

Learning English with Developmental Language Disorder: An Integrative Review of EFL Outcomes, Learner Factors, and Classroom Interventions

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Received: June 29, 2026 | Revised: August 11, 2026 | Accepted: August 21, 2026

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Abstract

Developmental language disorder (DLD) creates persistent difficulties in language learning, but evidence about its implications for formal EFL education remains fragmented. This systematic literature review with structured narrative synthesis examined English-learning outcomes among school-aged learners with DLD, factors associated with variation in attainment, classroom interventions, and limitations of the available evidence. Searches completed on August 19, 2026 covered ERIC- and PubMed-indexed records and selected publisher platforms, supplemented by backward and forward citation tracking. Peer-reviewed empirical studies published from January 2015 to August 2026 were screened against predefined eligibility criteria. Ten reports met the broader criteria: nine learner-focused studies formed the primary analytical corpus, while one teacher-awareness study provided supplementary contextual evidence. Data were extracted using a structured framework and synthesized narratively across EFL attainment, learner and exposure factors, multilingual and cross-linguistic relationships, and classroom interventions. The findings show that DLD does not preclude EFL learning, but development was often slower or less stable across vocabulary, grammar, word recognition, and narrative production. Outcomes varied with first-language abilities, cross-linguistic similarity, cumulative exposure, affective factors, task demands, and instructional support. Explicit grammar teaching, cognate instruction, multimodal support, repetition, and plurilingual comparison produced promising gains, although transfer to spontaneous communication and long-term retention remained limited. The evidence base was methodologically heterogeneous and concentrated in a small number of European special-education settings. The review therefore supports inclusive EFL provision based on bilingual-informed assessment, differentiated instruction, and stronger teacher preparation while highlighting the need for longitudinal classroom research in more linguistically and geographically diverse contexts.

Keywords: developmental language disorder; EFL; foreign-language learning; inclusive language education; systematic narrative review

1. Introduction

English language education is increasingly expected to accommodate learners with diverse linguistic, cognitive, and educational profiles, including students with developmental language disorder (DLD). In many educational systems, these learners are required to study English alongside their typically developing peers, whether in mainstream classrooms or special educational settings (Tribushinina et al., 2020; Tribushinina et al., 2023). Their participation reflects an inclusive principle: language-related learning difficulties should not automatically restrict access to foreign-language education. Nevertheless, inclusion cannot be understood simply as placing all learners in the same classroom and providing them with identical instruction. Conventional EFL lessons frequently require learners to process oral explanations rapidly, infer grammatical patterns from limited examples, retain unfamiliar vocabulary, and participate spontaneously in interaction. These demands may create barriers for learners whose existing language difficulties affect lexical processing, phonological short-term memory, and the implicit detection of linguistic regularities (Archibald & Gathercole, 2006; Evans et al., 2009; Kornilov et al., 2015). The problem may be intensified when teachers have limited knowledge of childhood language disorders. For example, Giannikas et al. (2021) found important gaps in EFL teachers' awareness of language impairment, indicating that teachers may encounter affected learners without possessing the specialist knowledge required to recognize or accommodate their needs. This issue is not marginal: a population-based study in England estimated that 7.58% of children had language disorder of unknown origin, a category broadly



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corresponding to the terminology subsequently adopted for DLD (Norbury et al., 2016). Although that estimate cannot be transferred directly to every country, it suggests that EFL teachers are likely to encounter learners with persistent language difficulties, including some who have not received a formal diagnosis. Equitable access to English education therefore requires not only participation in lessons but also pedagogical support that makes linguistic input, classroom interaction, and assessment accessible to learners with different language-processing needs (Arnett et al., 2014; Giannikas et al., 2021; Ziegenfusz et al., 2022).

Before these pedagogical needs can be examined, DLD must be defined accurately and distinguished from other explanations for limited language performance. The CATALISE consensus defines language disorder as difficulty in acquiring and using language that has a significant functional effect on everyday communication or learning and is likely to persist beyond childhood; the term *developmental language disorder* is used when these difficulties are not associated with a known biomedical condition that independently explains the disorder (Bishop et al., 2017). DLD may affect language comprehension, production, or both, and its manifestations can involve vocabulary, morphology, syntax, phonology, pragmatics, and connected discourse. It is therefore a heterogeneous condition rather than a uniform category: learners can differ substantially in the linguistic domains affected, the severity of their difficulties, and the extent to which those difficulties influence classroom participation and achievement (Bishop, 2017; Bishop et al., 2017; Ziegenfusz et al., 2022). DLD should also be distinguished from a speech-sound difficulty, although speech and language difficulties may coexist. More importantly, the diagnosis does not depend on a discrepancy between verbal and nonverbal intelligence, and relatively low nonverbal ability should not automatically exclude a child from identification or support unless the criteria for intellectual disability are met (Norbury et al., 2016). DLD should likewise not be interpreted as evidence of poor parenting, unwillingness to communicate, insufficient effort, or exposure to more than one language. Multilingualism does not cause DLD, although multilingual learners' proficiency in each language is necessarily influenced by the amount, duration, and quality of their exposure (Paradis, 2016; Govindarajan & Paradis, 2019). Consequently, poor performance in English alone cannot establish the presence of DLD. An EFL learner may demonstrate limited English proficiency because of restricted exposure or inadequate learning opportunities without having an underlying language disorder. Conversely, a multilingual learner with DLD will show persistent language-learning difficulties that cannot be explained adequately by exposure alone, although the precise manifestations may differ across languages (Blom & Paradis, 2015; Paradis, 2016). This distinction is crucial because confusing limited English experience with DLD may lead either to the misidentification of typical multilingual development as disorder or to the failure to recognize genuine language-learning needs.

