

**Isidora Drljača<sup>1</sup>**

Osnovna škola "Žarko Zrenjanin"

Novi Sad

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**TWICE-EXCEPTIONAL ESL STUDENTS IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS:  
A CASE STUDY**

*Abstract*

*With the help of technological advances, ESL students have the opportunity to study English through various sources, which makes them eager to learn and enables them to easily comprehend new aspects of the language. It is generally acknowledged that people who are open to different experiences often seek out information that aligns with their interests; therefore, they tend to enjoy change, technology, self-expression, and creativity - features commonly found in English language learning (Zivlak, 2019).*

*When the schooling process begins, students are expected to learn in a controlled environment where they cannot choose different sources but must rely on the ones provided. In such situations, talented, gifted students and underachievers are identified by teachers through various means. Exceptional students are typically identified based on their academic performance. Twice-exceptional students (2e) are defined as individuals who, in addition to being gifted, also have a physical or emotional disability or a learning difficulty. These children are often frustrated by their inability to meet their own expectations, and their feelings of discouragement and helplessness may manifest as impatience, resistance to criticism, or a tendency to belittle the task (Altaras, 2006). Misconceptions frequently arise because 2e students are often mistakenly categorized as underachievers.*

*This paper explores the identification of 2e students and the application of SEN (Special Educational Needs) documents in English classes in elementary schools. It also presents findings based on input from the students' parents, their personal assistants (where applicable), and the students themselves. The aim of this paper is to emphasize the importance*

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<sup>1</sup> [Isidora.drljaca@zarkons.edu.rs](mailto:Isidora.drljaca@zarkons.edu.rs)

*of recognizing, adapting, and implementing SEN documentation when working with 2e students, and to highlight its positive effects.*

*Keywords: ESL students, twice-exceptional students (2e), SEN papers, underachievers, elementary school*

### **Introduction**

English has been accepted as the global language among speakers of thousands of different languages (Rao, 2019) and, as of February 2025, English was the most popular language for web content, with over 49.4 percent of websites using it (Petrosyan, 2025). With the help of technological advances, the acquisition of the English language is accessible to numerous students.

In Serbian elementary schools, the English language is taught from the first until the eighth grade (ages from 7 to 15). The development of abilities, interests, and creativity occurs intensively during primary education, with the support of the school and family playing a crucial role (Maksić & Tenjović, 2008). In the first and the second grade of elementary school, students acquire the language with ease and without obstacles, and, because of that, the talented and gifted ones commonly appear. Young students enjoy the process of language learning due to the appealing and entertaining methods of ESL (TPR, direct method, and audio-lingual method). As Halliwell (1992) suggests, young children do not come to the language classroom empty-handed. They bring with them an already well-established set of instincts, skills, and characteristics that help them to learn another language (Okan & Ispinar, 2009). The problems appear when students stop showing willingness or motivation in the third year of learning when the writing starts getting tested and students' progression stops. In the findings of their study, Okan & Ispinar show that even in unfamiliar situations, the gifted children did not experience any problems in adapting themselves to roles in the activities. This shows that gifted and talented children do not easily give up and they try to do their best when they are expected to do something for their learning. This makes us conclude that genuinely gifted students emerge in this period of change. Motivation, despite the difficulties, remains and increases among these students. In a smaller number of students, high results and impressive achievement in class provide clear evidence of talent and giftedness.

### **Identification of the gifted and talented**

ESL teachers often encounter challenges when identifying exceptional students, as talent and giftedness are not always easy to distinguish. Talent is generally easier to recognize

due to the student's consistent motivation and sustained effort over time. However, many students also attend private lessons as part of their extracurricular activities. In many cases, this additional instruction, combined with innate ability, leads to exceptional results.

According to Ericsson, Nandagopal, and Roring (2005), even the most talented individuals require at least ten years of intense practice before reaching an international level of achievement - and for most, the process takes significantly longer.

