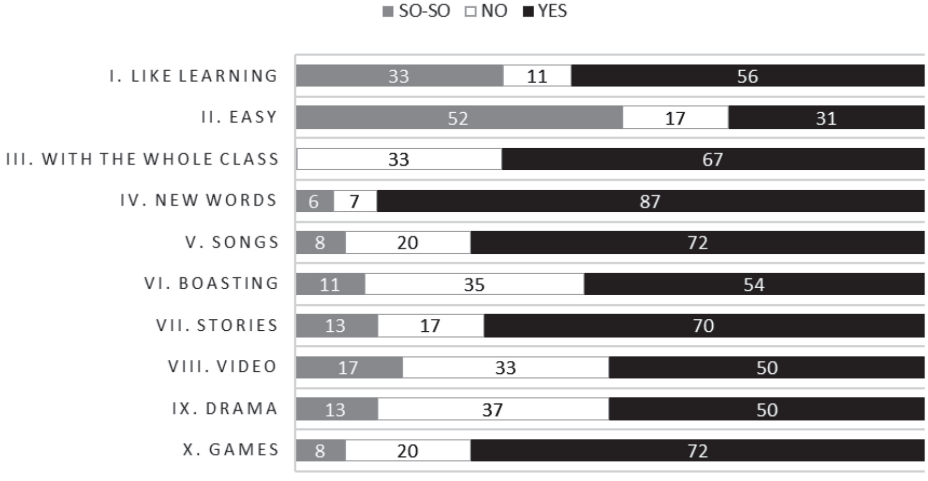

Figure 9. The attitude to learning English of non-SEN subjects pre-intervention (%)

Source: own study.

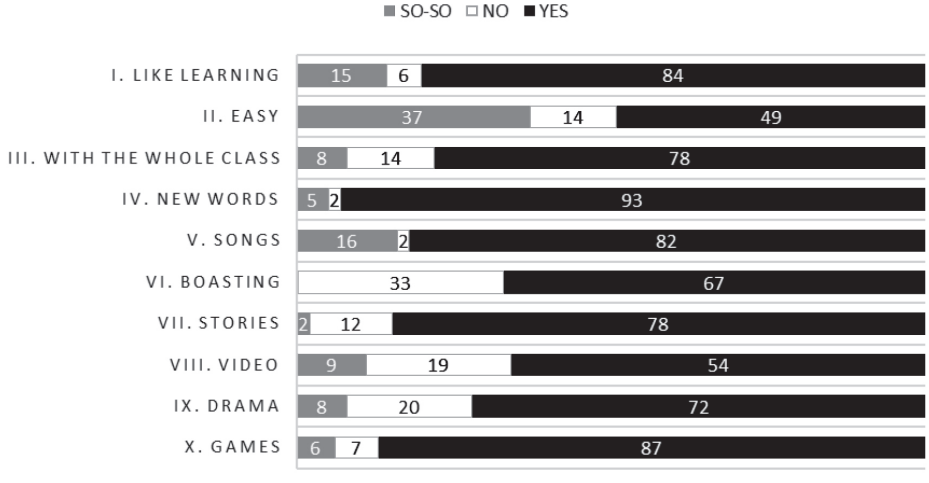

Figure 10. The attitude to learning English of non-SEN subjects post-intervention (%)

Source: own study.

To conclude, Figures 8 and 10 present children's attitude to learning English post-intervention. In both the SEN and non-SEN groups the "yes" (green) answers dominate, which means that the intervention was effective and beneficial. It can be seen that 78% of SEN and 84% of non-SEN participants liked learning the language, although a considerably lower percentage (less than a half of the respondents) considered it easy – 42% and 49%, respectively.

Discussion

The study focused on the linguistic achievements (RQ1) and attitude responses (RQ2) of 74 young learners, of whom 28 were with SEN = 38%, in two inclusive classes of grade 1 and two inclusive classes of grade 3. On comparing the total amount of acquired lexis (70 items) by children with and without SEN, there was a difference in the final achievement. Overall, the mean scores of the children diagnosed with SEN, in both groups and in both the receptive and productive testing, were lower than the mean scores of the non-SEN children (cf. Figures 1–4). Furthermore, a noticeable difference in the total amount of lexis acquired passively versus actively was observed in all research subjects, with a superior development of the passive lexicon. The results in spelling tests (grade 3) also proved to be to the SEN pupils' disadvantage (cf. Figure 5). However, the reading/comprehension skills of the majority of the research subjects by the end of their lower-primary education, when presented with simple textual material aided with visual contextual clues, seemed to be comparable (cf. Figure 6).