Once DLD is understood as a persistent and heterogeneous language-learning difficulty, its relevance to education becomes clear. Language mediates much of school learning: students are expected to follow oral explanations, learn subject-specific vocabulary, interpret questions, participate in discussions, comprehend written texts, and express knowledge through speech and writing. A systematic review of 44 studies found that, at the group level, school-aged learners with DLD experienced difficulties across the academic areas investigated, with the largest concentration of evidence concerning reading, spelling, writing, and narrative performance; however, the review also identified considerable variation among individual learners (Ziegenfusz et al., 2022). Difficulties with lexical representation and retrieval may restrict vocabulary growth, while weaknesses in grammar and discourse can affect sentence construction, listening comprehension, reading, and the organization of oral or written narratives (Kornilov et al., 2015; Govindarajan & Paradis, 2019). These vulnerabilities are particularly relevant to foreign-language learning because students must establish unfamiliar sound-meaning relationships, acquire additional grammatical systems, retain new lexical items, and interpret input that may be brief, decontextualized, or delivered rapidly. Nevertheless, the available research does not support the conclusion that learners with DLD are incapable of learning English. Zoutenbier and Zwitterlood (2019) found that Dutch-speaking children with DLD demonstrated measurable EFL knowledge, although their English vocabulary, listening, and reading performance was generally below age-related expectations. Similarly, Tribushinina et al. (2020) showed that Russian-speaking children with DLD could acquire English vocabulary and grammar during classroom instruction, but their subsequent progress was slower than that of peers with typical language development. Intervention studies provide further evidence that instructional design matters. Explicit metalinguistic grammar instruction improved learners' ability to identify English grammatical violations and generalize the targeted rules, although the improvement did not immediately transfer to spontaneous narrative

accuracy (Tribushinina et al., 2022). Explicit instruction in Dutch–English cognate relationships also improved English word recognition, whereas learners following regular, predominantly implicit instruction showed no comparable progress (Tribushinina et al., 2023). More recently, a plurilingual intervention that activated learners’ home-language knowledge produced gains in English vocabulary and grammar among pupils with DLD in special education (Tribushinina et al., 2025). The educational question is therefore not whether learners with DLD should study English, but which instructional conditions enable them to understand input, recognize cross-linguistic relationships, retain new forms, and demonstrate their developing competence.

The interpretation of this evidence must, however, account for the context in which English is learned. EFL generally describes settings in which English is taught as a curriculum subject but is not the principal language of communication in the surrounding society. Learners in such settings may receive only a limited number of English lessons each week, while their exposure outside school varies considerably according to family resources, media use, and opportunities for interaction. Research involving typically developing EFL learners demonstrates that the quantity and quality of input, instructional time, teacher proficiency, and opportunities for English use can substantially shape learning outcomes (Jaekel et al., 2017; Unsworth et al., 2015). By contrast, English as an additional or second language commonly refers to contexts in which English functions as a principal language of schooling, community participation, or wider social communication. Learners in these environments encounter English across academic subjects, peer interactions, public communication, and everyday activities, even when another language remains dominant in the home. Bilingual and immersion programmes may similarly provide sustained exposure to more than one language across the curriculum (Genesee & Lindholm-Leary, 2013; Genesee & Fortune, 2014). These environments differ from EFL classrooms in the amount, distribution, purpose, and intensity of target-language exposure. Findings concerning bilingual development, immersion education, or second-language acquisition in English-dominant societies therefore cannot be generalized automatically to learners with DLD who encounter English primarily through a few scheduled lessons (Paradis, 2016; Tribushinina et al., 2020). In a limited-input EFL environment, the accessibility of teacher talk, explicitness of instruction, sequencing of linguistic content, use of learners’ existing languages, and provision of repeated practice may exert an especially strong influence on learning. Maintaining this contextual distinction also positions the topic clearly within English language education rather than clinical language intervention.

Despite growing recognition that learners with developmental language disorder (DLD) can acquire English as a foreign language, the available evidence remains limited, fragmented, and unevenly distributed across research concerns. Existing studies have separately examined English proficiency, relationships between first-language and English abilities, age of instructional onset, multilingual experience, motivation and anxiety, and the effects of explicit grammar, cognate, or plurilingual instruction. Much of this evidence has also been generated from relatively small samples in a narrow range of European special-education settings, particularly in the Netherlands and Russia, limiting its transferability to mainstream classrooms and other sociolinguistic and educational contexts. Moreover, the broader literature frequently combines foreign-language learning with bilingual development, immersion education, or English-as-an-additional-language contexts, despite substantial differences in the quantity, distribution, and communicative purposes of English exposure. Consequently, a focused synthesis connecting learners’ English outcomes with the linguistic, experiential, multilingual, and affective factors that shape them, while simultaneously evaluating relevant classroom interventions, remains underdeveloped. The novelty of the present review lies in treating EFL as a distinct limited-input educational context and integrating three previously dispersed areas of evidence, English-learning outcomes, learner and contextual factors, and classroom interventions, within a single analytical framework. It also evaluates the methodological quality, participant characteristics, educational settings, and geographical concentration of the available studies to clarify what can currently be concluded and where significant uncertainties remain. Accordingly, this systematic review aims to identify, critically appraise, and synthesize empirical research on school-aged learners with DLD who study English as a foreign language, with particular attention to their reported English-learning outcomes, the factors associated with variation in attainment, the effectiveness and transferability of classroom interventions, and the methodological and contextual limitations that should inform future research and inclusive EFL practice.