The teacher and the parent are the first to identify a talented or gifted child, and their role is to foster an environment that nurtures the child's development. Parents provide the child with initial knowledge about potential areas of interest, guide them, and offer examples. Up to around the age of ten, one can speak of ephemeral, loose, and extensive interests. In the period from puberty to maturity, a process of differentiation of interests takes place, starting from a diffuse stage, moving through the imaginary stage and the verification stage, and reaching the crystallization of interests (Maksić & Tenjović, 2008). In practice, over the years, IQ tests or alternative tests that correlate highly with IQ scores have been used as the preferred method for identifying experimental samples over long periods. This was noted by Tannenbaum in his *International Handbook of Giftedness and Talent* (2003), where he also refers to Snyderman and Rothman's (1988) findings, which show that psychologists and educators knowledgeable in areas related to intelligence testing generally agree that IQ instruments are valid and useful in measuring some of the most vital aspects of intelligence. On the other hand, DeHaan and Havighurst (1961) list domains of excellence: intellectual ability, creative thinking, scientific ability, social leadership, mechanical skills, and talents in the fine arts. Similarly, Gardner (1983) initially identified seven types of intelligence - linguistic, musical, mathematical, visual-spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, social-interpersonal, and intrapersonal - and in the mid-1990s concluded that an eighth and ninth type, naturalistic and existential intelligence, also met the criteria for identification as distinct intelligences (Davis, Christodoulou, Seider, & Gardner, 1999). These findings suggest that standardized IQ tests are useful tools for the recognition of gifted children, but they capture only one aspect of intelligence. Further research expanded the topic and established a connection between intelligence and creativity. E. Paul Torrance developed a battery of tests called the Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking (originally the Minnesota Tests of Creative Thinking; Torrance & Gowan, 1963). As Boradley (1943) noted, Torrance (1962) believed that all students have creative abilities that can be enhanced. However, it is especially important to recognize and harness the abilities of students who may have behavioral or learning difficulties due to their different ways of thinking (Ahmed, Alabbasi, Paek, Kim, & Cramond, 2022). "Sensitivity to sound, rhythms, and the meaning of

words, and sensitivity to different functions of language” (Woolfolk, Hughes, & Walkup, 2013) refers to linguistic intelligence, which is the most important for language learning. When it comes to learning a foreign language, talented individuals are better than others at understanding texts and forming new messages, often while using a rich vocabulary (Zivlak, 2021).

In practice, teachers are a viable tool for identifying talented and gifted students. In addition to achieving remarkable scores, exceptional students often demonstrate high motivation, well-developed creative and deductive skills, and benefit from a supportive circle of family and friends. Gifted children typically surpass their peers in cognitive development and therefore often have difficulty forming friendships within their age group. Moreover, when following the regular school curriculum, a gifted child tends to master the material quickly, which can lead to boredom, hyperactivity, classroom disruption, and attention-seeking behaviour (Adžić, 2011). After the teacher’s initial identification, a team of psychologists and pedagogues reviews the teacher’s suggestions for a special educational needs (SEN) program, and together they prepare an individual SEN plan for the student. This document is tailored to the child’s specific needs to support their progress in mastering the curriculum and reaching their full potential. The parents review the plan with the teacher, and both parties sign it as a kind of agreement- a commitment to cooperate in implementing adapted educational methods into the student’s learning process. The SEN plan is reviewed every three months by both the parents and the teacher (Službeni glasnik, 2018). Cooperation is essential and plays a crucial role in the progress of a gifted child.

### **Problems**

Gifted students often respond positively to tasks that provide opportunities to demonstrate creativity and advanced deductive skills. However, in practice, their initial motivation frequently declines, and a lack of willingness to improve their abilities and skills becomes evident. Innate giftedness is not always accompanied by sustained effort, unlike the example of talented students mentioned earlier. In educational settings, only a small percentage of gifted students are typically identified, and many of them exhibit various forms of reluctance to learn. Several studies indicate that gifted students often feel isolated within school systems. Özge Ünlü and Yazgül Karadaş (2023) conducted a study in which 81% of 26 students identified as gifted and talented reported feeling different due to their exceptional academic achievements. A large portion of the participants (also 81%) expressed interest in receiving extracurricular training. However, the study also revealed that 50% of the students had

experienced bullying, and 65% reported problems with peers - 31% even stated that they were bullied by friends. Peer influence and peer pressure pose significant challenges. As a result, gifted students often show reluctance to stand out or be separated from the group in any way.

