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### Increasing accessibility in language education – the SCALED<sup>1</sup> project

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**Abstract:** This paper aims to familiarise the readers with the motivations and pedagogical principles behind the outcomes of the 'SCALED – Supporting Content and Language Learning Across Diversity' project and with the outcomes themselves. These include an open online course for initial teacher training and continuing professional development of language teachers, accompanied by a methodological guide and a report on good practices in inclusive language education and inclusive foreign language teacher training.

The SCALED project addresses the needs of both the academic and school communities, aiding educators in proactively eliminating existing and potential barriers to language learning. It incorporates empirically validated models and approaches, such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and the integration of individual accommodations and adjustments in learning and assessment conditions. The project seeks to advance fairness and counter discrimination and marginalization by fostering inclusive practices in teacher training and language education via enhanced accessibility. Accessible language learning environments can empower individuals with diverse needs, including special educational needs, and enable them to unleash their abilities and potential.

Accessibility constitutes a leading theme that transpires in all SCALED course modules and materials, from accessible instruction and assessment, through accessible and usable digital language materials (documents and multimedia) and online learning platforms to accessible and supportive language learning environments (e.g. assistive technology) for learners with special educational needs resulting from dyslexia, ADHD, autism, blindness and visual impairments, and diverse cultural and language backgrounds.

Keywords: accessibility, inclusion, foreign language teacher training, Universal Design for Learning, accommodations, SCALED

### Introduction

Variations in learning styles, engagement, and needs have always been present in education. What both academic and school teachers are likely to face in their classrooms are considerable differences in student enthusiasm for various tasks, preferences for learning activities and presentation modes, commitment to required readings, task execution speed, and willingness to engage in group work. While this is not a new challenge for teachers, recognizing the inherent learner variability among students can aid universities and schools in creating more inclusive and welcoming learning environments.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> The SCALED project was coordinated by the University of Warsaw (Warsaw, Poland) and Oslo Metropolitan University (Oslo, Norway) was the project partner. The SCALED project was funded by Iceland, Liechtenstein, and Norway through the EEA Grants. For further information on the SCALED project, online materials, and online course, visit <u>https://scaled.uw.edu.pl</u>.

Advancements in understanding common disorders have also contributed to greater awareness and acceptance of the diversity teachers may encounter in their classrooms. Students may face challenges such as ADHD, dyslexia, autism spectrum disorder, cerebral palsy, visual or auditory impairments, and mental health conditions. The growing prevalence of these conditions places an added responsibility on university lecturers and school teachers to make necessary adjustments to their teaching methods, ensuring that equal opportunities for participation are preserved for all students, including those with special needs (Garrels 2022).

A key responsibility of universities and schools is to ensure that all students, including those with disabilities, have equal access and opportunities to learn and succeed in their studies. This means creating accessible, supportive, and responsive environments that can address the diverse needs of learners and remove any obstacles that may hinder their participation. This in turn requires understanding that learning difficulties often result from the design of the learning environment and the interaction of students with that environment rather than from the very characteristics of students' abilities and challenges (CAST 2018; UNESCO 2020; Karisa 2023). One way to achieve this goal is to raise awareness and understanding of the different learning needs and to provide teachers with adequate training on inclusive, accessible teaching methods.

Following this idea, the SCALED project was launched. The materials developed in the project have been designed to support initial teacher training and continuing professional development of language teachers. The outcomes of the project target both the academic and school communities, aiding educators in proactively eliminating existing and potential barriers to language learning. The project responds to the needs of pre-service and in-service school teachers and academic teachers working in the context of teacher training, foreign language teaching (FL), and education through language (Content and Language Integrated Learning – CLIL, English Medium Instruction – EMI).

The major outcome of the SCALED project is an open online course for foreign language teacher training. A flag feature of the course is its inclusive and accessible design, following the principles of Universal Design for Learning (CAST 2018). This provides teachers with a lived experience of taking a professional development course on inclusive, accessible language education which has been designed in a way that closely follows the principles it advocates. The online course is accompanied by a downloadable, printable methodological manual (Nijakowska/ Tsagari/ Guz 2022) and a report (Tsagari/ Nijakowska/ Guz 2022) on good practices in inclusive language education and inclusive foreign language teacher training.

This paper aims to familiarise the readers with the motivations and pedagogical principles behind the outcomes of the 'SCALED – Supporting Content and Language Learning Across Diversity' project and with its outcomes, with special emphasis placed on the open online course and its accessible design.

