

## Introduction

### What is this book about?

Inclusive education requires knowledge about heterogeneity. One dimension of heterogeneity is neurodiversity – the multitude of ways in which we perceive the world, process these perceptions and react to the world (Baker, 2011, Bündgens-Kosten & Blume, 2022). We are convinced that people with *lived experience* can provide a lot to this knowledge. Therefore, in this interview volume you find twelve interviews with neurodivergent people as well as summaries of interviews with stakeholders of inclusive education – teachers, pupils, etc.

### Why was this book created?

If you open a textbook, an anthology, or a specialist journal nowadays and search for texts on heterogeneity and inclusion in foreign language teaching, you will probably find what you are looking for. In recent years, there has been a noticeable increase in interest in these topics in the German-speaking academic community.

What you will rarely find, however, are texts aimed at the academic community, foreign language teachers and/or pre-service teachers of foreign languages, in which people with *lived experience* have a direct say<sup>1</sup>. This is problematic on various levels, including the level of epistemic injustice. This term – coined by Fricker (2007), applied to the context of neurodiversity by Legault et al. (2021) and Chapman & Carel (2022), denotes to following:

Epistemic injustices are situations where persons who do not belong to a dominant social group are denied (or simply not offered) access to or participation in the shared epistemic resources. The various concepts and knowledge base available do not represent their lived experience (hermeneutic injustice), and their testimony is given less weight to shape the collective epistemic resources (testimonial injustice). (Legault et al., 2021, n.p.)

In a society characterized by *testimonial injustice*, there is a misconception that only “experts in the field” have anything important to say on a subject. In contrast, the experiences of a person who has experienced foreign language lessons ‘first-hand’ for years remain invisible. In terms of epistemic injustice, this is harmful – on a practical level, as it means that teachers and students are missing out on important information, but also on an ethical level. The Disability Rights Movement has been reminding us for years: “Nothing about us without us!” (Charlton, 1998) – decisions should not be made without involving the people who are affected by these decisions. This demand can also be understood on a more abstract level: Discourses about marginalized groups should not be pursued without members of these groups being involved in the discourse.

Interviews – even if they are inherently hierarchical (one person asks the questions, another answers them) – were a method for us which allowed to engage students into conversations with experts with *lived experience*. In this way, the students have discovered first-hand that neurodivergent people have experiences which can be beneficial to plan and implement inclusive foreign language teaching. A positive side effect of this approach is that direct contact with neurodivergent people can reduce fear of contact and promote positive attitudes towards inclusion among students who have (knowingly) had little such contact to date (Woll, 2017). Furthermore, we were inspired by the literature on participatory research approaches (e.g. Arnstein, 1969; Fletcher-Watson et al., 2018).

### How was this book created?

This book was brought about by an international cooperation funded by the European Union within the framework of Erasmus+. Researchers, teachers and students from the University of Vienna, the University of Ghent, the Technical University of Dortmund and the Goethe University Frankfurt contributed to it.

In summer term 2020 and winter term 2020/2021, a total of four seminars were held at three universities, during which students conducted interviews with neurodivergent individuals and with various stakeholders from the context of inclusive education. In this book, you will find transcripts of the interviews conducted during the seminars at the Universities of Frankfurt and Dortmund, as well as summaries of the interviews conducted at the University of Vienna.

---

<sup>1</sup> This does not mean that such texts do not exist. See, for example, Fletcher-Watson & Happé, 2019; Sautter et al., 2012, and the special issue of *Fremdsprachen Lehren und Lernen* (FLuL) 53/2 (2024) on “Neurodiversity in foreign language teaching and teacher training”. However, only the latter falls within the field of foreign language didactics. Nonetheless, there are also publications in the field of foreign language didactics written by non-neurotypical authors who explicitly speak as scientists and as people with *lived experience*. Listing them all would be a futile endeavor, but examples include Jones & Noble (2021) and Simon (2000).

The method underlying these seminars is inquiry-based learning, a form of research-based learning. If you would like to know more about the seminar concept and its practical implementation: Materials used and an accompanying handbook (“A guide for implementing inquiry-based learning in English teacher education: Focusing on neurodiversity”) can be downloaded from the project’s website. A report on the teaching concept and its effectiveness (“Findings from inquiry-based learning in teacher education: Preparing English language teachers for neurodiverse classrooms”) will be published at the same time as this book and can also be accessed on the website.

This also means that these interviews were conducted by students who were in the process of developing basic research skills. In other words, they were not conducted by researchers with several years of experience in the field. The respective interests of the interviewers and their emerging interviewing skills come to the fore.

