

## CAPÍTULO 62

### **PUPILS WITH MILD INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES IN THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM: THE CASE OF AN ANDALUSIAN SCHOOL**

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#### **1. INTRODUCTION**

As stated by the European Commission (2005), the fact that learners with Special Educational Needs (a category within which learners with mild intellectual disabilities are placed) are present in the classroom does not mean that they are included. Moreover, this type of pupils may be excluded in more than one aspect.

Our research is aimed at tackling a phenomenon that has not been satisfactorily studied in Spain, such as the case of pupils with mild intellectual disabilities in the foreign language classroom. We have found a few studies which could describe the teaching and learning processes and contexts taking place in a secondary school language classroom which is attended by this type of pupils. For this reason, we have decided to conduct a case study focused on Athena's learning of English as a Foreign Language (FL) during the third and fourth year of Compulsory Secondary Education. Athena is a state school pupil with an intellectual disability who often sees her learning of the foreign language hindered for reasons going beyond the ones brought about by her own disability. Hence, we have also paid attention to the conditioning factors that come from her close environment (school and family) as well as to her medical history and educational path. We consider that the detailed study of this case may lead us to deeply know the perspectives, beliefs, attitudes and actions of both the pupil and the teaching staff and her family. This may facilitate the development of didactic proposals for innovation to be useful in the context examined, as well as in similar environments.

To the best of our knowledge, there is a dearth of research on the teaching and learning processes of students with mild intellectual disabilities that take place during the secondary education stage of foreign language classrooms in Spanish education contexts. However, we have identified a greater amount of studies carried out on an international scale. Most of this research corpus focuses on the use of different approaches and

methodologies encouraging significant learning of a second and/or third language. On the one hand, we have observed enlightening studies carried out in contexts of linguistic immersion, as for example is the case with French in Canada (Arnett, 2003, 2008, 2010). On the other hand, we have collected researches elaborated in contexts where the FL is not the vehicular language. In this sense we have highlighted studies carried out in Iran (Ghanaat & Fahimniya, 2015; Mohammadian, 2016) and Slovenia (Krapez, 2012).

Additionally, we have reviewed a series of methodological proposals that can be beneficial for learners with intellectual disabilities, among which stand out: *Teaching based on the communicative approach* (Downey & Snyder, 2000; Krapez, 2012); *Total Physical Response* (TPR) (Kleinert et al., 2007; Mohammadian, 2016); *Multi-sensory Education* (Sparks, 2009; Tolbert et al., 2015); *Teaching based on the multiple intelligences approach* (Gardner, 2011); *Explanation of learning strategies* (McColl, 2005; Difino & Lombardino, 2004; Kleinert et al., 2007); *Affective aspects and classroom climate* (Dörnyei & Skehan, 2003; Mohammadian, 2016); *Co-teaching* (European Commission, 2005); *Cooperative learning* (Johnson & Johnson, 1994; European Commission, 2005; LOMCE, 2015); *Use of Information and Communication Technologies* (McColl, 2005; LOMCE, 2015; Tolbert et al., 2015); *Frequent assessment and use of different types of (self-)evaluation* (Difino and Lombardino, 2004)

## **2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The research questions of our study were as follows: 1) What are the characteristics of the contextual framework in which Athena's learning takes place?; 2) What are the instructional practices (methodology), class interactions and didactic materials used by the FL teaching staff?; 3) What are the factors and conditioning factors that influence Athena's learning processes in FL?; 4) Based on the above questions, how has Athena's FL learning developed during the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grades of the secondary education?

## **3. METHOD**

### **3.1. Participants**

In order to preserve participants' privacy, we have used the following pseudonyms:

- Athena: a young female aged of 15 years old at the beginning of the research.

- Alice and Marta, Athena's English co-teachers for two academic years during the research period (who have been teaching English for more than 20 years).
- Athena's Spanish teachers from the IES Hipatia (Athena's secondary school).
- Management and guidance team from the IES Hipatia, and Athena's parents.