# **1.** The SCALED project: Supporting content and language learning across diversity

Inclusive education, serving as both a fundamental human right and a means to achieve high-quality education for all, entails granting all learners access to relevant and meaningful learning opportunities that address their diverse needs and abilities. A critical element of inclusive education is ensuring accessibility. Accessibility extends to the physical, social, cultural, and digital aspects of education, encompassing the design and delivery of the learning environment, curriculum, materials, methods, and assessments to accommodate the needs of all learners (UNESCO 2017).

The SCALED project partners – the University of Warsaw and Oslo Metropolitan University are committed to equal opportunities for all. They foster a culture of equity and anti-discrimination in their academic community and reject any forms of unfair treatment and exclusion. They ensure that everyone is treated fairly regardless of their sex, age, disability, sexual orientation, nationality, ethnic origin, or religion. One of their main goals is to enable all students, including those with disabilities, to fully participate in the education process by removing obstacles to learning. To achieve this, they raise awareness and sensitivity to the diversity of learning needs.

The SCALED project aligns with the objectives of bolstering equity and inclusion initiatives by providing training opportunities for academic teachers, teacher trainees, and foreign language instructors across various educational levels. This initiative is both timely and necessary, as training in inclusive teaching is still infrequently incorporated into the curriculum of foreign language teaching specializations. The project aims to fill this gap, responding to feedback from academic and school teachers, university management staff, and teacher trainees, all of whom emphasize the crucial need for proper preservice and in-service teacher training on inclusion (Nijakowska/ Tsagari 2022).

Moreover, research studies addressing the training needs of both pre-service (Nijakowska 2022) and in-service foreign language teachers in primary and secondary schools (e.g., Nijakowska/ Kormos, 2016; Kormos/ Nijakowska 2017; Nijakowska/ Tsagari/ Spanoudis 2018, 2020) underscore the urgent requirement to enhance practical skills in implementing inclusive foreign language education. The project is designed to meet these identified needs within the academic and school communities. It is anticipated that bridging this training gap will result in numerous positive and lasting effects, influencing how teachers develop their teaching content and methods.

We have witnessed an educational paradigm shift towards considering diversity as the norm and fostering learning environments that are accessible and inclusive for all students (UNESCO 2017; Brussino 2020). It is essential to emphasize that accessible and inclusive education goes beyond ensuring the presence (enabling access to) of every student in regular school and university classrooms. It is also about guaranteeing their participation (active involvement) and achievements (success in learning), irrespective of their abilities or challenges (Slee 2018; UNESCO 2020). Well-prepared, well-trained, and aware academic and school teachers can significantly enhance the well-being, participation, and achievements of students by minimizing barriers to learning.

Inclusive teaching approach seeks to equally support all learners and enhance opportunities for everyone, instead of providing different or additional experiences only for some learners (Florian/ Spratt 2013). It recognizes the unique characteristics of each learner but endeavours to mitigate the adverse effects of labelling some students as different and the exclusion resulting from tailoring the teaching process exclusively for specific individuals (Black-Hawkins/ Florian 2012; Florian 2014). Rather than offering differentiated supports accessible only to select students, teachers are encouraged to ensure that everyone has options and choices (Meyer/ Rose/ Gordon 2014; CAST 2018; Torres/ Rao 2019; Novak 2022).

Recognizing that barriers to learning often stem from the design of the learning environment rather than the individual characteristics of students is crucial to instigate a shift in teacher beliefs regarding effective instructional practices. To ensure equitable opportunities for all students, educators need to understand the limitations of the learning environments designed for average students in a one-size-fits-all fashion and concentrate on proactively designing accessible environments that eliminate obstacles to learning and support the diversity of learners. This goal can be achieved through the implementation of the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework (Meyer/ Rose/ Gordon 2014; CAST 2018).

UDL is an educational framework designed to support teachers in embracing the diversity of learners and ensuring that learning is accessible to every student through the provision of multiple ways of representation, engagement, and expression. UDL acknowledges the individual differences in student learning styles, abilities, and preferences, aiming to establish flexible and adaptable learning environments, methods, materials, and assessments to cater to this diversity (Meyer/ Rose/ Gordon 2014). The UDL framework comprises three core principles, nine guidelines, and a set of specific checkpoints offering practical suggestions and recommendations for instructional and assessment practices. Its essence lies in establishing learning environments that align with student preferences, learning styles, and interests. This is achieved by expanding options and choices related to engaging in the learning process, processing information, and expressing oneself (CAST 2018).