We dare to say: “This is not a bug, this is a feature!” - at least in relation to teacher training. Teacher trainers and students who are conducting an interview for the first time will find realistic examples here that can not only be evaluated in terms of content but can also serve as an object for reflection and analysis concerning the research methods. We therefore hope that students and other interested persons can find inspiration for their own research projects and for the further development of their own research skills through these interviews with all their strengths and weaknesses.

### What have we learn from creating this book?

Many people were involved in creating this book - see also the overview on pages 5-6. All of them learned a lot during the process. At this point, we would like to mention a few points that stood out for us.

#### Conducting interviews is easy – and difficult.

All student groups – because collaboration was expected to promote socio-constructivist knowledge generation and mutual support – succeeded in conducting an interview. They mastered many steps, from establishing contact to obtaining informed consent, creating interview guidelines, conducting the actual interviews and transcribing them. Embedded in university seminars, supported by peers, lecturers and other experts, all participating groups were successful.

Correspondingly, many students gave similar feedback: After the interview, they understood better how interviews work and the challenges that arise. Retrospectively, many groups explained that they would do things a little differently. What it was that they wanted to do differently naturally differed between the groups. The project was also successful in this sense, as a learning process was clearly instigated and reflected upon.

For more information on what we and the students learned from conducting the interviews, please see our report “Preparing for inclusive EFL classrooms: Lessons learned from and guidance for inquiry-based approaches focusing on neurodiversity”, available on our website [ellen-project.eu](http://ellen-project.eu).

#### If you know one neurodivergent person, you know one neurodivergent person.

We are all individuals – this applies equally to neurotypical and neurodivergent people. How we experience teaching and what we prefer in terms of teaching is also individual. In this volume, we bring together several interviews with people of different neurotypes. It becomes clear that there are, of course, overlaps in experiences – but also how great individual differences are, even *within* the group of people with dyslexia, for example. The interviews remind us that all learners – even those with the same diagnosis – have had very different experiences of foreign language teaching, have different resources, react differently to stress, and have different perspectives on school. Alongside reports of challenges are descriptions of experiences of success and enthusiasm for specific content and activities.

There is no silver bullet – “best practices” must be critically examined in the specific teaching context.

Simplification is an important strategy in many contexts. Sometimes, as a first step, complexity has to be reduced in order to make a topic accessible at all. But oversimplification can lead to the actual diversity being lost from view and people being seen only as representatives of a group and no longer as individuals. These interviews, on the other hand, are complex in the most positive sense. They remind us that a method should always be considered in context and carefully evaluated in teaching practice.

One example: structure is helpful for learners. The autistic person interviewed in interview 10 also describes how helpful it was for her when lessons were predictable, when she had a routine, she could rely on. In contrast, she finds explicit advance structuring stressful:

Those were the subjects that were already so standardized anyway, which um, because they were somehow reassuring for me, because I knew from the start how it was going to continue and what was going to happen and what wasn’t going to happen. And um that was, then I could really concentrate intensively on the subject matter itself, because um everything else, the whole structure was basically just a habit and um not because the teacher then um wrote five points on the board that he wanted to do

in this order that day. That would rather stress me out, as I said, if I then realized that the time has already progressed, and we can't get through. And then a classmate shows up and has some stupid question. And, and I always just think 'oh look at the clock'. Worst of all, when it's the last lesson and I'm still afraid that time will be added on, even though school is already over. Um, that would be very counterproductive for me. (Translated from German)

Does this imply that *advance organizer* as a method should not be used with autistic students? No! However, it does mean that the human need for structure and routine cannot be fulfilled in the same way for everyone. This also implies that teachers can draw inspiration and ideas from this volume but cannot derive 'recipes for action' in relation to specific pupils. Direct interaction with the learners is particularly important here.

### Which voices are present, and which are missing in this book?

This book contains interviews with autistic people as well as people with ADHD, dyslexia and developmental language disorder (DLD), as well as stakeholders in inclusive education such as teachers and students (without specifying their neurotype). Some particularly prominent neurotypes are therefore included in this volume – represented by individual voices – while others are completely absent. The fact that they are not represented in this volume does not mean that they are less important for foreign language teaching or teaching in general.

Most of the interviewees lived in Germany (Part 1 of the book) or Austria (Part 2 of the book) at the time of the interview; other countries (Sweden, Japan) are only rarely represented. How foreign language teaching is experienced with different neurotypes depends, of course, on how foreign languages are taught and under what conditions. This should be borne in mind when reading the interviews.

Of course, even for Germany and Austria, the sample of people is not nearly representative. The recruitment of interview candidates in Germany was primarily based on personal contacts of the lecturers and students. Accordingly, academics and university students, for example, are heavily overrepresented here. Also not represented in this interview volume are neurodivergent people who do not communicate via spoken language.

Many of the interviews were conducted with young adults and adults who think back to their school days. Sometimes their school days were only a few years ago, but sometimes much longer. Only a few of the interviews in Part 1 of the book were conducted with pupils.