By and large, the linguistic test results demonstrated that the young learners with SEN were able to learn some English, although to varying degrees of ultimate gain, in proportion to their individual predispositions and (dis)abilities, and their level of motivation as well as the amount of effort. As for the discrepancies in the results, some pupils with SEN outperformed non-SEN peers, while others underachieved, which corroborates previous research indicating the significance of contextual factors for FL learning (Mihaljević Djigunović 2009). The three most-outstanding cases are Edyta and Ania, diagnosed with aphasia, as well as Romek, diagnosed with autism. Edyta and Romek's results were higher than the mean scores of non-SEN children, while Romek even proved himself to be the best FL learner. Edyta's success in learning English might seem quite surprising in view of her PP diagnosis and serious deficiencies in L1, but she had undergone an intensive speech therapy and training in compensatory learning

strategies, which surely had a positive impact on her learning a foreign language as well. Moreover, the girl put in a lot of conscious effort and was always eager to actively participate in the lessons, strongly supporting the importance of active participation for success in FL learning (CAST 2011; Norwich 2008). Ania also outperformed expectations in the receptive knowledge of vocabulary, although achieving lower results in productive knowledge, which could have been expected considering her disorder, of the motor/expressive type.

On the other hand, the extreme case of Jarek, diagnosed with a mild intellectual disability, can be viewed as an example of underperformance. The boy's linguistic gain was practically none. However, it should not be concluded that his participation in the AR was pointless or that he should not learn the FL at all. During the study, the boy's enthusiasm was observed, which is in line with the previous studies that stress the significance of motivation (Nikolov 2009) and the inclusive teaching practice (Kavkler et al. 2015). Jarek would often point to different pictures and objects, imitate gestures and repeat the target lexical items. The tasks stimulated him cognitively and physically, which also had a therapeutic effect on his well-being in the classroom.

In the attempt to identify the most- and the least-successful SEN learners, Ola stands out as a high-achiever, while Anita and Patryk as low-achievers. Ola was not diagnosed in a psychological-pedagogical counselling centre, but a special card stating her individual needs (PL: Karta Indywidualnych Potrzeb Ucznia) was issued at school on the application of the class tutor who observed the girl's difficulties in communication with peers (in L1) as well as her mathematical talent. Ola had low self-esteem, could not control her emotions, and had difficulties in reacting appropriately to incoming stimuli. She was undergoing sociotherapy. Her communication disorder did not influence negatively the FL gain. She was not tested in role-plays or real life-like simulations with peers. In the case of Anita, she was diagnosed with mild intellectual disability (MID). Although her results were low as compared to other children, she was able to remember and recall around half of the target lexical items, so her gain was greater than that of Jarek's from grade 1, a boy also with the diagnosis of MID. When it comes to Patryk, he did not have a PP statement, but a special card, issued on account of his difficulties in Polish-language education noted by the class tutor. The boy had difficulties in phonemic hearing and processing, visual-auditory coordination, reading, and shaping letters correctly. He also had a limited range of L1 vocabulary. Patryk attended remedial classes, speech therapy and corrective gymnastics. His deficiencies in the mother tongue were transferred to FL learning, which is evident from his test results.

The data obtained in two oral attitude tests were analysed to answer RQ2, concerning the change in the attitude of SEN subjects pre- and post-intervention (cf. Figures 7 and 8, respectively). As shown by the study, the number of SEN children who enjoyed learning English as a FL doubled after the action research, which contradicts previous research showing fluctuation of motivation with learners' age (Mihaljević Djigunović 2009). What is more, one of the most-attention-grabbing changes involved the pupils' stance on whether learning English seemed to be easy to them or not. The improvement was by 56%. Likewise, children' attitude towards various teaching techniques became more open and they became more willing to participate in novel games and tasks. In the light of the results of the study on the attitude to learning English of the research subjects with SEN pre- and post-AR, a positive change was indicated. This observation means that the intervention lessons can be considered effective not only in terms of their purely linguistic achievement, but also considering the motivational and attitude development of most children with SEN participating in the research project. By the same token, the attitude to English-language learning of the majority of children not diagnosed with SEN improved as well (cf. Figures 9 and 10), which indicates that the technique used in the course of the action research were advantageous to the four inclusive classes, and had a positive influence on the attitude to learning English as a foreign language of both the SEN and non-SEN subjects. It can be speculated that the linguistic content was presented to young learners in a more age-appropriate, sensory-stimulating and attractive way, which contributed to the development of a more positive outlook and less inhibitions (CAST 2011). Although non-SEN children's attitudes to various teaching techniques could be considered quite positive even before the intervention took place, the pupils reported enjoying them even more after the research project, which indicates the significance of contextual factors, the teacher's role above all, for children's FL learning motivation.

Likewise, pre-intervention, non-SEN children's stance seemed to be more resolute and mindful. Non-SEN pupils gave the less-hesitant or indecisive replies "so-so". The only point on which the SEN participants replied in more affirmative terms was about boasting at home about what they had learnt during English lessons. It can be speculated that the willingness to share with parents or "significant others" their achievements in learning the foreign language can be of a psychological-motivational origin. This finding further supports the importance of parental involvement for children's FL learning (Pfenninger and Singleton 2019; Rokita-Jaśkow and Ellis 2019).

