

GIFTED LEARNERS IN THE PRIMARY EFL CLASSROOM: A CASE STUDY

Andrea PUSKÁS¹ – Cyntia KÁLMÁNOVÁ²

ABSTRACT

Gifted and talented learners have been identified as learners with special needs and their education requires carefully selected, appropriate methods, strategies and techniques. The paper investigates teaching English as a foreign language in the higher level of primary school in a Slovakian primary school with Hungarian language of instruction and presents the findings of a case study. A special, extracurricular workshop was designed and carried out, using literary texts and unconventional teaching and learning forms. The outcomes of the workshop series are evaluated and future implications are outlined. Special attention is paid to the tools and educational forms EFL teachers can make use of when improving the learning potential and skills of gifted learners.

KEYWORDS

primary school learners, English as a foreign language, giftedness, literary texts, extra-curricular activities

INTRODUCTION

Learners have a variety of different characteristics and a wide range of studies have dealt with the question of satisfying various learner needs so that learning becomes more effective and successful. Being gifted and talented is one of the most common special needs teachers and educators meet in classrooms on a daily basis. Very often, this special need is the most neglected one, since being gifted and talented is often incorrectly defined and gifted learners appear to be the learners who need the attention and help of the teacher the least. Teachers often incorrectly assume that these learners can learn on their own easily and quickly without further teacher assistance or support. However, ignoring the needs of these learners can lead to serious consequences such as boredom, discipline problems, underachievement in academic results or even drop-out (See Tan, 2015). The present paper focuses on gifted and talented learners in the primary English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom and presents the findings of a case study. Extracurricular activities and workshops beyond EFL classes were organised for learners at a primary school with Hungarian language of instruction in Slovakia, Komárno. During the workshops and lessons, literary texts, audio-visual media, creative materials and materials promoting critical thinking were used and presented.

Defining gifted and talented learners

Increased attention was paid to defining who gifted and talented learners are during the 1980s and 1990s, when several publications of methodologists and education researchers appeared trying to define these learners and outline a number of characteristic features and

¹ doc. PaedDr. Andrea Puskás, PhD., J. Selye University, Faculty of Education, Department of English Language and Literature, puskasa@ujs.sk

² PaedDr. Cyntia Kálmánová, J. Selye University, Faculty of Education, Department of English Language and Literature, kalmanovac@ujs.sk

peculiarities. Francoys Gagné's theory of giftedness and his definition that clearly distinguishes between being gifted and being talented is very much used as a reference point even today. Gagné points out that giftedness is connected with "domains of abilities" and that it "corresponds to competence which is distinctly above average in one or more domains of ability" (Gagné, 1985: 108). This means that people are born with gifts and special abilities that will serve as opportunities and a great potential to be exploited. However, it is not guaranteed that these abilities turn into talents unless appropriate effort is made. Talents, Gagné claims, are the practical manifestations of giftedness, the concrete performance in various fields (Gagné, 1985). He explains that every talented individual is gifted, but not every gifted person is talented. This is because developing giftedness into talents usually requires hard work, plenty of effort, careful attention and a supportive environment.

In 1995, Gagné further elaborated his theory and presented four major domains of human ability described in details, in which gifted individuals can excel. These domains are: intellectual, creative, socioaffective and sensorimotor (Gagné, 1995). This also means that being gifted is no more tied merely with intellectual abilities or IQ scores, but other areas of human activities are highlighted as well, for example sports, arts and crafts, music, literature or social interaction, creativity and solving problems. A growing number of scholars in the 1990s pointed out that gifted learners possess a variety of skills other than cognitive excellence. Shore and Kanevsky highlight that gifted learners are better at identifying, evaluating and solving problems, can choose strategies and points of view in a flexible way, enjoy challenges and usually prefer complex and creative tasks (Shore & Kanevsky, 1997). Heacox and Cash explain that gifted learners have an accelerated pace of learning, have exceptional verbal abilities and excellent observation skills, they have developed critical thinking, decision-making and problem-solving skills, they are ready to take risks and can work independently (Heacox & Cash, 2014).