2. Method

2.1 Review Design

This study employed a systematic literature review with a structured narrative synthesis to examine English learning among school-aged learners with developmental language disorder (DLD). A systematic review was selected because it uses explicit and reproducible procedures to identify, select, appraise, and synthesize relevant evidence, thereby reducing the likelihood that conclusions are shaped by unsystematic study selection (Xiao & Watson, 2019; Siddaway et al., 2019). The review was designed and reported according to the principles of systematicity, transparency, accessibility, and reflexivity set out in the Synthesis Methods and Reporting Tool for research syntheses in applied linguistics (Chong, 2025). Following Chong and Plonsky's (2024) classification of secondary research, the study was treated as a systematic review because it addressed clearly delimited questions, applied predetermined eligibility criteria, critically evaluated the included evidence, and synthesized findings concerning a specific language-education problem. The review addressed four questions: (1) What English-learning outcomes have been reported among school-aged EFL learners with DLD? (2) Which linguistic, experiential, multilingual, and affective factors are associated with these outcomes? (3) What classroom interventions have been implemented, and what outcomes have they produced? and (4) What methodological, contextual, and geographical limitations characterize the available evidence?

2.2 Search Strategy

The final literature search was completed on August 19, 2026. Searches covered ERIC- and PubMed-indexed records and were supplemented by searches of publisher platforms hosting relevant applied-linguistics, education, and language-disorder journals, including Elsevier ScienceDirect, SAGE Journals, Taylor & Francis Online, and Frontiers. Multiple sources were used because differences in database coverage and indexing can substantially influence the body of evidence identified in a systematic review (Harari et al., 2020). Backward citation searching was conducted by examining the reference lists of eligible articles, while forward citation searching was used to identify subsequent studies citing the initially eligible publications. Google Scholar was used only for citation tracking and verification rather than as the principal bibliographic database because its indexing coverage and ranking procedures are not sufficiently transparent for a fully reproducible primary search. The search covered publications issued from January 2015 to August 2026. This period was selected to capture contemporary DLD terminology and current EFL instructional practices while allowing the inclusion of studies published shortly before the field broadly adopted the term *developmental language disorder*. Earlier publications were used to establish conceptual and theoretical foundations but were not included in the empirical synthesis. Because older studies commonly employed terms such as *specific language impairment* and *primary language impairment*, these labels were incorporated into the search to prevent potentially relevant evidence from being overlooked. The principal search logic was:

("developmental language disorder*" OR "specific language impairment*" OR "primary language impairment*" OR "language learning impairment*" OR "language disorder*" OR "language impairment*") AND (English OR EFL OR "English as a foreign language" OR "foreign language learning" OR "foreign language instruction" OR "English language learning" OR "English lesson*") AND (child* OR adolescen* OR pupil* OR student* OR school* OR classroom* OR intervention*)

The search terms were adapted to the syntax and field conventions of each database or publisher platform without changing the underlying conceptual components. The search was initially tested against known relevant publications to ensure that it retrieved foundational studies directly examining children with DLD learning English in foreign-language classrooms. Search results were then supplemented through repeated backward and forward citation tracing until no additional eligible empirical studies were identified.

2.3 Eligibility Criteria

Studies were included when they met five criteria. First, the publication reported original empirical research in a peer-reviewed journal. Quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods studies were eligible because the review examined both measurable English-learning outcomes and the conditions under which those outcomes were produced. Second, the participants were school-aged learners identified as having DLD, specific language impairment, primary language impairment, or an equivalent diagnosis indicating persistent language-learning

difficulties. Studies involving learners with additional conditions were eligible only when the findings for participants with DLD were reported separately. Third, English was learned as a foreign-language school subject in a context where it was not the principal language of the surrounding society. Fourth, the study reported at least one outcome related to English proficiency, English-language development, a learner or contextual factor associated with EFL attainment, or an instructional intervention intended to support English learning. Fifth, the article provided sufficient methodological and outcome information to permit extraction and critical appraisal.

Studies were excluded when they focused exclusively on temporary language delay, speech-sound difficulty, hearing impairment, intellectual disability, autism, acquired language disorders, or a biomedical condition without a separately identifiable DLD group. Studies conducted in English-dominant environments were excluded when English functioned as the principal societal or instructional language because these settings provided substantially different exposure conditions from conventional EFL classrooms. Research addressing only clinical screening, diagnosis, speech-language therapy, first-language intervention, or naturalistic bilingual development without a direct EFL component was also excluded. Reviews, theoretical articles, book chapters, conference abstracts, editorials, and research protocols were used, where appropriate, to establish the conceptual background or locate additional studies but were not included in the primary empirical synthesis. Teacher-focused research was eligible only when it examined instructional practices, professional knowledge, or pedagogical preparation directly relevant to teaching EFL learners with language impairment. Because such studies did not report learner outcomes, they were analyzed as contextual implementation evidence rather than combined with the learner-focused studies. This distinction prevented conclusions about English attainment or intervention effectiveness from being based on teacher perceptions alone.

2.4 Study Selection

The identified records were collated, and duplicate references were consolidated before screening. Selection proceeded in two stages. Titles and abstracts were first examined to remove publications that clearly did not concern DLD, school-aged learners, English learning, or foreign-language education. The full texts of the remaining articles were then assessed against all inclusion and exclusion criteria. Studies were retained only when English learning constituted a substantive object of investigation rather than merely the language in which an assessment or article was presented. Particular attention was given to distinguishing EFL classrooms from English-as-an-additional-language, immersion, bilingual, and English-dominant educational environments.

Ten empirical reports published between 2019 and 2025 satisfied the broader eligibility criteria. Nine learner-focused studies constituted the primary analytical corpus because they directly investigated English outcomes, learner factors, or classroom interventions among learners with DLD. One teacher-awareness study was retained as supplementary contextual evidence concerning professional preparedness and classroom implementation, but it was not treated as evidence of learner attainment or intervention effectiveness. The separation of these two forms of evidence maintained alignment between the review questions, the units of analysis, and the conclusions drawn from the synthesis.