### What is the structure of this book?

The interviews are organized by neurotype and roughly by age. This decision can be seen as problematic because it implies that neurotype and age are the most important aspects of these interviews. However, this is not necessarily the case. It is more pragmatic reasons that led us to do this. For readers who prefer a more thematically oriented approach, we recommend the table on page 23 for an initial overview, as well as the use of the index.

Our use of labels such as “autistic” or “woman with dyslexia” can also be considered problematic. We are aware that there are a variety of terms for the different neurotypes, that autism, ADHD and the like do not always occur in isolation, and that some people prefer not to use labels at all. We are also aware that there are different opinions on “person first” (noun “with” noun, e.g. “musician with AHDS”) and “identity first” (adjective + noun, e.g. “autistic artist”). The use of standardized terms at the level of chapter headings is in some respects easier for readers – but it is also highly simplistic and neglects the heterogeneity in preferences within the different communities.

### How can you use this book?

You could, of course, just read this book cover to cover. In case you lack the time to do so, there are supports in place for you:

- The chapter titles provide you with information about the interviewees and a glimpse into core themes of the interviews.
- You can look up topics of interest in the index, i.e. “group work”.

The executive summaries at the top of each chapter will give you a first glimpse into the interview. They will help you make the call if this specific interview is of interest to you or not. If you read only the executive summaries you will still develop an understanding of the breadth of ideas and experiences found in this volume.

Some topics can be hard on us. We have created a list of potentially difficult topics and have documented in which chapters they appear to make sure you can decide which texts you want to read when. You find this information on page 22.

While reading this book you will occasionally stumble over peculiarities related to the fact that this book collects conversations that were transcribed, i.e. translated into written language. Words in italics indicate that a word was stressed meaningfully. Three dots between two square brackets [...] indicate that the text was abridged here – e.g. by cutting small talk. Comments in brackets, e.g. (*laughs*), indicate non-verbal occurrences that could be heard on

the recording, or that happened during the interview and that are necessary for comprehension. (*incomp.*) indicates that a passage was incomprehensible and could not (fully) be transcribed.

Spoken language differs in many regards from written language. As a consequence, the interview transcripts are sometimes harder to read. We have decided, though, not to edit the texts too much. Self-corrections, half-finished sentences, etc. remain in the interviews, and only few deviations from the written norm were changed.

### What do you need to know about the index?

An index is supposed to help readers of a book to find passages of the book that might be relevant to their particular reading interest. In the case of an encyclopedia or an introductory non-fiction text, the creation of an index is a process that does not require much interpretation or subjectivity on the part of the person(s) creating the index. However, the situation is different when compiling an index for a book which consists of interviews which mainly include first person experiences. While indexing the interviews a lot of decisions had to be made: Which parts of an interview are included in the index and which are not, how can these parts be indexed to best reflect what is being said and also how can the index best be clustered. Moreover, it was sometimes difficult to find suitable 'labels' for certain situations that are described. The process of compiling the index thus also involved interpretative acts. An example could be the case of an autistic interview partner who describes that they can concentrate better when it is calm in the classroom. Indexing this part of the interview in the categories 'autism – silence/noise in the classroom' suggests a connection between autism and noise sensitivity which the interviewee did not express themselves and which cannot be concluded based on the interviews at hand. We want to stress that the index was compiled to facilitate working with the interview collection but that it certainly has limitations. In other words: The categories within the index do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the interviewees, but are interpretations of the project team.

### How can you use this book in (foreign/second/world) language teacher education?

This book is for people interested in neurodiversity and inclusion. It is especially relevant for teacher education. Interviews from this collection were used in university teaching at Goethe University Frankfurt, TU Dortmund and at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. There are a range of ways to use this book. You can use the index to find text segments on specific topics that you can discuss in your university classes. This could, for example, be text extracts that illustrate the principles of *Universal Design for Learning (UDL)*, or that focus on *agency*. Teacher education students can also read different interviews, and then discuss similarities, differences and practical ramifications. We have also successfully had students analyse these interviews *as* interviews. These interviews are well suited to discuss questions related to conducting interviews, developing interview guidelines, etc., if you utilize *inquiry-based learning* or related methods in your teaching. This is especially so as these interviews were conducted by ordinary university students (and not by seasoned professionals).

Other products of the ELLeN project might also be of interest to you in the context of teacher education. On our project website [ellen-project.eu](http://ellen-project.eu) you can access the course materials we developed and revised, a *Teacher's Guide* that describes how to use them, a report on inquiry-based learning ("A guide for implementing inquiry-based learning in English teacher education: Focusing on neurodiversity"), and self-study courses that draw on these interviews. All materials can be used in university teaching and nearly all materials can be freely edited and the edited versions shared. Please note the licencing information provided with these materials.