In the beginning of the twenty-first century, in the 2000s, there is a significant shift in understanding giftedness and crucial changes in its definition. This transformation or change is based on the theory that giftedness is no more connected merely with innate abilities, something certain individuals are born with and others are not, but instead, it is understood as a subject-specific set of abilities at a certain point of the individual's life that can and should be improved (see for example Deck, 2006; Matthews & Folsom, 2008). Understanding giftedness as a process and as a variable depending on circumstances and external factors rather than a fixed, inherited state also highlights and strengthens the responsibility of educational institutions and the school environment leading to an increased significance of the teacher's role. Providing gifted learners with more opportunities, motivation and support together with creating a stimulating environment that offers challenges and inspirational tasks is the key in turning giftedness into talents. Hilary Lowe even claims that in addition to ability, opportunity and support, gifted learners need encouragement and recognition (Lowe, 2002), which means that parents, teachers and educators need to recognize and appreciate the abilities and efforts of learners and must give them regular feedback considering the learner's persistence and intensive effort.

A very important research finding published in the beginning of the twenty-first century is that gifted learners are more emotionally sensitive than other learners (see for example Daniels & Piechowski, 2009) and can have difficulties in improving their social skills, for example they may have problems with establishing friendships and may feel isolated when they do not spend enough time with peers of the same or similar intellectual level or peers with the same abilities (Heacox & Cash, 2014). This finding encourages teachers to pay more attention to the development of gifted learners' social and emotional skills and competences and the creation of a challenging but safe environment.

Practical solutions for gifted and talented learners at primary school

It is very important for schools to create an efficient identification system of gifted and high ability learners so that the right approaches, methods and strategies can be used for the right learners. According to Carlson (1981), this identification can be carried out in two ways, based on either objective measures (for example standardized IQ tests) or subjective measures (for example observation using structured or semi-structured observation sheets or checklists, teacher and parent descriptions and feedback, peer description, the learner's own description), which are, according to many scholars even more reliable since they provide a more complex picture of the learner's profile (see for example Feldhusen & Jarwan, 2000; Feldhusen, 2001; Wallace, 2006).

Following the identification of gifted learners, it is very important that schools make steps to satisfy the needs of these learners. Wai and Benhow (2021) explain that the most common practical measures that have developed during the past few years are acceleration, grouping and enrichment. Other scholars differentiate between quantitative differentiation (very similar to acceleration) and qualitative differentiation, the latter usually standing for enrichment (Moltzen, 2006).

Acceleration or 'grade skipping' in other words is one of the most radical forms of educational intervention. It is very rare or simply does not exist in Central Europe, learners are usually not allowed to enter a higher class in state institutions, not even based on test results, teacher feedback or recommendation. However, one of the most frequently discussed practical solutions for gifted learners and learners with special needs in general is ability grouping. A lot of researchers have confirmed that grouping learners based on their abilities and needs is beneficial both for learners and teachers and ability grouping has been confirmed as one of the best solutions for gifted learners (VanTassel-Baska & Stambaugh, 2005; Gross, 2006; VanTassel-Baska, 2021; Wai & Benbow, 2021). Ability grouping can be of various types, including special schools, full-time classes, pull-out or withdrawal programmes, cluster grouping, regrouping for specific subject instruction or cross-grade grouping (Gross, 2006).

Qualitative differentiation or enrichment is one of the most commonly used practices in state schools, where ability groupings are limited and learners are not allowed to swap classes during lessons and are educated together with other learners with different educational needs. Enrichment means providing gifted learners with opportunities that go deeper and wider than the regular curriculum and learning content (Wai & Benbow, 2021). Learners are given extra materials and challenges, where they can go deeper into the topic (in-depth enrichment) or widen their knowledge by examining learning content from different perspectives or processing and dealing with additional learning materials.

The modification or enrichment of the curriculum is unavoidable in order to satisfy the needs of gifted and talented learners. Another widely used practice is using interdisciplinary content or introducing learning content and materials from other disciplines to provide challenges and opportunities for creativity. The benefits of using literary texts in teaching foreign languages and the potential of literary texts in developing critical thinking and creativity have been confirmed by several scholars (Parkinson & Reid Thomas, 2000), but using graphs, statistics, diagrams, describing phenomena from geography and biology can also help when preparing lessons for gifted and talented learners (Puskás, 2021).

The case study

The central idea when designing an extracurricular workshop series for primary school EFL learners was the integration of diverse approaches and techniques, more specifically literary texts and unconventional teaching and learning forms into the learning environment of

primary school EFL learners in order to support gifted and talented learners in reaching their full potential. The need for a stimulating learning environment is becoming increasingly significant, pupils require more dynamic and engaging learning experiences so that they can access information and acquire knowledge more easily. The extracurricular workshops were organized for primary school EFL learners on a regular basis, where a diverse range of activities and techniques based on literary texts, children's and traditional literature and their adaptations. Special attention was paid to improving motivation, increasing learner engagement and interest and creating an encouraging and supporting environment for learners by taking a learner-centred approach.