### **2e students**

Twice-exceptional individuals or 2e students demonstrate exceptional levels of capacity, competence, commitment, or creativity in one or more domains coupled with one or more learning difficulties. This combination of exceptionalities results in a unique set of circumstances (Kaufman, 2018) which results in twice-exceptional students not being easily detected in general classrooms because their talent is overshadowed by their underperformance in typical areas of interest.

In the USA, the concept of 2e students has been recognized, and specialized programs have been integrated into the educational system, including the formation of dedicated twice-exceptional classes. For example, one case study describes a boy whose primary area of disability was identified as reading and writing—areas that were later also discovered to be his domains of giftedness. He maintained progress in reading through the use of audiobooks, and in ninth grade, when his exceptional abilities were acknowledged, his IEP was modified to support his writing by focusing on content rather than spelling or other writing conventions (Kirk, Gallagher, Coleman, & Anastasiow, 2009). This example illustrates that SEN plans in the Serbian educational system could support 2e students in a similar way. The Serbian system promotes inclusion in public schools, where students with disabilities often attend classes accompanied by personal assistants who support their participation and provide help when needed (Službeni glasnik, 2018). Working with special needs students presents challenges due to large class sizes (up to 28 students), the demanding curriculum, and the learning outcomes mandated by the Ministry of Education (Službeni glasnik, 2025). The system's focus on standardized approaches rather than individualized instruction makes it difficult for teachers to meet the needs of 2e students. Additional effort is required to identify them, as their difficulties with reading and writing - often rooted in cognitive processing deficits - can mask their true abilities.

In a study conducted by Roid and Barram, the availability of Working Memory subtests and composites was designed to meet some of the assessment needs of twice-exceptional students. It was found that the more difficult Form Patterns tasks were often failed by some twice-exceptional gifted students due to strict time limits (Roid & Barram, 2004). From this example, it can be concluded that certain abilities typically associated with gifted

students may be lacking in twice-exceptional individuals, which can hinder the recognition process. Their exceptional abilities may overshadow their disabilities—or vice versa - so that each masks the other, leaving both unrecognized and unaddressed (Kaufman, 2018). It is therefore essential for teachers to identify the exceptional strengths of 2e students in order to adapt learning strategies and implement appropriate interventions. Without proper identification, motivation often drops significantly among 2e students, as standardized programs in public schools do not allow them to express themselves in ways that suit their individual needs. Teachers must feel empowered to teach twice-exceptional students effectively and creatively. To support this, more teacher education should be offered, such as professional development workshops focused on twice-exceptional learners (Chivers, 2012). Still, to date, scientific research on SEN documentation for 2e students remains limited - particularly in the context of ESL learners.

### **Methodology**

Based on a case study, this paper employs a qualitative approach to examine how various aspects of language acquisition among 2e students affect the students themselves, their parents, and their personal assistants. The survey was conducted at the elementary school „Žarko Zrenjanin” in Novi Sad. Three students of different ages (14, 11, and 10) participated, having previously been identified as 2e by their English teacher. Each student has a unique profile and distinct areas of disability, which set them apart from one another. However, their shared experience of learning English makes them a relevant sample for investigating ESL among 2e students. All three students are male. The parents (three in total) and personal assistants (two in total) were asked to complete the survey. The form was reviewed in advance by the school psychologist, who had been involved in the identification of the 2e students and the development of the SEN program for one of them. The teacher—who is also the author of this paper - was familiar with the students’ language-learning profiles, having worked with them for approximately four years.