### **3.2. Instrument and data collection**

Regarding the method that has guided this research, the ideal methodological strategy to obtain valid answers to the research issues raised is the case study. The investigation was carried out over two academic years (2015-2016 and 2016-2017). The case study has required the use of methods specific to the qualitative paradigm and, more specifically, to ethnographic research (Simons, 2011), including elements specific to biographical-narrative research (Bolívar et al., 2001). In order to do so, we have used the following instruments and strategies to gather information: in-depth and semi-structured interviews, participant observation, documentary analysis, and informal conversations.

As for our chosen epistemology or the method, it is essentially interpretative and constructivist, though the research has contained its own aspects since the beginning (from how to know the characteristic of the critical social approach, the opening step, to the emergence of nuances pertaining to the investigation-action).

The data collection and the interpretation of these have been processes that have maintained a bidirectional and interdependent relationship, following an inductive analytical process of generation of subjects or categories throughout the research (Parlett & Hamilton, 1976). In fact, it was thanks to a period of practically unconscious observation in the school context of Athena, with the consequent data interpretation, at the beginning in a somewhat intuitive way that the research questions of this study began to take shape. We have tried to describe, analyse and interpret the answers to these questions as the research has progressed in a more systematic and precise way, as well as once the research has been completed.

## **4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **4.1. What are the characteristics of the contextual framework in which Athena's learning takes place?**

As to the idiosyncrasy of the Secondary School (IES Hipatia), we have seen how the data extracted from the characteristics of the school where Athena studies make direct reference to a series of problems in the effective implementation of inclusive education in the centre, which has repercussions on its functioning. Among them, stand out:

- The fact that not all secondary schools have created plans, projects or strategies for the treatment of diversity care, specifically the other school located in the same area. This has produced a “call effect” that has increased the number of learners with Special Educational Needs (SEN) and learning difficulties of social origin enrolled in the centre. This has had the effect of increasing the working time of teachers who have to adapt both the teaching materials and their techniques, while at the same time having to face an increase of discipline problems and a reduction in the time available to deal with the rest of pupils individually.
- Families complaining that pupils without SEN or learning difficulties are not being well aided and that the school level is low.
- The fluctuation of the teaching staff (the stable teaching staff does not reach 60%) due to the job instability of the interim teaching staff, as well as transfers procedure solely based on time of service. This has prevented the implementation and sustainability of innovations in the maintenance and refurbishment of an educational centre project designed to address diversity, as well as the need of a larger teaching staff and school facilities aimed at reducing pupil ratio.
- Need for better technical resources such as tablets for all pupils and optimal access to the Internet, without overload, leading to greater customization of teaching.

As regards Athena’s *English teachers’ careers*, they agree that their training in the field of inclusive education mainly began as a result of their incorporation into the school and that it has mostly been characterised by being a self-taught training with occasional support from the Granada Teachers’ Centre. These data collected in our research correspond to what many authors and even institutions such as the European Union maintain regarding the need to reconfigure initial and ongoing training in order to provide foreign language teachers with a greater number of theoretical and practical tools to meet the diversity in the classroom (European Commission, 2005; McColl, 2005; Sánchez Palomino, 2007; Gallego & Rodríguez, 2012; Krapez, 2012; Verdugo & Rodríguez, 2012; Arnett, 2013; Mroz, 2014; Wight, 2015; Russak, 2016; Medina García, 2017).

As far as *Athena's English Classroom* is concerned, the number of pupils present in the class of Athena has oscillated between 27 and 29 among which there have been 4 pupils with SEN and from 5 to 6 with learning difficulties not deriving from disability, which has hindered both the monitoring, as well as the planning and development of the teaching and learning processes of all pupils. According to Verdugo & Rodríguez (2012), it is essential to reduce the ratio from 15 to maximum 20 pupils in the classrooms which have pupils with SEN.

In the same way, the high ratio of pupils has influenced the mood and coexistence of the class, affecting the teaching methodologies and cooperative learning. Consequently, as there is less time to devote to each learner, discipline has occasionally been compromised and at the same time it has not been possible to dedicate enough time to strengthen the relations between learners with SEN and the rest of pupils.

