

TOWARDS AN INCLUSIVE TEACHING APPROACH FOR FRENCH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE: DIFFERENTIATION TO ENCOURAGE PARTICIPATION

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Abstract

This article explores an inclusive approach to teaching French as a Foreign Language (FLE), with particular attention to learners experiencing academic difficulties and, more specifically, to students with dyslexia. Drawing on research on inclusive education, differentiated instruction, scaffolding, and learner participation, the study examines how pedagogical differentiation can contribute to reducing barriers to learning and fostering more active engagement in the FLE classroom. Rather than conceptualising learning difficulties exclusively in terms of individual deficits, the article adopts a contextual perspective that considers the interaction between learners' needs, instructional practices, classroom environments, and access to learning opportunities. Particular attention is given to the adaptation of tasks, multimodal input, structured support, flexible grouping, and progressive scaffolding as strategies for facilitating participation and learner autonomy. The methodological approach combines a review of relevant theoretical perspectives with pedagogical observations and illustrative examples drawn from the teaching of French as a foreign language. The findings suggest that differentiated instruction can enhance accessibility, confidence, and participation while benefiting the learning process as a whole. The article argues that inclusive FLE teaching requires a shift from standardised instruction towards flexible pedagogical practices capable of responding to learner diversity without lowering academic expectations.

Keywords: inclusive education; French as a Foreign Language (FLE); differentiated instruction; dyslexia; scaffolding; learner participation

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Introduction

The present study is situated within the broader paradigm shift towards inclusive education and the growing recognition of learner diversity as a central concern of contemporary educational policy and practice. Its rationale rests on three main considerations. First, inclusive education has become an increasingly prominent and rapidly evolving field of research, particularly in response to international educational frameworks and policy initiatives promoted by UNESCO and other major institutional actors (UNESCO, 1994, 2020). The growing emphasis on equity, accessibility, participation, and equal educational opportunities calls for a critical reconsideration of established pedagogical practices, including those employed in foreign language education.

Second, there is a pressing need to develop pedagogically grounded and practically applicable tools that can support teachers in addressing the diverse needs of learners with special educational needs (SEN) in the French as a Foreign Language (FLE) classroom. Teachers are increasingly confronted with heterogeneous learning profiles, which require them to reconsider conventional approaches to instruction, classroom interaction, task design, assessment, and learner support. In this context, inclusive education cannot be reduced to the physical integration of learners with SEN into mainstream classrooms; rather, it entails the systematic removal of barriers to learning and participation and the creation of learning environments in which all learners can meaningfully engage and progress.

Third, despite the growing body of research on inclusive education, comparatively limited attention has been devoted to the specific pedagogical strategies, techniques, and instructional approaches that can be effectively implemented in FLE classrooms characterized by learner diversity. This gap is particularly significant given the specific cognitive, linguistic, communicative, and affective demands associated with foreign language learning.

Against this background, the present study seeks to contribute to the ongoing debate on inclusive language education by examining the pedagogical conditions and practices that may facilitate the effective inclusion of learners with SEN in FLE contexts. At a time when educational reforms increasingly place inclusion, equity, and learner participation at the centre of educational agendas, identifying and critically examining pedagogical approaches capable of accommodating diverse learning profiles is of particular relevance. The study therefore focuses on inclusive FLE pedagogy, investigating the extent to which differentiated instruction, multimodal learning opportunities, adaptive teaching practices, and diversified forms of learner participation can contribute to more accessible, equitable, and pedagogically responsive foreign language education.

Literature Review (Theoretical foundation)

Learners Experiencing Academic Difficulties: From a Deficit-Oriented Perspective to an Inclusive Approach

Within the broader framework of inclusive education, the present study deliberately focuses on learners experiencing academic difficulties rather than exclusively on learners with disabilities. This distinction is theoretically significant, as academic difficulty cannot be reduced to disability, nor should it be understood solely as an individual deficit. Contemporary approaches to inclusive

education increasingly emphasize the interaction between learner characteristics and the barriers generated by educational environments, curricula, instructional practices, and assessment procedures. From this perspective, inclusion is concerned not only with whom learners are, but also with the extent to which educational systems enable them to access, participate in, and benefit from learning. *The European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education*, for instance, places learner participation at the centre of inclusive education, highlighting the importance of learners' meaningful socio-emotional participation in educational settings.