For instance, to enhance inclusivity in presenting information, educators can utilize diverse formats and media, including text, audio, video, images, diagrams, graphs, etc. This approach enables learners to access content in their preferred mode, thereby minimising obstacles for those with sensory or cognitive impairments. To promote inclusivity in engagement, instructors can offer learners choices and alternatives in their learning approaches, whether working independently or collaboratively, using various tools or resources, pursuing different topics or goals, etc. This fosters motivation and engagement, reducing barriers for learners facing emotional or behavioural challenges. In terms of fostering inclusivity in expression, educators can permit learners to showcase their understanding in varied ways, such as through writing, speaking, drawing, performing, etc. This allows learners to leverage their strengths and interests, diminishing barriers for those with communication or motor difficulties (CAST 2018; Torres/ Rao 2019; Novak 2022).

Teachers should also consider a multilevel support system in which all students take advantage of universally designed environments, but some may require some additional, more refined, individualised, and intensive support. This is because universally designed school and university classrooms may not provide sufficient choice or tailored assistance that these students may need, such as individual adjustments and accommodations, including the use of specialized assistive technology. Importantly, the definition, categorization, and administration of accommodations may vary from one country to another. What is considered an accommodation for an individual learner in one country or context may, in other countries or contexts, be regarded as a universal feature accessible to all learners. Addressing individual differences among learners should be carried out in an informed, sensitive, and respectful manner. This approach helps prevent marginalization, which can occur when certain students in a class are treated differently or when some learners are denied access to experiences, content, resources, or settings available to other learners (Nijakowska/Tsagari 2022).

Following the motivations and pedagogical principles accepted in the SCALED project, the primary goal of the SCALED course is to nurture equity, anti-discrimination, and inclusion in language education by enhancing accessibility via incorporating Universal Design for Learning in the planning and implementation of courses as well as supporting learners with individual adjustments if the need arises. Special emphasis is placed on addressing the needs of diverse learners, including those with special requirements. The course contends that student diversity is the standard. It rejects the notion that designing educational environments and experiences based on an average student, using a onesize-fits-all approach, is effective. Instead, both proactive and reactive support strategies are advocated. An integral part of the course is the endorsement of an approach where instructors and teachers offer options and choices accessible to all learners in a class (UDL) in that way recognising their diverse needs. This approach aims to prevent the stigmatisation of learners as different, promoting inclusivity and avoiding discrimination. The course recommends a universal instructional design that caters to the widest possible range of learners and proactively addresses potential barriers to learning. Providing options and choices to all learners in a class helps to prevent the stigmatization of learners as being different. This approach is supported by individual instructional and assessment accommodations and adjustments which may be necessary for some students on top of the universally designed learning goals, spaces, activities, materials, and assessments.

The SCALED course also follows recent trends in teacher education by incorporating task-based instruction and promoting the model of a teacher as a reflective practitioner (Wallace 1991). In this model, the trainer or instructor assumes the role of a moderator and facilitator, rather than a strict model or controller. Importantly, many aspects of reflective teaching incorporated in the course are foundational to inclusive instruction. An example of reflective educator behaviour that is inclusive and actively promoted within the course concerns exploring novel concepts and approaches that advocate for learner-centred instruction. Another important feature is the ability to challenge, validate and redefine personal beliefs and values related to the learning needs of all students, not limited to those with special needs, as well as to take the initiative to stimulate development and bring about change. Thoughtfully analysing classroom situations and case studies, carefully attending to both what is to be taught and how it is to be taught, and exploring and implementing new strategies to ensure benefit for all learners are classroom behaviours expected of reflective, inclusive teachers. Engaging in consultations and discussions of new ideas, challenges, and initiatives with colleagues can considerably support the development and growth of an inclusive mindset among educators (Minott 2019).

The following section discusses the SCALED project's main outcomes. It focuses on the teacher training course on inclusion and increasing accessibility in language education, highlighting the accessibility features of the course design.

## 2. The SCALED project's outcomes: Supporting language teachers and teacher trainers

All SCALED project outcomes are available on an open licence and can be accessed in different ways, namely in the book/file format and the online format. The outcomes of the SCALED project include the report on good practices in inclusive education and teacher training (Tsagari/ Nijakowska/ Guz 2022)<sup>2</sup>, the online course for initial and continuing foreign language teacher education<sup>3</sup>, and the downloadable methodological manual<sup>4</sup> (Nijakowska/ Tsagari/ Guz 2022) accompanying the online course.