#### **4.2. What are the instructional practices (methodology), class interactions and didactic materials used by the FL teaching staff?**

With regard to the *Methodology followed* by the English teachers, Alice and Marta, we have found that, although there have been attempts to modify some of the less communicative methodology elements by incorporating a greater number of activities aimed at oral expression (carrying out mini-projects), during the 4<sup>th</sup> grade, the methodology implemented has contained a greater number of elements coming from the grammar-translation method. Likewise, most of the class time has been allocated to unidirectional teaching, despite the fact that pupils were organized in working groups. In turn this has made *class dynamics* more difficult, especially due to pupils' location, which prevented some learners such as Athena from paying proper attention to the teacher and the blackboard due to visibility problems. This fact has also resulted in greater difficulty in maintaining the discipline at certain times. Equally, we have observed that in the methodology put into practice the use of the textbook has harboured a predominant weight, as well as the evaluation of learning by heart, especially in pupils with SEN, which is a more characteristic feature of a traditional methodology, as well as the leading role played by Alice, the EFL teacher, mainly as an instructor.

The data presented above are consistent with Isorna et al. (2013) on teaching methodologies used during the stage of secondary education. This research corpus shows that teaching methodologies are usually represented by the teacher's masterly

explanations, the majority use of the textbook, repetitive and by heart learning, as we have illustrated throughout our research. According to several authors, the traditional way of teaching is not recommended for pupils with SEN and/or learning difficulties related to language (McColl, 2005; Sparks, 2009; Krapez, 2012; Arnett, 2013; Wight, 2015; Ghanaat & Fahimniya, 2015; Tolbert et al., 2015; Mohammadian, 2016; Russak, 2016).

Likewise, this traditional way of teaching language, together with the way of implementing cooperative learning, has not had a positive impact on learners in general and, specifically, on the rest of pupils with SEN. In the class time they have worked similarly and have hardly interacted with their classmates and in many occasions they have been forgotten. As recommended by the European Commission (2005) and scholars (Johnson and Johnson, 1994) and even the Organic Act of Education 8/2013, co-operative learning can be an appropriate way of addressing diversity within a foreign language classroom, as long as a number of essential elements such as positive interdependence, individual accountability, social skills, face-to-face interaction, and group processing.

As for the *didactic material and their implementation* with Athena, we have detected a series of deficiencies in the adapted curricular material. In this sense, we have found a recent research conducted by Ghanaat & Fahimniya (2015) which highlights the inadequacy of textbooks for TEFL to learners with intellectual disabilities in Iran. In our case, we have verified that the origin of the deficiencies of the didactic material employed with Athena and the rest of pupils with SEN comes both from the way in which the adaptation has been carried out (experience, training and working conditions of the teachers in charge of carrying it out) and from the material it has been extracted from (digitalisations and modifications of a text book that has not been designed to address diversity, only presents several levels of difficulty for the exams). These shortcomings stand out: predominance of grammar, vocabulary and translation exercises over more communicative activities; reduction of inappropriate or poorly pedagogical cognitive load, activities that require greater use of cognitive processes are often replaced by copying and translation exercises; absence of page numbering, activities and colour pattern; confused statements, which do not correspond to what the exercise or what the activity demands of the pupil; lack of follow-up and/or evaluation.