The notion of *academic difficulty* remains deeply embedded in the everyday vocabulary of teachers, parents, and learners. In educational practice, it generally refers to a persistent discrepancy between the learner's current performance and the expectations established by the curriculum. However, such a discrepancy should not necessarily be interpreted as evidence of an intrinsic deficiency. The *social model of disability*, developed initially in disability studies and subsequently influential in inclusive education, has contributed to shifting attention from individual impairments towards the environmental and institutional barriers that restrict participation (Oliver, 1990). Although the present study does not equate academic difficulties with disability, this theoretical shift is particularly relevant because it invites us to question whether difficulties experienced by learners are partly produced or intensified by the organization of teaching itself.

This interactional understanding is consistent with the broader shift from an individual or medical model of educational difficulty towards a social and pedagogical model of inclusion. Rather than asking exclusively what is "wrong" with the learner, inclusive pedagogy raises a different question: what barriers within the learning environment may prevent the learner from accessing and participating in the learning process? This conceptual shift has important implications for foreign language teaching, since difficulties may be intensified when instructional practices rely predominantly on a single mode of presentation, a uniform pace of learning, extensive written processing, or narrowly defined forms of assessment.

The concept of *learner variability* provides an important theoretical basis for such an approach. Contemporary educational research increasingly challenges the assumption that learners constitute a homogeneous group who can be effectively taught through a single instructional pathway. Tomlinson (2014), in her work on differentiated instruction (*The differentiated classroom: Responding to the needs of all learners*), emphasizes the importance of adapting content, process, product, and learning environment in response to differences in learners' readiness, interests, and learning profiles. In the context of FLE, this means that the same communicative objective may be approached through different tasks, levels of scaffolding, interactional arrangements, or modes of linguistic production: "This may include timelines, rubrics, carefully delineated product assignments, varied working arrangements in the classroom, multiple resources, partnerships with instructional specialists, or small-group reteaching or extension". (Tomlinson, 2014: 33)

Multiple means of representation may involve presenting linguistic input through written texts, audio recordings, visual supports, diagrams, subtitles, demonstrations, or multimodal

resources. Multiple means of action and expression may allow learners to demonstrate their linguistic competence through different modalities, including oral production, written production, visual representations, digital tools, or collaborative tasks. The concept of *scaffolding*, initially theorized by Wood, Bruner, & Ross (1976) and grounded in the sociocultural perspective associated with Vygotsky (1978), provides a further theoretical foundation for inclusive language teaching: "More often than not, it involves a kind of «scaffolding» process that enables a child or novice to solve a problem, carry out a task or achieve a goal which would be beyond his unassisted efforts. This scaffolding consists essentially of the adult «controlling» those elements of the task that are initially beyond the learner's capacity, thus permitting him to concentrate upon and complete only those elements that are within his range of competence." (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976: 90)

Learning occurs most effectively when learners receive appropriate temporary support that enables them to accomplish tasks beyond their current level of independent performance. In an FLE classroom, scaffolding may include modelling, explicit instructions, visual organizers, lexical banks, sentence starters, guided questions, partially completed examples, peer support, or additional processing time. Importantly, such support should be gradually withdrawn as learners develop greater independence..

This perspective is particularly pertinent to learners experiencing specific learning difficulties, including dyslexia. Historically, dyslexia has often been conceptualized through a deficit-based lens, with emphasis placed on the learner's difficulties in reading and written language. "The Everyman definition calls it a reading disorder in which people jumble letters, confusing dog with god, say, or box with pox." (Morris et al., 2002: 55). The historical account of dyslexia begins with W. Pringle Morgan's 1896 description of a young learner who experienced severe reading difficulties despite apparently preserved intellectual abilities. The INSERM expert report subsequently described Morgan's 1896 case as the first reported example of what would later be termed developmental dyslexia (INSERM, 2007). This historical development is important because it contributed to distinguishing specific difficulties in reading from generalized intellectual impairment. Let's take the following text as an example:

« Samedi matin, Léa est allée au marché avec sa **mère**. Elles ont acheté des pommes, du **pain** et un petit **gâteau** pour l'anniversaire de son **frère**. En rentrant à la maison, Léa a rencontré son voisin qui promenait son **chien** dans le parc. »

Possible dyslexic reading and interpretation

A learner with dyslexia might produce a reading such as:

« Samedi matin, Léa est allé au marché avec son **père**. Ils ont acheté des pommes, du **pin** et un petit **château** pour l'anniversaire de sa **sœur**. En retournant à la maison, Léa a rencontré son chien.

The following example is illustrative rather than diagnostic and should not be taken as representative of all dyslexic reading profiles:

Table 1.

<i>Correct form</i>	<i>Possible erroneous form</i>	<i>Type of error</i>	<i>Semantic consequence</i>
sa mère	<i>son père</i>	lexical substitution	The family relationship is changed: <i>mother</i> → <i>father</i> .
elles	<i>ils</i>	grammatical/gender confusion	The feminine plural subject is replaced by a masculine plural form.
du pain	<i>du pin</i>	phonological/orthographic confusion	<i>pain</i> (“bread”) is replaced by <i>pin</i> (“pine tree”).
un petit gâteau	<i>un petit château</i>	graphemic/lexical substitution	<i>gâteau</i> (“cake”) becomes <i>château</i> (“castle”), changing the meaning considerably.
son frère	<i>sa sœur</i>	lexical substitution	<i>brother</i> becomes <i>sister</i> , modifying the family context.
en rentrant	<i>en retournant</i>	lexical substitution / paraphrastic substitution	The action is reformulated, slightly altering the narrative movement.
son chien	<i>son chat</i>	lexical substitution	<i>dog</i> becomes <i>cat</i> , changing an important detail of the scene.
promenait	<i>promène</i>	tense/aspect alteration	The imperfect (<i>was walking</i>) becomes the present (<i>walks</i>), modifying the temporal perspective.

The important point for a study of dyslexia in French is that a reading difficulty may ultimately interfere with text comprehension. The learner may decode some words inaccurately and subsequently construct a representation of the narrative that differs from the original. The educational significance of dyslexia becomes even more apparent in the context of foreign language learning. Difficulties affecting phonological processing, decoding, spelling, reading fluency, working memory, or the automatization of linguistic patterns may create additional obstacles when learners encounter a new phonological, orthographic, and grammatical system. Nevertheless, these difficulties should not be interpreted as an inability to learn a foreign language. Rather, they call for the reconsideration of instructional design, pacing, input modalities, task demands, and assessment procedures. In this respect, inclusive FLE pedagogy should seek to preserve the same fundamental learning objectives while diversifying the pathways through which learners can reach them. Lexical dyslexia “impairs the visual recognition of the forms involved in reading irregular words,” whereas phonological dyslexia “impairs the development of alphabetic

strategies and, consequently, the ability to read and spell unfamiliar words” (Perradeau, 2006: 130).

Young people experiencing this difficulty encounter significant challenges when faced with a text that they are required to decode. Since dyslexia is associated with difficulties in specific cognitive and linguistic processes involved in reading and written language, it may result in cognitive difficulties that are closely linked to academic failure and, subsequently, to difficulties in social integration. Dyslexia interferes with the acquisition of reading skills, but it is also closely associated with dysorthography, namely difficulties in written transcription and spelling.

Results

Dyslexic disorders are diverse and may be classified into several categories:

a) *Dyslexic difficulties at the decoding level- these difficulties concern the accurate and efficient conversion of written symbols into linguistic units.*