The report is a novel collection of chapters, a guide for educational authorities and decision-makers in charge of designing educational programs at different educational levels as well as for teacher training institutions and teacher trainers. It features the effective practices applied in partner universities (University of Warsaw and Oslo Metropolitan University) and other educational institutions at different levels of education in partner countries (Poland and Norway). These practices concern language education that promotes inclusion and training of foreign language teachers in the methods of inclusive education, universal design for learning, accessibility, as well as diverse and special educational needs. Theoretical considerations and practical solutions offered in individual chapters provide educators and trainers with a broad range of effective methods and techniques. This equips them with tools to improve their competence and skills in establishing inclusive and accessible learning environments, catering to the diverse learning needs of students (Nijakowska/ Tsagari 2022). The report constitutes a recommended supplementary reading for the teacher trainers who intend to use the SCALED course.

The SCALED course has been designed to be implemented in online self-study, hybrid (face-to-face and online – synchronous and asynchronous), and face-to-face modes. The course in the book/file format is available on the SCALED project website for browsing and reading online as well as for download and printing as PDF files. Interested parties can view or download individual modules or the whole course with the methodological guide/notes for the trainers. All files include links and QR codes to electronic resources used in the online version of the course.

The SCALED course is composed of ten modules that tackle several issues that prove critical for effective inclusion in language education, all of them linked by the concept of accessibility. The theme of accessibility is pervasive throughout all SCALED course modules and materials. This encompasses accessible teaching (UDL and instructional accommodations), accessible assessment methods and assessment accommodations, creation of accessible and user-friendly digital language materials (including documents and multimedia) and online learning platforms. The focus extends to establishing supportive

 $<sup>^2</sup>$  The report can be accessed, viewed, and downloaded from the SCALED project website: <u>https://scaled.uw.edu.pl/output-1/</u>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> The online course is hosted by the Moodle e-learning platform at the University of Warsaw – Kampus. Information on how to access the course and enrol is available on the SCALED project website: <u>https://scaled.uw.edu.pl/output-3/</u>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> The methodological manual (individual modules and the whole course) can be accessed, viewed, and downloaded from the SCALED project website: <u>https://scaled.uw.edu.pl/output-2/</u>

language learning environments accessible to learners with special educational needs arising from conditions such as dyslexia, ADHD, autism, blindness and visual impairments, as well as diverse cultural and language backgrounds.

The course comprises the following ten modules:

- Module 1: Responding to diversity: Inclusion and accessibility,
- Module 2: Accessible learning: Universal Design for Learning,
- Module 3: Accessible learning: Instructional accommodations,
- Module 4: Universal Design for Learning: Accessible and usable digital learning materials documents,
- Module 5: Universal Design for Learning: Accessible and usable digital learning materials multimedia,
- Module 6: Universal Design for Learning: Accessible online learning platforms,
- Module 7: Making language education accessible to students with ADHD, Autism, and Dyslexia,
- Module 8: Making language education accessible to visually impaired and blind students,
- Module 9: Inclusive and accessible Language Assessment,
- Module 10: Making language education accessible to students with diverse language and cultural background.

The course is universally designed and accessible to diverse users at three levels regarding digital accessibility (network availability), universal design in Learning Management System (LMS) – accessible functionalities of the Moodle e-learning platform, and, finally, universal design of the course content – accessible activities, materials, and assessments. As mentioned earlier the distinctive feature of this course is that it provides its users with a unique experience of taking an inclusive, universally designed, and accessible course on inclusion and accessibility in foreign language teaching.

The course structure is transparent and easily navigable for all users, with modules accessible through a drop-down menu on the main page and also via the side panel's navigation bar. The course design ensures multiple pathways for navigating through the content and resources, facilitating easy movement between modules, tasks, steps, and resources. This design aims to help users quickly locate the necessary information within the course.

Upon entering the course, users immediately gain access to a welcome note, a video and a text introducing the course, and essential information such as tips on how to take the course, details about the authors, funding information, and the license. Consistency is maintained across all ten modules, ensuring a predictable and anxiety-reducing experience for students who know what to expect. Each module follows a uniform structure, encompassing five elements: an introduction to the module and its learning objectives, a set of tasks, a summary highlighting key points and lessons learned, a quiz or reflection activity, and a list of resources. These resources include materials specific to tasks, additional resources, and recommended readings, each accompanied by concise descriptions.