2.5 Data Extraction

A structured extraction framework was developed from the review questions. For each article, information was recorded concerning publication details, country, societal-language environment, mainstream or special-education setting, sample size, learner age, diagnostic terminology and criteria, first-language background, multilingual status, age of EFL onset, duration and intensity of instruction, out-of-school English exposure, research design, comparison condition, intervention characteristics, English-language measures, principal findings, and reported limitations. For teacher-focused research, additional information was extracted concerning participant preparation, knowledge of language impairment, reported instructional practices, and implications for teacher education.

English outcomes were disaggregated by language domain, including vocabulary, grammar, listening, speaking, reading, writing, and narrative performance. Receptive and productive outcomes were recorded separately because performance on recognition or comprehension tasks does not necessarily represent learners' ability to produce English spontaneously. For intervention studies, the extraction also distinguished improvement on directly taught items from generalization to unfamiliar items and transfer to communicative language use. Where several articles originated from interconnected projects or potentially overlapping samples, they were treated as

related research reports rather than independent participant samples. Unreported information was recorded as unavailable and was not inferred from other publications.

2.6 Data Synthesis

A structured narrative synthesis was conducted because substantial heterogeneity in research designs, participant profiles, instructional conditions, and outcome measures made statistical pooling inappropriate. Narrative synthesis enables evidence from different methodological traditions to be compared systematically while preserving important contextual and design-related differences (Snyder, 2019; Siddaway et al., 2019). The synthesis began with a descriptive mapping of publication year, geographical location, educational setting, participant characteristics, research design, and measured outcomes. The extracted findings were then compared repeatedly and organized into four analytical categories: (1) EFL attainment under business-as-usual instruction; (2) age of onset, instructional exposure, out-of-school exposure, motivation, and anxiety; (3) multilingual experience, first-language relationships, and cross-linguistic transfer; and (4) explicit, metalinguistic, cross-linguistic, and plurilingual classroom interventions. Teacher knowledge was treated as a cross-cutting implementation condition.

3. Findings

3.1 Characteristics of the Evidence Base

Ten reports published between 2019 and 2025 met the review criteria. Nine investigated English learning among students with developmental language disorder (DLD), while one examined the preparedness of prospective English teachers to support students with language-related learning difficulties. The geographical distribution was uneven: seven studies were conducted in the Netherlands, two in Russia, and one in Cyprus. Most learner-focused studies involved students attending special-education schools or specialist language-education settings. Sample sizes ranged from 19 to 87 participants, and the studies employed cross-sectional comparisons, longitudinal observations, quasi-experimental classroom interventions, and mixed-group designs. Because several reports originated from the same interconnected research programme and may have included related school settings or participant populations, participant numbers were not aggregated across studies.

The outcomes examined were also heterogeneous. Receptive vocabulary and grammar were assessed most frequently, followed by grammaticality judgements, word recognition, narrative production, listening, reading, motivation, and foreign-language anxiety. Relatively few studies measured spontaneous oral communication, reading comprehension, extended writing, or the long-term retention of instructional gains. The diversity of participants, research designs, instructional conditions, and outcome measures prevented statistical pooling; consequently, the findings were synthesised narratively.

Table 1
Characteristics and Principal Findings of the Included Reports

Study	Context and participants	Design and focus	Principal finding
Zoutenbier and Zwisserlood (2019)	Netherlands; 35 sixth-grade students with DLD	Cross-sectional examination of Dutch language, decoding, and English proficiency	English performance was generally low relative to age expectations. Dutch language and decoding abilities were associated with English outcomes.
Tribushinina et al. (2020)	Russia; 33 learners with DLD and 18 typically developing learners	Three-wave longitudinal study during the first two years of EFL instruction	Both groups demonstrated English learning, but subsequent progress was slower among learners with DLD. Later starting age was positively associated with receptive vocabulary in the DLD group.
Giannikas et al. (2021)	Cyprus; prospective secondary EFL teachers	Survey of teacher knowledge and preparedness	Participants demonstrated gaps in their understanding of childhood language impairment and reported a need for additional preparation and collaboration.
Tribushinina et al. (2022)	Netherlands; 75 students with DLD	Classroom intervention involving explicit grammar instruction and cross-language comparison	The intervention group improved in English grammaticality judgements and generalised rules to untrained sentences. Improvement was not observed consistently in English narrative production.
Tribushinina et al. (2023a)	Russia; 33 learners with DLD	Comparison of younger and older starters matched for length of EFL instruction	Earlier starters did not outperform later starters. Both groups demonstrated a lexical advantage for English–Russian cognates.

Study	Context and participants	Design and focus	Principal finding
Tribushinina et al. (2023b)	Netherlands; 87 students with DLD	Controlled cognate-awareness intervention	Learners receiving the intervention improved in recognising instructed vocabulary and previously untaught cognates, whereas the comparison group did not show equivalent improvement.
Tribushinina and Mackaaij (2023)	Netherlands; 71 primary-school students with DLD	Comparison of monolingual and multilingual learners	Multilingual learners performed better on several English measures. Some differences were reduced after accounting for out-of-school English exposure.
Stolvoort et al. (2024)	Netherlands; 19 seventh-grade students with DLD	Two-wave study of linguistic and affective predictors	No significant group-level progress in vocabulary or grammar was observed over four months. Later starting age was associated with stronger outcomes on some measures, while anxiety was negatively associated with performance.
Tribushinina and Boz (2025)	Netherlands; 75 learners with and without DLD	Comparison of monolingual and multilingual groups	Multilingual learners outperformed monolingual learners on most English outcomes, and the multilingual advantage was not significantly weaker among learners with DLD.
Tribushinina et al. (2025)	Netherlands; 58 learners with DLD	Baseline phase followed by plurilingual metalinguistic instruction	Little progress occurred during regular instruction, whereas vocabulary and grammar improved during the intervention. Foreign-language anxiety did not significantly change.