#### **4.3. What are the factors and conditioning factors that influence Athena's learning processes in FL?**

The data collected pointed out the following factors: 1) *Medical history, socio-educational needs derived from their disability*: the data from the analysis of the medical history of Athena show the origin of the Mild Intellectual Disability that is perinatal type, i.e., is in her premature birth. Most of Athena's socio-educational needs are the result of a Mild Intellectual Disability and appear on a greater or lesser scale, mainly in the manuals by Antequera Maldonado *et al.* (2008), the AAIDD (2011) and the DSM-V (2013), especially with regard to cognitive and emotional development; language development; adaptive development; school development and adaptation; 2) *The close environment and its influence on the learning of Athena's English*: as we have been able to observe throughout the research, there has been a great lack of knowledge on the part of both the school and family environment of Athena with regard to the acceptance and treatment of her disability. Verdugo & Rodríguez (2012) highlight the importance of knowing the needs, beliefs and attitudes that the families of people with intellectual disabilities tend to manifest with the purpose of making that the different socio-educational institutions provide them with a more solid support system and contribute to their empowerment. This lack of knowledge about the socio-educational treatment that the pupil should receive may have had negative effects on the pupil's learning, which in the case of Athena has resulted in a lack of motivation to learn English. To this has been added the fact that in a large part of her family as well as in her circle of friends English learning has hardly had any relevance; 3) *School career, other aspects of disability*: the lack of knowledge about how to deal with Athena's intellectual disability, how to fully include it, has been very present throughout her educational path, as can be seen from data extracted from interviews and informal conversations. Social isolation and school harassment, as well as humiliation, intimidation and verbal aggression on behalf of a teacher during the primary education stage, lack of human and infrastructural resources necessary to address her disability, scarcity and inadequacy of teaching methodologies and didactic materials, absence of communication and collaboration and coordination between school and the family environment. All this has represented a set of factors that have undoubtedly conditioned the learning of Athena, as well as those that her disability entails; 4) *Learning style and interests (e.g. leisure and socio-labour)*: with regard to learning style, according to data from Athena interviews, observation and a small test based on multiple intelligences (*The Connell Multiple Intelligence Questionnaire for Children*), the pupil shows a greater motivation towards learning based on musical and visuospatial activities.

#### **4.4. How has Athena's FL learning developed during the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grades of the Compulsory Secondary Education?**

With regard to *Athena's attitude in the FL class*, we have appreciated that the pupil has had an adequate attitude, though not sufficiently motivated or confident. Consequently, the following aspects have been detrimental to her motivation and safety:

- a) By English teachers: labelling and distinction in class of learners with SEN, including Athena. As we pointed out, learners could be discriminated when it has been referred to as: "adapted", "those with needs or difficulties". In the same way, these pupils could feel different from the rest because they could not participate in some activities and exercises that were corrected on the blackboard and the times they started the exam later than the rest of the class because their photocopies were not prepared. The pupil has emphasized on numerous occasions that the teachers do not present the profile of teacher that motivates her and makes her feel good in class. According to Athena, they are not as affectionate and kind as other teachers she has had before.
- b) On the part of the classmates: lack of interaction with Athena and with learners with Special Educational Needs in general. Athena, along with the rest of SEN pupils, have been integrated, but not included. The implementation of a more solid approach that assumes inclusive education as a responsibility of the whole community, not only of families and persons with disabilities, has been lacking, in line with the research carried out by Medina García (2017).

As far as *teaching and learning processes* are concerned, the first fact to bear in mind is that the pupil has showed the same difficulties in learning English as those she presents in her mother tongue, in accordance with what was defended by Rondal (2000).

The second aspect to bear in mind is the implementation of cooperative learning in the class of Athena, which, besides not having occupied a predominant place within the organization of class time, has not been implemented in the way that would have best contributed to the learning of Athena as well as of the rest of her classmates. Cooperative learning has also been implemented in a traditional way, something that does not allow us to make the most of this learning strategy, according to Johnson & Johnson (1994).

The third aspect we proceed to discuss is the quality and quantity of the English input received by Athena. Most of the explanations and corrections particularly aimed at the



pupil have been in Spanish. In addition, during the class time devoted to the correction of exercises and activities on the blackboard, most of the time the learner has been doing the exercises and activities of the didactic material. Accordingly, she has not been able to benefit from this input and, in the moments when she has had this opportunity, she has experienced great difficulty in following the corrections due to the speed of the explanations. Hence, Athena has not had the same access to input in quality and quantity as her classmates without SEN.