Questions of general interest related to SEN were included. Parents and personal assistants were asked to share their opinions on several topics: whether they were interested in the concept of 2e and the SEN program; whether the child was interested in learning English and enjoyed the classes; which topics the child was most engaged with; and whether writing and grammar structures posed a particular challenge in learning ESL. Finally, one student was asked about previous experiences with SEN-related learning, and an opportunity was provided to express interest in further engagement with the program.

## Research and results

In the description of the Google Form, it was stated that the questionnaire aimed to present the parents' perception of how well the students were improving their skills. It was also indicated that the child was considered twice-exceptional in the area of ESL acquisition and that, based on the responses, the teacher would gain insight into whether the parents were interested in the SEN program. Additionally, the parents of the child who had completed the SEN program a year earlier were given the opportunity to reflect on his progress.

The questionnaire included eight questions, along with one open-ended question allowing parents to address any uncertainties regarding the SEN plan directly to the teacher. The questions were grouped into three sections:

1. Familiarity with the concepts of twice-exceptionality and special education needs (SEN) program
2. Children's attitude to ESL learning and their favorite/the least favorite topics covered in class
3. Previous experience with the SEN program and a question about any further inquiries that a parent/assistant might have

Parents and assistants were previously informed about the definition of 2e students and the characteristics of children identified as such. However, due to the nature of the research, the participants still needed the opportunity to respond truthfully regarding their prior familiarity with the mentioned concepts. Based on the collected data, it can be concluded that the respondents felt familiar with these concepts, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1

*Familiarity with the Concepts of Twice-Exceptionality and Special Education Needs (SEN)*

	yes	no	no and I don't want to learn more
Awareness of the term 2e	5 (100%)	0	0
Awareness of the SEN program	5 (100%)	0	0

Inquiries were made about the children's attitudes toward English language learning both in the classroom and at home. The responses indicate that parents and assistants feel the children enjoy attending English classes and like sharing the topics covered in class. Regarding

specific topics and skills, the answers varied: one respondent stated that the child loves animals most, another mentioned countries and capital cities, and three reported an interest in country flags. Questions were also asked about handwriting and the children's general attitude toward writing. Three respondents confirmed that the children dislike writing in class, whereas two disagreed. Finally, the children's attitude toward grammar acquisition was assessed: four respondents gave negative answers, and one reported a positive attitude, suggesting that grammar rules are generally not well received. Two respondents elaborated: one parent noted that the child is interested in expanding language learning after showing curiosity about idioms, while one personal assistant observed that the child's lack of interest in grammar stems from insufficient parental support at home. The results are presented in Table 2. Different methods of grammar teaching were introduced to address this lack of interest. All students had the opportunity to use computer-based learning, which they found most engaging. In addition, Content and Language Integrated Learning proved beneficial, as did Communicative Language Teaching, whereas other methods were less effective.

Table 2

*Children's attitude to ESL learning and their favorite/the least favorite topics covered in class.*

	yes	no	no and I don't want to learn more
The child likes English classes, and enjoys speaking in English at home	5 (100%)	0	0
The child likes attending English classes and enjoys speaking about them at home.	5 (100%)	0	0
The topics taught in class that the child likes			
country flags	3 (60%)	0	0
countries and capital cities	1 (20%)	0	0
animals	1 (20%)	0	0
The child dislikes writing			



in class and his handwriting is illegible.	3(60%)	2(40%)	0
The child dislikes learning grammar and has problems with understanding grammar rules.	4(80%)	1(20%)	0

In the final section of the form, parents and personal assistants were invited to reflect on the SEN program that one of the students had followed the previous year, and to ask any general questions regarding the SEN program. One personal assistant commented that the teacher's support provided additional motivation, helping the student develop an interest in the topics covered in English classes. The parents expressed full support for the SEN program implemented the previous year and for any future programs. Some respondents emphasized the importance of providing support to gifted students through the use of SEN programs, especially for 2e students. One parent asked whether the child was expected to follow an SEN program in other subjects as well. The teacher explained that the SEN program is typically written for a single subject - or even a specific topic - if the teacher identifies a student's aptitude in that area, such as ESL learning. The responses to this section are presented in Table 3.