3.2 English Attainment Under Regular EFL Instruction

The reviewed evidence consistently indicated that DLD does not prevent students from learning English as a foreign language. Nevertheless, progress was frequently slower, less stable, or more limited than that observed among peers without DLD. [Zoutenbier and Zwitterlood \(2019\)](#) found generally low English proficiency among primary-school students with DLD, although the degree of difficulty varied considerably across learners. Similarly, the longitudinal findings of [Tribushinina et al. \(2020\)](#) showed that learners with DLD and typically developing learners initially acquired some English; however, the typically developing group subsequently made more pronounced progress. The difference between the groups therefore became more apparent as the linguistic demands of English instruction increased. Two studies provided further evidence of limited progress under regular classroom instruction. [Stolvoort et al. \(2024\)](#) found no significant group-level development in receptive vocabulary or grammar over a four-month period. In [Tribushinina et al. \(2025\)](#), students similarly showed little measurable improvement during a 15-week baseline phase consisting of their usual English lessons. These findings did not indicate a complete absence of learning at the individual level, but they suggested that group-level gains were difficult to detect during relatively short periods of ordinary instruction.

The difficulties observed were not uniform across language domains. Receptive vocabulary and basic word recognition appeared more accessible than grammar and extended language production in several studies. For example, learners could demonstrate knowledge of individual words or identify lexical similarities across languages while continuing to experience difficulty with grammatical accuracy and narrative production. This variation shows that English attainment among learners with DLD cannot be adequately represented by a single general proficiency score. Their performance depended on the linguistic domain assessed, the type of task, and the instructional support provided.

3.3 Starting Age, Exposure, Motivation, and Anxiety

The reviewed studies did not support the assumption that beginning EFL instruction at an earlier age necessarily produces stronger outcomes for learners with DLD. In the longitudinal study by [Tribushinina et al. \(2020\)](#), a later starting age was positively associated with receptive vocabulary among learners with DLD. [Tribushinina et al. \(2023a\)](#) likewise found that younger starters did not outperform older starters when the two groups had received a comparable number of years of English instruction. [Stolvoort et al. \(2024\)](#) also reported positive relationships between later starting age and performance on certain English measures. Collectively, these findings indicate that chronological earliness alone did not predict greater EFL attainment within the populations examined.

Exposure to English was generally associated with stronger performance, although the relationship was not uniform across studies. [Tribushinina and Mackaaij \(2023\)](#) found that out-of-school exposure accounted for part

of the difference between monolingual and multilingual learners. [Tribushinina and Boz \(2025\)](#) similarly identified extracurricular English exposure as an important predictor of English outcomes. However, [Stolvoort et al. \(2024\)](#) did not find a significant relationship between informal exposure and progress in their small sample. Differences in sample size, the duration of observation, the measurement of exposure, and the nature of the English-language activities may have contributed to these inconsistent findings.

Affective factors were investigated less frequently than linguistic factors. [Stolvoort et al. \(2024\)](#) found that foreign-language anxiety was negatively associated with some English outcomes, whereas positive attitudes towards English lessons were associated with vocabulary performance at the first measurement point. In the plurilingual intervention reported by [Tribushinina et al. \(2025\)](#), vocabulary and grammar improved, but anxiety did not significantly decrease and students' evaluations of the lessons became slightly less positive. Thus, the limited available evidence did not demonstrate that improved linguistic performance necessarily coincided with improved emotional responses to English learning.

3.4 First-Language Abilities, Cross-Language Relationships, and Multilingualism

Several studies identified relationships between learners' existing linguistic abilities and their English outcomes. [Zoutenbier and Zwitterlood \(2019\)](#) found that Dutch language proficiency and decoding abilities were associated with English performance. However, [Tribushinina et al. \(2020\)](#) found that relationships between first-language and English abilities were weaker among learners with DLD than among typically developing learners, particularly in grammar. First-language ability therefore appeared relevant to EFL learning, but the strength of its relationship with English varied across linguistic domains and learner groups.

Cognate knowledge emerged as one of the most consistent forms of cross-language support. [Tribushinina et al. \(2023a\)](#) found that both younger and older learners with DLD performed better on English–Russian cognates than on noncognate words. This result indicated that learners with DLD could recognise and use lexical similarities between their first language and English. The cognate-awareness intervention conducted by [Tribushinina et al. \(2023b\)](#) extended this finding: students who received explicit instruction improved not only in their recognition of the words taught during the lessons but also in their recognition of untreated cognates. This generalisation suggested that at least some learners acquired a transferable strategy for identifying cross-language lexical relationships.

The two studies directly comparing monolingual and multilingual learners did not identify multilingualism as an additional disadvantage. [Tribushinina and Mackaaij \(2023\)](#) reported that multilingual students with DLD outperformed their monolingual peers on several vocabulary, grammar, and narrative measures. Some of these differences became smaller after out-of-school exposure was controlled, although advantages remained on several outcomes. [Tribushinina and Boz \(2025\)](#) similarly found a multilingual advantage across most English measures and reported that this advantage was not significantly diminished by DLD. Within the reviewed studies, therefore, multilingual learners with DLD generally achieved outcomes comparable to or stronger than those of monolingual learners with DLD.

3.5 Effects of Classroom Interventions

Three studies directly examined structured approaches to EFL instruction for learners with DLD. Although the interventions differed in their linguistic targets, they shared several characteristics: language patterns were made explicit, relationships between English and learners' other languages were highlighted, and learning was supported through repeated or multimodal presentation.