When designing the case study, the following research questions were formulated:

RQ1: What kind of activities and techniques and work forms have a beneficial impact on gifted and talented learners' engagement in the primary EFL classroom?

RQ2: What are the potential positive outcomes of an EFL workshop series designed for gifted and talented learners?

Workshop series description

The extracurricular workshops aimed at providing opportunities for enrichment for gifted and talented pupils as well as improving their learning potentials and skills. However, the characteristics of withdrawal programmes were applied as well, since gifted learners from two different grades participated. It was a non-compulsory workshop series, where learners applied voluntarily. The workshops were carried out during the 2018/2019 academic year in a primary school with Hungarian language of instruction in Komárno, Slovakia, the Munka Utca Primary School with Hungarian Language of Instruction. The sessions of the workshops lasted for 45 minutes and were held on a weekly basis in the afternoons after regular, compulsory lessons were over. The sessions continued throughout the entire 2018/19 school year.

The content of the extracurricular workshop series was based on the following key areas and topics: 'Human relations and communication,' 'Reading for fun,' 'Working with a text,' and 'Writing practice'. Each lesson was designed with the aim of taking the diverse characteristics of individual pupils into account, including prior knowledge and interests. The project started with measuring learners' attitudes to and confidence about EFL with the help of the questionnaire method. Throughout the workshop sessions, observation was carried out to examine learners' changes and behaviour.

The workshop began with 16 participants altogether between the ages of ten and thirteen, involving learners from the fifth and sixth grades. Despite the differences in the language levels of the pupils and their varying abilities and skills, their high level of anticipation for learning and their desire to engage in the tasks and activities was impressive. They were motivated, demonstrating high levels of attention, a strong desire to excel, had a large vocabulary, could form complex sentences in the target language and had excellent memory skills. Furthermore, they displayed a profound interest in real-world matters and were able to grasp abstract ideas and complex reasoning.

It is noteworthy that during the introductory discussions, the majority of the group noted that they had learnt the language and improved their speaking skills primarily through self-study. The learners highlighted that the chat zones of online games were a valuable resource for developing their communication skills, both written and verbal. Moreover, reading materials such as online articles, novels and short stories were also mentioned as valuable sources of language learning. Television programmes were similarly identified as a useful medium, offering learners the choice to select between using subtitles and not using them on certain occasions.

Given that the participants of the workshop series had already had experience with using the target language, at the beginning of the workshop a questionnaire was distributed to the learners to collect data on the learners' relationship with the target language. 13 learners filled in the questionnaire, 6 learners from the fifth and 7 learners from the sixth grade.