- Auditory/phonological errors: confusion between or omission of phonologically similar sounds, such as /t/-/d/, /k/-/g/, /f/-/v/, etc. Ex: *table/ dable; gare/care; fille/ ville* etc.
- Visual/orthographic errors: confusion between visually similar or reversely oriented graphemes, such as b/p, b/d, u/n, m/n, E/F, G/C. Ex. *doigt/ boigt; mon/ nom; peur/ beur* etc.
- Syllabic errors: inversions, omissions or transpositions within syllables, such as ul/lu, pra/par. Ex. *parler / rapler ; pluie/ puile* etc.
- Letter and grapheme omissions or additions: letters, digraphs or syllabic units may be omitted, added or duplicated, particularly in longer or unfamiliar words.
- Sequencing errors: difficulties maintaining the correct order of letters, graphemes or syllables within a word.
- Word substitutions: replacement of the target word with a visually or phonologically similar word. Ex. *maison / maman; chat/ chaud; porte / poste; mer / mère* etc.
- Difficulty decoding unfamiliar words: particular difficulty may arise when the learner encounters new lexical items that cannot be recognized immediately through visual memory. Ex. *incompréhensible* – leght + morphological complexity.

b) *Difficulties affecting reading fluency*

- Slow reading rate: the learner reads significantly more slowly than expected for their age or proficiency level.
- Hesitations and frequent pauses: reading may be interrupted by prolonged attempts to identify or decode words.
- Laborious and fragmented reading: the learner may read word by word or syllable by syllable rather than in larger meaningful units.

c) *Lexical difficulties*

- Difficulty recognizing words automatically: familiar words may need to be decoded repeatedly rather than recognized instantly.

- Confusion between visually or phonologically similar words: for example, *pain/pin*, *beau/boa*, or *mer/mère*.
- Difficulty accessing lexical meaning: the learner may decode a word but experience difficulty rapidly connecting its written form to its meaning.
- Difficulty acquiring and retaining new vocabulary: this may be particularly apparent in foreign-language learning.

d) *Difficulties affecting reading comprehension*

- Difficulty identifying the main idea of a text.
- Difficulty establishing relationships between sentences and integrating information across the text.
- Difficulty making inferences: the learner may understand individual words or sentences but struggle to derive information that is implicit.
- Difficulty maintaining information in working memory: previously read information may be forgotten before it can be integrated with subsequent information.
- Difficulty distinguishing essential from secondary information.
- Difficulty constructing a coherent mental representation of the text.

e) *Morphosyntactic difficulties*

The learner may experience difficulties in processing grammatical information during reading, including:

- confusion between grammatical forms- Ex. Les enfants *jouent* dans le jardin. / Les enfants *joue* dans le jardin. (orthographically distinct, but phonologically barely perceptible);
- difficulty identifying verb tenses – Ex. *Je suis allée* au supermarché / *J'allais* au supermarché. (difficulty in identifying time value);
- difficulty recognizing grammatical markers;
- confusion between singular and plural forms;
- difficulties with gender and agreement – Ex. *Une petite fille* est arrivée en classe. / *Un petit garçon* ... *un/ une* ; *petit/petite* ;
- difficulties interpreting pronoun reference- Ex. *Paul a donné son livre à Marc parce qu'il en avait besoin* (The learner must identify the referent of “il” and integrate the relationship between the sentences.).

These difficulties can become particularly significant in French because grammatical information is frequently expressed through orthographic markers that are not fully represented phonologically, such as plural or gender markers.

f) *Difficulties specific to the orthographic system of French*

French presents additional challenges because the relationship between spelling and pronunciation is relatively complex. Learners with dyslexia may experience difficulties with:

- silent final letters: *petit, grand, parlent*;
- homophones: *a/à, et/est, son/sont*;
- grapheme combinations: *eau, ai, ei, ou, oi, ill*;
- liaison phenomena: *les_enfants, des_amis*;

- morphological markers that are not pronounced: *ils parlent, elles arrivent*;
- irregular or unpredictable spelling patterns.

g) Written-language difficulties associated with dyslexia

Dyslexia is frequently associated with dysorthography, which may involve:

- spelling errors;
- phonologically based spelling –*faim/ femme/ fame/ fam*;
- omissions and additions of letters;
- letter reversals or transpositions;
- incorrect segmentation of words – *aujourd’hui → au jour d’hui/ peut-être → peut être/ tout à fait → toutafait/ parce qu’il → parcequ’il/ quelqu’un → quel qu’un*;
- difficulties with grammatical agreement;
- inconsistent representation of the same word.

h) Metacognitive and strategic difficulties

Some learners may also experience difficulties in monitoring their own reading process. They may:

- fail to notice that they have misread a word;
- continue reading despite an incoherent interpretation;
- have difficulty identifying when comprehension has broken down;
- make limited use of contextual clues;
- experience difficulty selecting appropriate reading strategies.