Table 3

*Previous experience with the SEN program and a question about any further inquiries that a parent/assistant might have*

	yes	no
The child finished SEN program last year and this is my experience towards his accomplishments	-full support for this type of programs and the initiative. -the teacher provides additional effort to motivate the student to get interested in ESL learning.	3(60%)
Additional questions or comments for the teacher	-Is the SEN program required for other subjects?	4(80%)

### Discussion

The research results indicate that parents of 2e students are aware of the importance of implementing SEN programs within mainstream education. Although this is a small-scale case study, it supports the need for broader research in the future. The results are valid but not conclusive. Few studies have been conducted in Serbia on this topic, and further investigation is needed.

The collected data reflect the attitudes of parents and personal assistants toward implementing additional programs, as well as the resulting increase in motivation among 2e students when learning ESL. Respondents demonstrated familiarity with the concepts of 2e students and SEN programs. Moreover, the identification of the students as twice-exceptional was reinforced through the responses provided by parents and assistants. Specifically, all five respondents answered positively when asked whether the children enjoyed attending English classes and speaking English at home. Certain assumptions regarding ESL instruction for 2e students were confirmed - particularly in relation to areas of interest, as well as challenges with writing and grammar acquisition. Most students reported a dislike for writing in English, often had illegible handwriting, and showed a general dislike or lack of understanding when it came to learning grammatical structures. Nevertheless, the findings suggest that, despite these difficulties, 2e students demonstrate more advanced language and communication skills in ESL learning compared to their peers. Similar results were reported in a study by Alsamani, Alsamiri, and Alfaidi (2023), which concluded that although teachers are aware of the characteristics exhibited by 2e students and find them relatively easy to identify, they are not sufficiently trained to do so and therefore rarely refer such students to SEN programs.

Additionally, three individual opinions were provided. One parent shared a personal impression regarding their child's attitude toward understanding idiomatic structures. This indicates that the child has a strong interest in language development and the cultural dimension of linguistic forms. One personal assistant confirmed that the child used English outside the classroom and enjoyed absorbing new language structures from various sources. This supports the idea that there is a general interest in language learning and that diverse ESL techniques should be employed in class to help the child fully acquire the language. These reflections highlight the importance of implementing SEN support in English classes for 2e students.

There are several opportunities for improvement. Further research is needed to develop specific strategies for implementing SEN plans tailored to the needs of 2e students in ESL learning. At the same time, the unique profiles of 2e students must be taken into account.

In this study, one student showed no difficulty in understanding grammatical structures, writing, or producing legible handwriting. This reinforces the importance of identifying individual needs before designing a specific SEN program. It is essential to conduct detailed assessments of each student's learning profile and to consult both a psychologist and a pedagogue to determine appropriate measures for supporting ESL acquisition among 2e students.

### **Conclusion**

This research provided deeper insight into the importance of implementing special educational needs (SEN) programs for twice-exceptional (2e) students in elementary English as a Second Language (ESL) classes. English language learning is rapidly evolving due to technological advancements, and new teaching methods present valuable tools for ESL teachers. This is one of the main reasons why many students find learning English interesting and engaging. However, motivation for ESL learning tends to drop significantly when students are introduced to writing and grammatical structures. It is during this stage that gifted and talented students are typically identified, as they stand out through exceptional results, creativity, and sustained motivation for language learning. Still, students who show both exceptional strengths and learning difficulties are often hard to recognize. For this reason, a key implication of this study is the need for the Serbian Ministry of Education to invest in professional development aimed at helping teachers better understand the specific needs of 2e students. It should be noted, however, that SEN programs for exceptional students do not always yield positive outcomes. For instance, a study by Özge Ünlü and Yazgül Karadaş highlights challenges faced by gifted and talented students, such as bullying and peer pressure, which often make them reluctant to be placed in separate groups that might mark them as different from their peers. As a result, motivation among these students can decrease significantly. This underscores the urgent need for improved teacher training focused on the true characteristics of 2e students. Without it, this population risks being left without the support needed to address their learning difficulties, ultimately leading to academic underachievement.