[Tribushinina et al. \(2022\)](#) investigated a 12-lesson intervention combining explicit grammar instruction, comparison between English and Dutch, and multimodal support. Students in the intervention condition improved in English grammaticality judgements and applied the instructed rules to new sentences. These gains were not accompanied by a significant reduction in grammatical errors in English narrative production. Improvement was also observed in Dutch narrative accuracy among the intervention group. The results therefore showed learning and some generalisation, but the effects depended on the outcome measure: gains on a controlled grammaticality task did not automatically transfer to spontaneous English-language production.

Tribushinina et al. (2023b) examined 12 short lessons designed to develop awareness of English–Dutch cognates. Students receiving the intervention improved in recognising both instructed vocabulary and untreated cognates, whereas students receiving regular instruction did not show comparable improvement. The effect on untreated cognates was particularly relevant because it indicated transfer beyond the words directly presented during instruction. Nevertheless, learners’ baseline performance was already relatively high for some cognate items, which may have restricted the magnitude of the observed gains. Tribushinina et al. (2025) evaluated a plurilingual metalinguistic programme following a baseline period of regular instruction. Students showed little development during the baseline phase but improved in vocabulary and grammar during the 15-week intervention. Greater instructional dosage was associated with stronger grammar development. However, the intervention did not significantly reduce foreign-language anxiety, and students’ lesson evaluations became slightly less favourable. The linguistic and affective outcomes therefore followed different patterns.

Across the intervention studies, the most consistent improvements occurred in the linguistic areas directly targeted by instruction. Evidence of broader transfer was mixed: students generalised cognate recognition and some grammatical rules, but gains were not consistently demonstrated in spontaneous narratives or affective outcomes. Because the interventions combined several elements—explicit explanation, repetition, multimodal presentation, and cross-language comparison—the contribution of each individual component could not be isolated.

4. Discussion

This systematic review demonstrates that developmental language disorder does not constitute a categorical barrier to learning English as a foreign language. Children with DLD acquired English vocabulary, grammatical knowledge, and cross-language awareness, although their progress was frequently slower, less consistent, and more dependent on instructional support than that of learners without DLD. This pattern is compatible with the contemporary understanding of DLD as a heterogeneous condition whose linguistic manifestations and educational consequences vary substantially across individuals and language domains (Bishop, 2017; Dosi & Gavriilidou, 2020; Leonard, 2014). Difficulties in lexical processing, grammatical learning, verbal retention, and the extraction of regularities from linguistic input may contribute to the uneven outcomes observed among these learners (Evans et al., 2009; Kornilov et al., 2015; Lukács et al., 2017). Nevertheless, the reviewed evidence shows that DLD should not be interpreted as an inability to acquire another language. English attainment was shaped by the interaction among learners’ existing linguistic resources, the amount and quality of English exposure, affective conditions, and the accessibility of classroom instruction.

The first major pattern concerns the limited progress frequently observed under regular EFL instruction. Zoutenbier and Zwitterlood (2019), Tribushinina et al. (2020), and Tribushinina et al. (2025) showed that learners with DLD could acquire some English but often demonstrated slow or statistically undetectable group-level development during periods of business-as-usual instruction. This pattern may partly reflect the restricted quantity and intensity of English input available in foreign-language environments. Unlike children learning English in immersion, bilingual, or English-dominant settings, EFL learners generally encounter English during a limited number of weekly lessons and have fewer opportunities to use it for authentic communication. Research on instructed foreign-language learning similarly indicates that limited classroom exposure can constrain development, particularly when lessons are brief, infrequent, or disconnected from sustained language use outside school (Jaekel et al., 2017). Contextual, lexical, and learner-level factors also interact in determining how effectively students acquire second-language vocabulary from classroom input (Mulder et al., 2019). Consequently, the limited progress identified in this review cannot be attributed exclusively to the learners’ DLD; it also reflects the conditions under which English learning occurred.

One plausible interpretation is that predominantly implicit and low-intensity instruction may be insufficient for learners who require more encounters with linguistic forms before stable representations are established. Children with DLD may experience difficulty extracting distributional regularities from continuous input and retaining newly learned linguistic information, although the degree of difficulty varies among learners and tasks (Evans et al., 2009; Lukács et al., 2017). This interpretation does not imply that implicit learning is entirely unavailable to learners with DLD. Rather, it suggests that classroom instruction relying almost exclusively on incidental exposure may not provide adequate frequency, salience, or processing support. Because the reviewed

EFL studies did not directly measure procedural or statistical learning mechanisms, this explanation remains theoretically plausible rather than empirically confirmed within the reviewed classrooms.

The results further indicate that the effects of DLD were not equivalent across linguistic domains. Learners generally demonstrated greater success on receptive vocabulary, word recognition, and controlled grammatical measures than on spontaneous narrative production. For example, the explicit grammar programme examined by [Tribushinina et al. \(2022\)](#) improved grammaticality judgements, but comparable improvement did not emerge in English narrative accuracy. Recognising a rule in a controlled task places different demands on the learner from using that rule while simultaneously generating ideas, retrieving vocabulary, organising discourse, and monitoring grammatical form. Research involving children with DLD similarly shows that lexical access, grammatical formulation, definition production, and narrative organisation draw on partially different linguistic and cognitive resources ([Dosi & Gavriilidou, 2020](#); [Govindarajan & Paradis, 2019](#)). Improvement on an isolated grammar or vocabulary measure should therefore not be treated as equivalent to broader communicative development. EFL attainment among learners with DLD needs to be understood multidimensionally, with receptive knowledge, controlled production, narrative performance, and spontaneous interaction assessed as related but distinct outcomes.