Conclusion

What arises from the study is that children with apparently the same diagnosis/statement of the need for special education (e.g. autism or mild intellectual disability) differ in the range, extent and rate of their FL development, and thus each case should be treated with due caution. The contributing factors accounting for the discrepancies in linguistic achievement can be the following:

- the type and the severity of the disorder, combined with the intensity of the therapy and the corrective-compensatory classes,
- difficulties in specific cognitive processes (i.e. perception, working memory, metacognitive difficulty; mental operations involving generalising, comparing and contrasting, planning and predicting),
- difficulties in focusing and maintaining attention, especially in the face of distractions; frequent hyperactive and/or impulsive behaviour; persistent emotional states and behaviour which disrupted learning and school performance,
- speech and communication disorders; L1 deficiencies which affected foreign language learning (problems with phonological, syntactic, semantic coding),
- disorders marked by impaired social interaction; deficits in adaptive behaviour,
- poor motor skills, visual-hearing-kinaesthetic analysis and coordination,
- the level of intellectual development,
- poor sense of self and low motivation for academic tasks if there is no special assistance in the areas of difficulty (possible low self-esteem, insecurity, or overdependence),
- the role of teaching assistants (e.g. Romek was supported by a personal teaching assistant, while other SEN children had one assistant per class who had to direct his/her attention to everyone) (Król-Gierat 2020).

Apart from the purely linguistic gains, the therapeutic aspects of learning a foreign language for children with aphasia should not be marginalised. First of all, it can bring invaluable emotional benefits, such as raising one's own self-esteem and self-confidence, already found as significant factors in learning (Cortney et al. 2017; Mihaljević Djigunović 2009). Moreover, some minor deficits in the mother tongue can also be compensated when attending foreign-language lessons. Learning a FL can positively influence L1 through raising metalinguistic awareness. The FL experience stimulates the left hemisphere, enriches the range of concepts/vocabulary, and provides training of the speech organs.

The attitude towards the learning situation has a great impact on motivation, and in turn on the ultimate attainment. This phenomenon also works vice versa – good results in FL learning boost motivation and contribute to the development of a more positive attitude to learning the language. SEN children might need more reinforcement and confirmation of their potential and skills than non-SEN peers due to their general learning difficulties.

All things considered, the intervention had a positive influence on the attitude to learning English as a foreign language of both SEN and non-SEN subjects. Nevertheless, this effect might have also been a result of the so-called situational motivation phenomenon described by Nikolov (1999). Significantly, the intervention improved the linguistic results and attitudes of both SEN and non-SEN pupils.

Although the validity of the action research was limited to specific groups of pupils, and the results cannot be extrapolated to the wider population, they can still be shared and discussed with other practitioners to help compare and contrast their experiences. Future research should focus on interaction dynamics of linguistic gains and affective factors in inclusive young learner FL classrooms in other teaching contexts worldwide, especially on how both are shaped by teacher competences for applying the whole-child approach. Also, children's attitudes to a variety of inclusive classroom activities should be further studied for supporting the development of preservice and inservice FL teachers' pedagogical strategies that can contribute to the effectiveness of their classroom practice.

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SUMMARY

The present paper reports on the findings of an action research project on the effectiveness of inclusion on a sample of 74 lower-primary English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. It was an attempt to diagnose linguistic and attitudinal differences in learning English as a foreign language between children with and without Special Educational Needs (SEN). The results demonstrate that young learners with SEN are able to learn some English within their individual predispositions and (dis)abilities, psycho-physical development and educational needs. However, even children with apparently the same diagnosis (e.g. ADHD) differ in the range, extent and rate of their foreign language (FL) development. The paper aims at discerning the contributing factors accounting for the discrepancies. Moreover, apart from the purely linguistic gains, the potential therapeutic benefits of learning a FL for children with SEN should not be overlooked.

KEYWORDS: Special Educational Needs, inclusion, young learners, linguistic attainment, attitude development

STRESZCZENIE

Artykuł przedstawia wyniki projektu badawczego dotyczącego skuteczności integracji na próbie 74 uczniów szkół podstawowych uczących się języka angielskiego jako obcego. Głównym celem było dostrzeżenie różnic w zakresie osiągnięć językowych i postaw między dziećmi ze specjalnymi potrzebami (SPE) edukacyjnymi i bez nich. Wyniki pokazują, że dzieci z SPE są w stanie nauczyć się języka angielskiego w ramach swoich indywidualnych predyspozycji i zdolności, rozwoju psychofizycznego i potrzeb edukacyjnych. Jednak nawet dzieci z pozornie taką samą diagnozą (np. ADHD) różnią się zakresem i tempem osiągania postępów. Artykuł ma na celu zidentyfikowanie czynników przyczyniających się do tych rozbieżności. Poza aspektami czysto językowymi nie należy zapominać o potencjalnych korzyściach terapeutycznych płynących z nauki języka obcego.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: specjalne potrzeby edukacyjne, integracja, dzieci, osiągnięcia językowe, rozwój postaw

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