For 2e students, the stage at which writing and complex grammatical structures are introduced in class becomes particularly challenging if they are not identified as exceptional in ESL and do not receive a special educational needs (SEN) program for English language acquisition. Twice-exceptional students are typically already recognized as different by their peers and teachers, so this challenge does not apply in the same way to them. They tend to

become accustomed to being set apart earlier, and any kind of additional involvement in class activities actually makes them more visible and more integrated into the peer group. Moreover, preparing a SEN program does not constitute additional work for the teacher, as certain adjustments should already be in place to meet the specific needs and profiles of 2e students. Ultimately, this paper presents positive feedback from parents, personal assistants, and the children identified as 2e students. Their motivation and contributions positively impact not only their own progress but also the motivation of teachers, assistants, and parents.

ESL learning is vital in modern society, and the implementation of individualized and modern learning approaches should not be left to chance - it requires thoughtful planning and a willingness to explore all available resources. Teachers who work with talented students must be creative, innovative, and committed to continuous learning about new teaching methods, current trends, and emerging technologies (Zivlak, 2019). Still, the support of the Ministry of Education must remain consistent. In order to design and deliver the most effective teaching strategies, teachers need to identify students' individual needs and collaborate with professionals, parents, and students to become truly successful educators in the contemporary world.

## **DVOSTRUKO IZUZETNI UČENICI ENGLESKOG JEZIKA KAO PRVOG STRANOG JEZIKA U OSNOVNIM ŠKOLAMA – STUDIJA SLUČAJA**

### *Apstrakt*

*Uz pomoć tehnološkog napretka, učenici engleskog jezika kao prvog stranog jezika imaju mogućnost da uče engleski kroz različite izvore i to ih čini zainteresovanim da uče i sa lakoćom razumeju nove aspekte jezika. Zahvaljujući činjenici da ljudi koji su otvoreni novim iskustvima češće aktivno traže informacije zasnovane na njihovim interesovanjima i da oni obično vole promene i nove tehnologije, slobodu izražavanja mišljenja i kreativne aktivnosti koje su integrisane u učenju engleskog jezika, pokazuju posebno interesovanje za iste (Zivlak, 2019)*

*Kada postanu deo obrazovnog sistema, učenicima se plasira učenje u kontrolisanim uslovima gde ne mogu da biraju razne izvore već one koji su dati. U ovakvim situacijama, talentovani, nadareni i učenici sa slabijim postignućima su identifikovani od strane nastavnika na razne načine. Izuzetni učenici su identifikovani prema njihovim školskim rezultatima. Dvostruko izuzetni učenici (2i) su opisani kao učenici koji, pored izuzetnih sposobnosti, imaju neki fizički ili emocionalni hendikep, ili teškoće u učenju. Ovakvo dete često je frustrirano*

*nesposobnošću da ispuni sopstvena očekivanja, a njegova obeshrabrenost i bespomoćnost mogu se manifestovati kroz nestrpljivost, tvrdoglavost kada je suočeno sa kritikom i omalovažavanje zadatka (Altaras, 2006). Pogrešni zaključci se donose jer se obično ti učenici kategorišu kao učenici sa slabijim postignućima.*

*Ovaj rad se bavi identifikacijom tih učenika i IOP-om 3 (individualnim obrazovnim planom) i učenika na časovima engleskog jezika u osnovnim školama. Pored toga, ovaj rad prikazuje rezultate dobijene uz pomoć roditelja 2i učenika, dečijih ličnih asistenata (ukoliko ih je bilo) i 2i dece. Cilj ovog rada je da naglasi važnost prepoznavanja, adaptiranja i implementiranja IOP-3 programa pri radu sa 2i učenicima i da prikaže pozitivne aspekte ovakvog rada.*

*Ključne reči: učenici Engleskog jezika kao prvog stranog jezika, dvostruko izuzetni učenici(2i), IOP-3 program, učenici sa slabijim postignućima, osnovna škola*

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