A second major finding is that an earlier starting age did not consistently lead to higher English attainment. [Tribushinina et al. \(2020\)](#) and [Tribushinina et al. \(2023\)](#) found either no advantage for earlier starters or a positive association between later onset and selected English outcomes. Although this pattern may appear contrary to widely held assumptions about early language learning, research in instructed foreign-language settings has repeatedly shown that age effects depend on the intensity, duration, and type of exposure provided ([Pfenninger, 2014](#)). [Jaekel et al. \(2017\)](#), for example, demonstrated that an early beginning does not necessarily produce a lasting advantage when instructional conditions are insufficient to sustain development. Older beginners may initially draw on more developed literacy, attention, learning strategies, conceptual knowledge, and metalinguistic awareness, enabling them to benefit more efficiently from explicit classroom instruction.

For learners with DLD, these results suggest that chronological earliness should not be separated from linguistic readiness and instructional quality. Beginning English instruction at a younger age may provide little advantage when it merely adds several years of limited exposure without accessible and cumulative learning experiences. Conversely, later starters may benefit from stronger first-language literacy and a greater ability to reflect explicitly on relationships between linguistic forms. This interpretation is consistent with ecological perspectives in second-language acquisition that position age as one component of a wider configuration involving instruction, motivation, experience, and social context rather than as an isolated causal variable ([Pfenninger, 2017](#); [Pfenninger & Singleton, 2016](#)). The review therefore does not indicate that English education should be delayed for children with DLD. Instead, it shows that starting age alone is an inadequate indicator of likely success.

Exposure outside formal lessons emerged as another potentially important, although inconsistent, influence. [Tribushinina and Mackaaij \(2023\)](#) and [Tribushinina and Boz \(2025\)](#) found that extracurricular English exposure accounted for meaningful variation in proficiency, did not identify a comparable relationship in their smaller sample. This inconsistency may reflect differences in sample size, measurement procedures, and the forms of exposure experienced by participants. Informal exposure is not a uniform construct: interactive communication, comprehensible audiovisual content, language-rich digital activities, and incidental encounters with isolated words are unlikely to provide equivalent learning opportunities. Research on second-language vocabulary learning similarly indicates that learning depends on the interaction among word characteristics, input context, and individual learner abilities rather than exposure quantity alone ([Mulder et al., 2019](#)). Future investigations should consequently distinguish the frequency, comprehensibility, interactivity, and linguistic focus of out-of-school English activities.

Affective factors further complicated the relationship between exposure and attainment. [Tribushinina et al. \(2025\)](#) found that foreign-language anxiety was negatively associated with some English outcomes, while positive attitudes towards lessons were related to vocabulary performance at one measurement point. However, the plurilingual intervention examined by [Tribushinina et al. \(2025\)](#) improved grammar and vocabulary without producing a corresponding reduction in anxiety. Students' evaluations of the lessons also became slightly less

positive. These findings correspond with person-in-context perspectives showing that motivation and affect interact with age, experience, and learning environments rather than functioning as stable individual attributes (Pfenninger & Singleton, 2016). Linguistic improvement and affective improvement should therefore be treated as separate outcomes. An intervention may make grammatical patterns more accessible while remaining cognitively demanding, whereas enjoyable activities may support participation without immediately improving formal language scores. Because affective variables were examined in only a small number of studies, the relationship among DLD, EFL anxiety, motivation, and classroom engagement remains insufficiently established.

The relationships between first-language abilities and English attainment were also domain dependent. Zoutenbier and Zwitserlood (2019) found that Dutch language proficiency and decoding were associated with English outcomes, indicating that established language and literacy resources could support foreign-language learning. Similar relationships between existing linguistic abilities and later second-language achievement have been documented among learners with and without learning difficulties (Siu & Ho, 2015; Sparks et al., 2008). However, Tribushinina et al. (2020) found weaker first-language–English relationships among learners with DLD than among typically developing learners, particularly in grammar. DLD may therefore reduce the consistency with which linguistic knowledge transfers across languages without eliminating cross-language transfer altogether. Bilingual research likewise shows that transfer among children with language impairment depends on the linguistic domain, language combination, proficiency level, and properties of the task (Blom & Paradis, 2015; Grasso et al., 2018; Verhoeven et al., 2012). First-language ability should consequently be regarded as a relevant resource, but not as a simple or universal predictor of English achievement.

Cognate knowledge provided the clearest evidence that learners with DLD could mobilise cross-language relationships. Tribushinina et al. (2023) found that both younger and older learners benefited from English–Russian cognates, while the intervention conducted by Tribushinina et al. (2023) improved recognition of both instructed vocabulary and previously untaught cognates. Improvement on untreated items is particularly important because it indicates the acquisition of a transferable word-recognition strategy rather than the memorisation of a restricted vocabulary set. This finding is consistent with evidence that cognate awareness facilitates vocabulary recognition and lexical development among bilingual and additional-language learners (Bosma et al., 2019; D’Angelo et al., 2017; Sheng et al., 2016). Cognate knowledge can also support meaning inference, morphological awareness, and reading comprehension when learners are able to recognise systematic relationships between their languages (Dressler et al., 2011; Hipfner-Boucher et al., 2016; Proctor & Mo, 2009).

The cognate findings nevertheless require contextual qualification. The strength and accessibility of cognate facilitation depend on orthographic, phonological, and semantic similarity, as demonstrated in research involving different language combinations and learner populations (Grasso et al., 2018; Kelley & Kohnert, 2012; Rosselli et al., 2014). Explicit instruction can support cognate recognition even across different scripts, although this evidence has primarily involved older and more proficient language learners rather than children with DLD (Helms-Park & Perhan, 2016). Because the reviewed EFL evidence predominantly involved Dutch–English and Russian–English relationships, equivalent benefits cannot be assumed for learners whose first languages share fewer visible lexical forms with English. In Indonesian EFL classrooms, for instance, cross-language pedagogy may need to extend beyond cognates to include semantic, morphological, syntactic, and conceptual comparisons. This is an inference from the linguistic concentration of the reviewed evidence and requires direct investigation in typologically different language contexts.