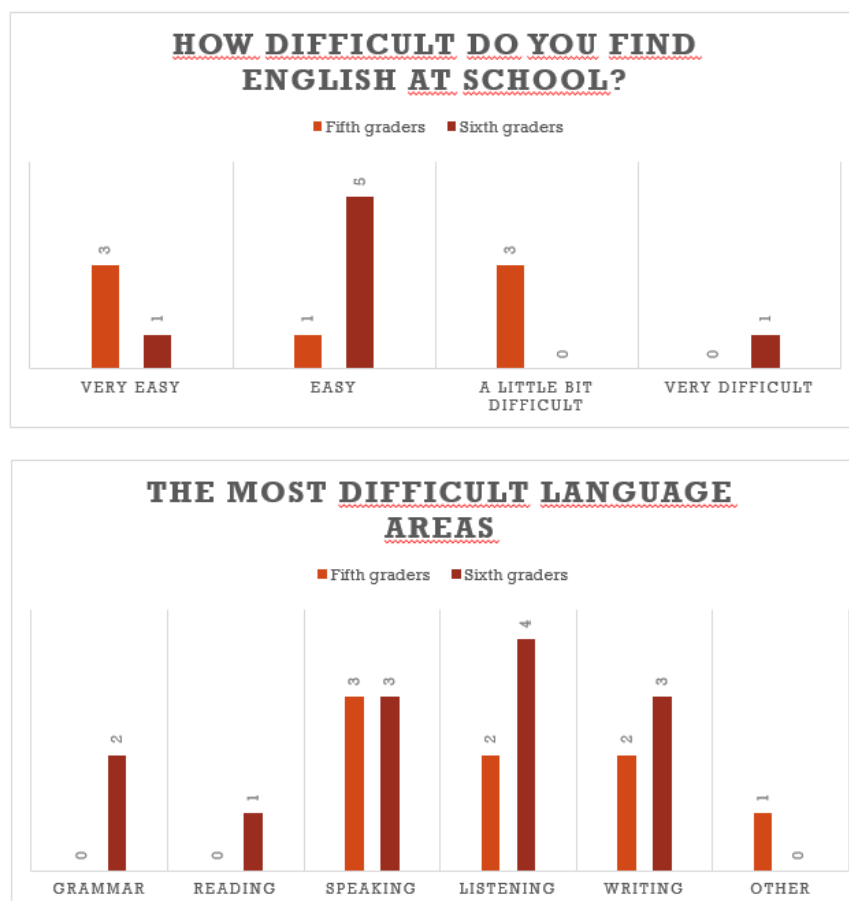


Figure 1 and Figure 2: Learners' attitude on the difficulty of the subject and the most difficult language area.

The results included in Figure 1 and Figure 2 demonstrate that when being asked about the use of the target language, both fifth and sixth grade pupils indicated that they greatly enjoyed speaking in English. The main difficulty seemed to be a certain degree of anxiety, even among these gifted learners. It turned out that whenever they felt that they might perform poorly when speaking in the target language, they avoided even trying to express their thoughts (see Figure 3).

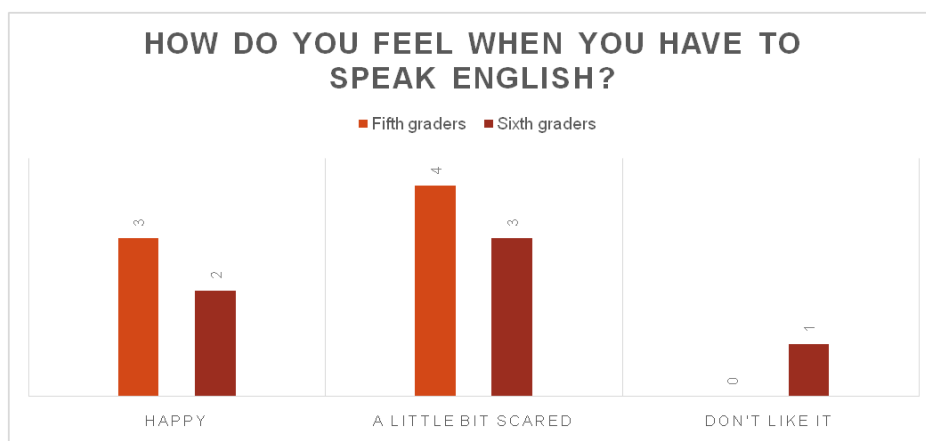


Figure 3: Learners attitude on their confidence when speaking English.

In addition to anxiety, the use of a repetitive workflow and the continuous correction of mistakes was identified as a significant issue for gifted learners within the traditional classroom setting. Similarly, these factors were found to have a demotivating and frightening effect on learners. This became evident by learners' reluctance to use English during classroom work. In addition, it was found that occasionally, gifted learners perceived the practice of offering additional exercises as a reward for finishing their work ahead of schedule as a form of obligation rather than a source of enjoyment or accomplishment. Furthermore, limited opportunities for open-ended questions and longer discussions during traditional lessons might have prevented gifted learners from expressing their ideas fully.

Teaching materials and activities

In light of the challenges that gifted and talented learners often face in a traditional classroom setting, it became a priority to design this specific extracurricular workshop series in a way that would provide a supportive and engaging environment to learners to meet their specific needs. It was necessary to use authentic materials and up-to-date sources with special emphasis on the incorporation of literary texts, songs, comics, folk tales, myths and audio-visual materials including brief extracts and short clips from films and animated movies. This approach was selected with the intention of encouraging these learners to act more bravely and to use the target language with greater confidence.

In light of the objective to improve the learning potential and skills of gifted learners, the workshop sessions were prepared and organised with special care. A number of techniques were selected and employed with the intention of enhancing motivation and active learning. Special attention was paid to learners' abilities, preparing appropriately challenging tasks and relevant learning materials, creating enjoyable but efficient learning opportunities that will promote motivation, creativity, critical thinking, cooperation and independence.