To end this section on teaching and learning processes, it is necessary to refer to the *evaluation and monitoring* of the pupil. On the one hand, the learner has been evaluated in the same way as the rest of pupils with SEN, despite having a faster learning rhythm, which invites us to reflect on the fact that learners with intellectual disabilities are not homogeneous and that between them there are also different learning styles, rhythm, and interests. It is imperative that English teachers take this into account when programming and planning the teaching and learning processes (Difino & Lombardino, 2004; European Commission, 2005; McColl, 2005; Arnett, 2013; Wight, 2015). On the other hand, as far as follow-up is concerned, the pupil has hardly been able to follow corrections (they did not correspond to the exercises and activities of her adaptation) nor have we observed that her adapted curricular material has been corrected regularly, so that it was often loaded with errors as well as exercises and activities, blank or unfinished. Corrections are essential in these pupils, regardless of the support that can be offered in this sense in their family environment (not all families have the time, training or financial means to be able to offer extracurricular support to their disabled and school-age children). The daily monitoring, the individualised evaluation together with a quality and quantity input can greatly favour these pupils, as stated in the aforementioned literature. Obviously, all learners can benefit from these measures, but pupils with intellectual disabilities generally present greater difficulties in terms of language, attention, memory, cognition, metacognition, so routine monitoring becomes completely essential. A high ratio of pupils cannot justify that such monitoring is not carried out.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

According to the results of our study, the current conditions of the centre are not at all suitable to favour Athena's learning. Although it is true that this is a centre that initially carried out an inclusion project, this process has experienced a significant stagnation and

involution, as declared by Athena's teachers and the school team. In this sense, the current conditions are not adequate to address diversity, due both to the teaching staff's instability and to the uniformity of the school's pupils, since the number of pupils with SEN is increasing. Furthermore, as we have observed, there is a clear lack of coordination in the treatment of inclusion between different members of the teaching staff. These facts have hindered an adequate and progressive implementation of the inclusive approach contained in the Educational Project of the Centre (EPC).

With regard to the English teachers' perceptions of Athena, both declare that the pupil shows difficulties in expressing herself orally and interacting with her classmates because of her shyness and fear of being judged. They agree in considering that Athena's attitude in the classroom is adequate, although they recognise that at certain moments the pupil presents motivation problems. They believe that this deficit in motivation could be remedied if they had a series of resources to personalize their teaching more effectively and if her family environment motivated and supported the pupil's learning continuously. Consequently, they consider that the pupil could improve her performance and results in the subject under the following conditions: provision of an ICT tool (tablets) for greater effectiveness and efficiency of the personalization of the teaching they carry with the pupil; more aware and coordinated school context; increased support for learning by the family.

Regarding the specific preparation of Athena's teachers, they did not have any initial training in this sense, nor have they had any ongoing training, beyond their own experience and the knowledge drawn from praxis. The specific knowledge can be summed up in the following aspects: a) Attention to diversity is an approach that targets all learners, not just those with difficulties. It is therefore essential to personalize teaching to respond to the different learning styles and rhythms. Despite being aware of this, teachers state that they cannot put this principle into practice because they do not have the right conditions; b) Cooperative learning is an appropriate measure to address diversity in FL classrooms. Yet, as with the previous aspect, they state that it is not possible for them to implement such learning in an adequate manner due to the high ratio of pupils and the lack of technical and human resources; c) The implementation of curricular adaptations is fundamental so that pupils with difficulties can learn on an equal footing with others.

At the same time, although they make assiduous curricular adaptations, these do not respond to the guidelines proposed by the specialized authors (Difino & Lombardino,

2004; Arnett, 2013; Tolbert et al., 2015). Accordingly, we have observed the following shortcomings in their adaptations: excessive use of linguistic and grammatical aspects to the detriment of communicative tasks; excessive translation exercises; in addition to a series of formal questions that hinder the execution of the work.

If we compare the training and praxis of Athena's teachers with the good practices of teachers whose experiences we have studied in the literature review (Krapez, 2012; Arnett, 2013), we must conclude that the training of Alice and Marta could be improved, especially in what pertains to: the implementation of cooperative learning; the type of adaptation of didactic material; the importance of coordination with the family environment of these pupils; how to address and treat pupils with SEN, especially Athena.

Finally, with regard to the question on how Athena's FL learning has developed during the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> years of secondary education, we note that there has been a positive evolution regarding the previous courses. If in the 2<sup>nd</sup> year her final mark was 6, in these last years her final marks were 7. Both the teachers and the headmaster as well as ourselves as the researchers agree in affirming that this advance has been propitiated by Athena being the axis of the present research, which has implied that the whole team of the centre and the family environment has focused on her learning.

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