The multilingual comparisons provide further evidence against treating additional language experience as an added burden for children with DLD. Tribushinina and Mackaaij (2023) and Tribushinina and Boz (2025) found that multilingual learners performed at least as well as, and frequently better than, monolingual learners on several English measures. More importantly, the multilingual advantage was not significantly weaker among learners with DLD. These findings correspond with research demonstrating that children with language-related learning difficulties can participate successfully in additive bilingual programmes and that multilingual exposure does not itself cause or intensify developmental language difficulties (Genesee & Fortune, 2014; Paradis, 2016). Research on bilingual children with language impairment has likewise identified differentiated rather than uniformly deficient lexical and grammatical profiles (Blom & Paradis, 2013; Ebert et al., 2014).

However, the reviewed results do not establish that multilingualism automatically produces an English-learning advantage. Some group differences were attenuated after extracurricular English exposure was considered, and the cross-sectional designs could not separate multilingual experience from motivation, educational opportunity, family background, or access to English-language resources. The appropriate conclusion is therefore that multilingualism did not constitute an additional disadvantage within the populations examined. This distinction is important because children with developmental difficulties are sometimes denied opportunities for bilingualism on the assumption that exposure to multiple languages will overburden their linguistic systems (Marinova-Todd et al., 2016; Scherba de Valenzuela et al., 2016). The present findings provide no empirical justification for applying that assumption to EFL learners with DLD.

The intervention findings strengthen the argument that learners' existing languages can function as pedagogical resources. Explicit grammar teaching, cognate-awareness instruction, and plurilingual metalinguistic activities produced measurable gains in the linguistic areas they directly targeted (Tribushinina et al., 2022; Tribushinina et al., 2023; Tribushinina et al., 2025). Across these interventions, language patterns were made visible through explanation, comparison, repetition, and multimodal representation rather than being left entirely for learners to infer from limited English input. This pattern is compatible with evidence that deliberate cross-language comparison can support bilingual lexical development and facilitate transfer across languages (Bosma et al., 2023; Dam et al., 2020). Intervention studies have also documented cross-linguistic effects following cognate-based and narrative-language instruction among multilingual children with language impairment (Kambanaros et al., 2017; Petersen et al., 2016). The contribution of the reviewed studies lies in extending these principles from therapeutic or bilingual settings into foreign-language classrooms.

The intervention evidence should nevertheless be interpreted as promising rather than conclusive. Improvements were strongest on assessments closely aligned with the instructed language content, while transfer to spontaneous narratives and affective outcomes was limited. The evidence therefore demonstrates near transfer more convincingly than broad communicative development. Moreover, the programmes combined several components, including explicit explanation, cross-language comparison, repetition, visual support, gestures, and structured practice. Their designs do not permit the contribution of each element to be isolated. Most interventions were also relatively short and lacked delayed post-tests, leaving the maintenance of gains uncertain. These limitations prevent claims that any single intervention constitutes an established best practice. They instead suggest that making linguistic relationships salient, accessible, and repeatedly available is a promising instructional direction requiring more rigorous comparison and longitudinal evaluation.

Teacher preparedness constitutes an additional condition shaping whether such instruction can be implemented. Giannikas et al. (2021) found that prospective EFL teachers possessed incomplete knowledge of childhood language impairment and perceived a need for further preparation. Arnett et al. (2014) similarly reported uncertainty in foreign-language teacher candidates' beliefs about students with learning difficulties. Learners with DLD may appear inattentive, unmotivated, or unwilling to communicate when the underlying difficulty involves processing instructions, retaining verbal information, retrieving vocabulary, or formulating a response. Without appropriate preparation, teachers may interpret these behaviours as insufficient effort rather than manifestations of language-related learning needs. International evidence also suggests that professional knowledge and access to suitable services for bilingual children with developmental disabilities vary considerably across settings (Marinova-Todd et al., 2016; Scherba de Valenzuela et al., 2016). Nevertheless, because only one report in the present review directly examined EFL teacher preparedness, this issue remains contextual rather than conclusive evidence about the wider teaching profession.

5. Conclusion

This systematic review concludes that developmental language disorder does not prevent children from learning English as a foreign language, although their development is often slower, less consistent, and more dependent on accessible instruction than that of learners without DLD. Progress under regular, low-intensity EFL instruction was frequently limited, particularly in grammar and spontaneous language production, while an earlier starting age did not consistently predict stronger attainment. Instead, learning appeared to be shaped by the quality and intensity of exposure, existing first-language abilities, multilingual experience, affective factors, and instructional design. Learners' home languages did not constitute an additional burden; multilingual

experience and cross-language relationships, especially cognates, often functioned as resources for vocabulary, grammar, and metalinguistic learning. Explicit, cross-linguistic, multimodal, and plurilingual interventions produced promising gains in targeted outcomes, although evidence of long-term retention and transfer to spontaneous communication remained limited. These conclusions must be interpreted cautiously because the evidence base consisted predominantly of small European studies conducted in special-education settings, with heterogeneous measures and several reports originating from an interconnected research programme. Further research is therefore required in mainstream and linguistically diverse EFL environments, particularly in underrepresented regions such as Southeast Asia, using functional measures of speaking, interaction, reading, and writing alongside delayed assessments. Teacher preparation should also be investigated because inclusive provision depends on educators' ability to recognise DLD and adapt instruction without misinterpreting language-processing difficulties as low ability or motivation.

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