Course users can access information in their preferred presentation mode, with the option to customize display settings according to their individual preferences. For instance, introductions to modules and their summaries can be consumed through reading, listening, or watching as narrated presentations with closed captions. Learning objectives

and key points/lessons learned are presented both as bulleted lists and audio files. All videos within the course are embedded YouTube videos, ensuring a variety of display choices. Users can adjust settings such as sound volume, screen size, playback speed, and access features like subtitles/closed captions, translation into a selected language, and viewing the transcript. The videos are segmented into short chapters, facilitating the selection and viewing of specific segments. Additionally, course users receive information about helpful applications that can personalize and enhance the learning experience while working with course modules. Examples include text-to-speech functionalities (such as read aloud and immersive reader) for documents and websites. To ensure accessibility, alternative text has been provided for all images or they have been labelled as decorative. Moreover, formatting and editing have been meticulously checked in all course materials, including documents and multimedia. This ensures compatibility with various supporting devices and technologies, such as screen readers commonly used by visually impaired or blind course users, facilitating efficient use of the course.

Each module presents between four to six tasks, each of which is further divided into steps. Across all modules, tasks follow a consistent structure, comprising task instructions, estimated task duration, and a list of steps. Tasks and steps may be categorized as compulsory or optional, with optional components providing additional materials and practice. All tasks and steps that are not explicitly marked as optional are mandatory. Additionally, modules include notes for trainers, offering ideas on how to integrate the course into classroom settings and suggestions for adapting self-study tasks to group work contexts.

Classroom management options expand when course users have access to devices like computers, smartphones, and headphones. These devices enable individualised and customised access to digital materials, allowing trainees to work at their own pace—for example, watching a video with closed captions and at a slower playback speed. Additionally, when utilizing a book or file version of the course (whether online or printed), users can either click on a provided link (while browsing the text online) or scan a QR code (while working with printed materials) to access the online version of the course materials, such as a website or video. The available classroom management options may vary depending on the teaching context, and the suggested (approximate) time for activities may be influenced by the dynamics of the group.

Course users benefit from a range of diverse options for content and materials presentation, including various formats and types of media, offering alternatives to traditional text. Individual settings are customizable to cater to diverse preferences. Additionally, users have access to a variety of formats and methods for completing assignments, expressing themselves, and showcasing their acquired knowledge. It is essential to highlight that the presentation and assessment options align consistently with the course objectives and learning outcomes. The course provides multiple assessment and self-assessment tools, along with instant feedback through automatic scoring on quizzes. Moreover, numerous activities within the course are designed to stimulate reflection and evaluation of the learning journeys and belief systems of course users, both pre-service and in-service teachers. A sample task instruction from the course (Module 2 Task 4 Step 3) is provided below:

Compose a brief reflection that summarises your thoughts and demonstrates what you have learned in this module. Explain how you can implement the UDL principles in your teaching with a particular class/group of learners that you work with. Make sure

that you include practical examples referring to goals, methods, materials, and assessments. Choose the way of expression and the format of presenting your ideas. Go for the format that best works for you, for example, draw a mind map, design a graphic organiser or an infographic, write a text, record a podcast or a video, prepare a narrated PowerPoint presentation or a speech (Nijakowska 2023: 70–71).

The course is designed to offer instructors and participants maximum flexibility. It incorporates a variety of mandatory and optional tasks, steps within tasks, supplementary resources, and recommendations for effective classroom management such as group interaction involving pair and group activities, panels and discussions, role-playing, and sharing experiences. This design allows the course to extend over one to two semesters or terms. The goal is to empower both course takers and instructors to choose activities and customise their learning trajectories within the course to meet their individual needs and learning objectives.

### **Final note**

Planning classes in a manner that takes into account the needs of students with various competence profiles and learning needs from the outset enhances the likelihood of success for all. By adhering to the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework, language teachers can design courses, methods, materials, and assessments that proactively tackle and minimize barriers to learning. This proactive approach fosters a more inclusive and supportive learning environment that accommodates a broad spectrum of students. This methodology not only benefits students with identified special needs but also extends its advantages to those facing diverse learning challenges and those without specific challenges. All learners are provided with choices and options, allowing teachers to cater to the diverse needs of a larger student population than if adjustments were made solely for students with identified special needs.

Particularly, students with disabilities and identified special educational needs may feel excluded if the course content is inaccessible due to its design. Moreover, differential treatment, resulting from the special learning accommodations they receive, can contribute to a sense of exclusion and otherness. A proactive approach to eliminating barriers to learning can mitigate this feeling of exclusion, reduce the need for individual assistance, and minimize the reliance on additional resources. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that, even with well-planned and universally designed classes, full participation for all students may not be achievable. Proactive planning should be complemented by additional support in the form of individual accommodations (reactive strategies) for students who require them.

Incorporating inclusive pedagogy into teacher education programs, in ways such as underlying the SCALED course, plays a crucial role in equipping educators to address the varied needs of every student. By providing comprehensive training to educators, we can empower them to establish fair, supportive, and accessible learning environments, ensuring the success of all their students.

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