Teaching and learning materials were selected carefully, considering both their motivational and linguistic value and their potential of aligning with the curriculum regarding specific language areas. Another factor that was taken into account was the fact that the participants in the study were from two different grade levels. Although there was some overlap between the units and all the learners had advanced vocabulary, it was nevertheless important to adjust the materials. Another significant factor was the development of collaboration and problem-solving skills, which could potentially present challenges during regular classroom activities for gifted learners. Providing these students with opportunities to engage in authentic, real-life communication and express their ideas and thoughts was also a crucial objective.

The activities designed for the workshops were created specifically for the participants keeping in mind their interests and digital skills. The lesson plans were primarily based on literature, literary texts, the extensive usage of audio-visual aids and a wide range of diverse activities and methodologies. The most frequently used activities and techniques were the following:

- brainstorming exercises as warm-ups
- demonstrations and simulations
- discussions and debates
- interviews and role plays

Special attention was paid to varying work forms in order to improve collaboration and cooperation, the frequent changes in pair and group work as well as independent learning (keeping and analysing a portfolio) proved to be fruitful. Given that the core of the lessons was working with literature, literary texts and their adaptation, it was essential to incorporate corresponding worksheets into video-, music- and art-based lessons. Contemporary tools and sources of activities and techniques including interactive flashcards, conversation practice question cards, and quiz-style activities were incorporated, too. As a specific example, the use of Graded Readers books proved to be a valuable addition to both traditional and interactive teaching methods employed during the workshops providing learners with space and time to think independently and contribute to discussions.

Literature-based activities in the extracurricular workshops

Based on our observation of learner behaviour, increased learner talking time and other perceived results, literary texts turned out to be significantly motivating and engaging for the participants. A number activities were particularly well-received by the target group and seemed to be encouraging and motivating learners to use the target language.

It is evident that the *Harry Potter* series by J. K. Rowling remains a significant point of interest for contemporary young learners. However, following an initial discussion, it became apparent that this particular group demonstrated a lack of enthusiasm for revisiting the original story. Therefore, the plan was to reintroduce the narrative from an alternative perspective that might stimulate the interest of these learners, who were in urgent need of a new experience. Naturally, the original plot and form of the series is still a great choice for using literary texts for language practice. However, in this particular case, the illustrated version of *Harry Potter* was proved to be a more suitable option. A series of brainstorming activities was conducted, starting with an examination of the cover and creating a corresponding new cover for the story, then identifying the well-known and lesser-known characters based on their illustrations in order to bring them to life through the use of role-play activities.

Another great example of a classic British tale used in the workshop series is the widely-known bear Paddington, which is a firm favourite with fans. The lesson plan designed on the basis of this tale combined collaborative and independent learning forms. Pupils practised cooperation and problem solving when answering questions based on the story of *Paddington at the Circus* written by Michael Bond, which they interlocked with a video clip extract from the 2018 film adaptation, *Paddington 2.*, where the main character and the Browns visit Madame Kozlova's Fair. The learners were encouraged to find the best possible answers to a couple of questions included in a worksheet and then share them with a partner, checking and discussing answers. It seemed that the use of audio-visual materials was an effective way of engaging learners and encouraging them to focus and work together. One strategy that seemed to encourage creative thinking was having students pair up and rearrange a list of scenes from

a clip. The ‘comics’ activity was introduced as a way of making learning more enjoyable and encouraging creativity.

The workshop intensively focused on interdisciplinary techniques as well, with literary texts providing a useful basis for practising the use of historical and geographical terminology, including terms connected with maps, folklore and mythology. Although the famous children’s book series *How to Train Your Dragon* by British author Cressida Cowell was not widely recognized in this particular group, the animated film adaptation was highly admired and was very popular among the learners. This was a great chance to make them acquainted with the original literary text, and they were really open to examining new reading materials.

A worksheet included in one of the lesson plans was developed according to the first film adaptation of *How to Train Your Dragon*. The first few exercises were designed to focus on a specific language area in connection with the classroom syllabus, typically found in both fifth and sixth grade. The following exercises were designed to be interactive, combining video clips from the film with Multiple-Choice and True/False items. Learners collected these worksheets in a portfolio, which also included a mini dictionary section, listing new vocabulary and their Hungarian translation to help learners remember the words better.