### And what about people who don't read German?

This book includes both German- and English-language interviews. To ensure that as many people as possible can access it, we have included short "executive summaries" for each interview in the three project languages – English, Flemish and German. An English translation of the table of contents, of the index and of this introduction are available on our project website [ellen-project.eu](http://ellen-project.eu), in addition to the version in German included here.

### Whom would we like to thank?

The only reason why you are holding this book (metaphorically or actually) in your hands today is the active support of this project by a range of stakeholders. This includes neurodivergent individuals of different ages that took the time to answer the interview questions of students. It also includes the schools that welcomed our students, and the teachers, school students and other stakeholders that provided our university students (and us) with multifaceted insights into inclusive schools. Such a support of teacher education should never be taken for granted – even less so in the years of COVID-19, which were challenging for schools.

Our thanks also extend to those people whose interviews are not included in this volume. Only those interviews where we had full consent to publish them – from interviewees but also from students – are included. Some interviews, conducted by students who did not wish them published in book form, are absent – but they enriched the course discussion and competence development as much as those printed here.

We also would like to thank the stakeholders who supported us with feedback on this book and on the process that led to this book.

We also want to extend thanks to our students – those students whose interviews you find in this collection, but also those who were involved in this project in different ways. University seminars within the ELLeN project were, in many regards, experimental, and we want to say “thank you” to the students who participated in this ‘experiment’ with an open mind.

Last but not least it should be stated that this project would not have been possible without the European Union’s Erasmus+ funding (funding number 2020-1-DE01-KA203-005696), administered by the DAAD, or without the institutional support of the participating universities. Only the project team is responsible for any contents in this collection.

## References

- Arnstein, S. R. (1969). A ladder of citizen participation. *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, 35(4), 216–224. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01944366908977225>
- Baker, D. L. (2011). *The politics of neurodiversity: Why public policy matters*. Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Blume, C., & J. Bündgens-Kosten (Eds.) (erscheint 2024) Neurodiversität in Fremdsprachenunterricht und -lehrkräftebildung [Themenheft]. *Fremdsprachen Lehren und Lernen (FLuL)*, 52(2).
- Bündgens-Kosten, J., & Blume, C. (2022). Neurodiversität– (k)ein Thema für die Fremdsprachendidaktik?“. *Zeitschrift für interkulturellen Fremdsprachenunterricht*, 27(2), 225–247.
- Chapman, R., & Carel, H. (2022). Neurodiversity, epistemic injustice, and the good human life. *Journal of Social Philosophy*, 53(4), 614–631. <https://doi.org/10.1111/josp.12456>
- Charlton, J. I. (1998). *Nothing about us without us: Disability oppression and empowerment*. University of California Press.
- Fletcher-Watson, S., Adams, J., Brook, K., Charman, T., Crane, L., Cusack, J., Leekam, S., Milton, D., Parr, J. R., & Pellicano, E. (2018). Making the future together: Shaping autism research through meaningful participation. *Autism: The International Journal of Research and Practice*, 23(4), 943–953. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361318786721>
- Fletcher-Watson, S., & Happé, F. (2019). *Autism: A new introduction to psychological theory and current debate*. Routledge.
- Fricker, M. (2007). *Epistemic injustice: Power and the ethics of knowing*. Oxford University Press.
- Jones, M., & Noble, M. (2021). “What about teachers?”: A duoethnographic exploration of ADHD in ELT. *Explorations in Teacher Development*, 29(1), 34–45. <https://doi.org/10.35542/osf.io/xautd>
- Legault, M., Bourdon, J.-N., & Poirier, P. (2021). From neurodiversity to neurodivergence: The role of epistemic and cognitive marginalization. *Synthese*, 199, 12843–12868. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-021-03356-5>
- Sautter, H., Schwarz, K., & Trost, R. (Eds.). (2012). *Kinder und Jugendliche mit Autismus-Spektrum-Störung: Neue Wege durch die Schule*. Kohlhammer.
- Schuster, N. (2020). *Schüler mit Autismus-Spektrum-Störungen: Eine Innen- und Außenansicht mit praktischen Tipps für Lehrer, Psychologen und Eltern* (5th edition). Verlag W. Kohlhammer.
- Simon, C. S. (2000). Dyslexia and learning a foreign language: A personal experience. *Annals of Dyslexia*, 50(1), 155–187. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11881-000-0021-7>
- Woll, A. (2017). *Kontaktbedingungen zwischen Menschen mit und ohne Behinderung als Prädiktoren von Einstellungen zu Inklusion* [Pädagogischen Hochschule Heidelberg]. <https://opus.ph-heidelberg.de/frontdoor/deliver/index/docId/230/file/DissertationWoll21Juni2017.pdf>