Consequently, dyslexia may affect not only the decoding of written language, but also the learner's ability to monitor, regulate and repair their comprehension.

Discussions and conclusions

The issue is particularly relevant in the Romanian educational context. Romanian media reports have cited a figure of approximately 250,000 children requiring specific educational support in relation to dyslexia (Euronews Romania, 2023). In our country, recent public discussions have drawn attention to the significant number of children affected by dyslexia and to the challenges they face within the education system (Mocanu, 2024). Nevertheless, the figure draws attention to the educational visibility of specific learning difficulties and to the need for more systematic pedagogical responses. The challenge is therefore not simply to identify learners who experience difficulties, but to determine how educational practices can be reorganized in order to reduce the barriers they encounter.

Another theoretical pillar of the present study is consequently differentiated instruction. Differentiation implies that the teacher may vary the content, process, learning supports, interactional arrangements, task complexity, time allocation, and forms of assessment according to learners' needs, while maintaining meaningful and appropriately challenging learning objectives. In an FLE classroom, differentiation may involve, for example, adapting the length and complexity of texts, providing explicit vocabulary support, pre-teaching phonological patterns, using visual organizers, allowing additional processing time, offering graduated scaffolding, organizing peer collaboration, or permitting alternative forms of linguistic production.

The concept of scaffolding is particularly useful in this context. Drawing on the sociocultural tradition associated with Vygotsky and subsequently developed in educational research, scaffolding refers to temporary and adjustable support that enables learners to accomplish tasks that they could not yet perform independently. In FLE, scaffolding may take the form of modelling, sentence frames, guided questions, lexical banks, graphic organizers, partially completed examples, peer support, or progressive removal of assistance. Such practices are particularly relevant for learners experiencing difficulties because they transform the pedagogical objective from merely completing a task into progressively developing the learner's autonomy.

The principle of participation must also occupy a central position in an inclusive approach to language education. Inclusion cannot be considered fully achieved merely because learners with difficulties are physically present in mainstream classrooms. Genuine inclusion requires meaningful opportunities to participate in classroom interaction, to express ideas, to collaborate with peers, to make choices, to receive feedback, and to demonstrate learning. The European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education explicitly identifies learner participation as a key dimension of genuinely inclusive education. In the FLE classroom, this principle is particularly important because language acquisition is inherently interactional: learners develop communicative competence through opportunities to understand, negotiate meaning, produce language, and interact with others.

Finally, the present study adopts a strengths-based rather than deficit-based perspective. Learners experiencing academic difficulties should not be defined exclusively through what they cannot do. An inclusive pedagogy also seeks to identify their existing linguistic, cognitive, social, creative, and metacognitive resources and to mobilize these resources in the learning process. This orientation is compatible with UDL's emphasis on learner agency, autonomy, meaningful engagement, and multiple forms of communication and expression.

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives suggest that inclusive FLE teaching should not be conceived as a set of remedial techniques applied retrospectively to learners who fail to meet predetermined expectations. It should instead be understood as a proactive pedagogical approach in which learner variability is anticipated at the stage of instructional design. Differentiation, scaffolding, multimodality, flexible assessment, collaborative learning, and diversified forms of participation consequently become not merely compensatory measures, but constitutive dimensions of an inclusive pedagogy of French as a Foreign Language.

The theoretical framework adopted in this study therefore rests on a fundamental proposition: the objective of inclusive FLE pedagogy is not to lower linguistic expectations, but to diversify the pathways through which learners can access, practise, demonstrate, and progressively master the target language. Such an approach makes it possible to reconcile curricular requirements with learner diversity and to conceptualize inclusion as a question of pedagogical accessibility, participation, and equity rather than simply as the placement of learners with difficulties within mainstream educational settings.

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