Worksheet: How To Train Your Dragon 1

Name: _____

1. Meet the main characters. Colour them correctly. *Ismerd meg a főszereplőket! Színezd ki őket megfelelően!*

colour / friend / hair / name / Viking / flying

Hello! My _____ is Hiccup. I'm 12 years old and I'm a Viking.
I live on the Island of Berk. My favourite _____ is green.
I have got brown _____ and green eyes. I love dragons and flying.
My best _____ is Toothless, the dragon. My dad's Stoick.
He's the chief. He doesn't like dragons.

Hi! My name is Astrid. I'm Hiccup's friend. I'm a _____, too.
My favourite colour is blue. I have got blonde hair and blue eyes.
I love _____. My dragon's name is Stormfly.

2. This is Toothless. Complete the parts of the dragon. *Ez itt Fogatlan. Írd be a sárkány testrészeit!*

wings
head
foot
teeth
back
tail

Watch the video scene and solve exercise 3 and 4. *Nézd meg a videó részletet és oldd meg a 3-as és 4-es feladatokat!*

3. Choose the correct answer. *Válaszd ki a megfelelő választ!*

Hiccup is looking for ...
A, a fish B, a cat C, a dragon

Hiccup has got ...
A, a knife B, a hat C, a bag

The dragon is ...
A, angry B, happy C, sad

The dragon can't ...
A, jump B, fly C, walk

4. Are the sentences TRUE or FALSE? *Írd le, hogy a mondatok IGAZAK vagy HAMISAK!*

a) Hiccup has got a shield. _____
b) The dragon hasn't got any teeth. _____
c) The dragon doesn't like fish. _____
d) The dragon shoots fire. _____
e) The dragon sleeps like a bat. _____
f) The dragon can't draw. _____

5. My mini dictionary:
Write down the Hungarian meaning to the words. *Írd le a szavak Magyar jelentését!*

flying _____ teeth _____
chief _____ wings _____
island _____ shoot _____
looking for _____ fire _____
dragon _____ knife _____
bat _____ shield _____

6. Connect the dots. Who is in the picture? *Kösd össze a pontokat! Ki van a képen?*

It is _____

Figure 4: The *How to Train your Dragon* Worksheet used in the workshop.

RESULTS

One of the most beneficial approaches to enhancing the learning potential and skills of gifted and talented learners is to provide them with opportunities for challenges that are engaging and motivating at the same time. The case study of the extracurricular workshops conducted in the academic year 2018/19 with primary school EFL learners identified as gifted and talented confirmed that the use of literary texts, audio-visual media together with unconventional learning forms and interdisciplinary techniques provides gifted and talented learners with the opportunity to further develop their skills and abilities in a supportive and encouraging environment. Literary texts and their media adaptations could be easily turned into lesson plans, worksheets and activities and could be adjusted to learners’ needs and interests. The

observation sheets confirmed that by the end of the extracurricular workshop series, the participants of the extracurricular workshops demonstrated higher levels of engagement in class work.

Several significant positive outcomes of the workshop series were observed. The learners showed improvement in the areas of motivation, problem-solving, and social and emotional development. They also improved in cooperation, by the end of the workshop series they could work in groups and pairs much more easily. It is not uncommon for gifted learners to feel excluded or overlooked, particularly when there is an expectation for them to excel in all areas. While they may possess exceptional abilities, they still require guidance and support. It is essential that these learners have access to well-structured, engaging and thought-provoking learning experiences. These experiences should be enriched with activities that aim to help learners to process information and important concepts in a creative and innovative way, and learners must be provided with content that is relevant to their language level, mental abilities and interests. Integrating literary works or extracts improved learners' reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills. Two skills were developed the most, these were reading and speaking skills. In addition, the activities designed on the basis of literary texts initiated discussions and fostered communication among learners.

CONCLUSION

Satisfying the needs of gifted and talented learners requires educators and teachers who can not only identify such special needs but are also familiar with a variety of teaching approaches, methods and techniques that are suitable for this unique target group. Enrichment and extracurricular workshops or lessons beyond the traditional classroom are great opportunities for providing gifted and talented learners with challenging, cognitively and emotionally stimulating tasks and activities.

The results of the case study conducted in a primary school with Hungarian as the language of instruction in Komárno, Slovakia have confirmed that using literary texts, audio-visual tools, unconventional work forms and establishing a supportive and safe environment lead to the improvement of speaking and reading skills as well as increased learner motivation, engagement and confidence in speaking.

Finding more innovative and efficient ways to satisfy the needs of gifted and talented learners is a great responsibility for teachers and must be carried out with special care. However, it is the only way of creating a learner-centred and successful environment where both learners and teachers feel satisfied.

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