



AI-BASED TOOLS TO SCAFFOLD STUDENTS WITH SPECIFIC LEARNING DISORDERS

The Inclusive Learning Course at the University of Bari Aldo Moro

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Abstract

(EN) This article discusses the second edition of the *Inclusive Learning* programme, implemented at the Language Centre of the University of Bari to teach English to students with Specific Learning Disorders. Building on established methods (video-based teaching, grammar through music, Test-Teach-Test, digital mediators), the main innovation in this edition was the integration of AI-based tools to enhance scaffolding and accessibility in language learning. All participants successfully completed the course and gave positive feedback.

KEYWORDS: Inclusive Learning; Artificial Intelligence; Inclusion; Specific Learning Disorders; Linguistic accessibility.

(ITA) In questo articolo viene presentata la seconda edizione del corso *Inclusive Learning*, realizzato presso il Centro linguistico dell'Università di Bari per insegnare l'inglese a studenti con Disturbi Specifici dell'Apprendimento. Basandosi su metodi consolidati (insegnamento basato su video, grammatica attraverso la musica, *Test-Teach-Test*, mediatori digitali), la principale innovazione di questa edizione è stata l'integrazione di strumenti basati sull'Intelligenza Artificiale per migliorare l'accessibilità nell'apprendimento delle lingue. Tutti i partecipanti hanno completato con successo il corso e hanno fornito feedback positivi.

PAROLE CHIAVE: Apprendimento inclusivo; Intelligenza artificiale; Inclusione; Disturbi Specifici dell'Apprendimento; Accessibilità linguistica.

1. Introduction

The University Language Centre of the University of Bari Aldo Moro, in collaboration with the University's *Disability and Specific Learning Disorders (SLD) Service*, implemented the second



edition¹ of the *Inclusive Learning* program during the 2024/2025 academic year. This learning initiative has been designed to develop an innovative English language course tailored for university students with Specific Learning Disorders. In more detail, the *Inclusive Learning* course wanted to offer volunteer students the opportunity to attend an accessible English language course. The main innovation of the second edition of the course compared to the first one was the introduction of selected digital tools based on Artificial Intelligence, used for educational purposes to strengthen scaffolding mechanisms and improve linguistic accessibility.

2. Motivation

With the aim of achieving a «just, equitable, tolerant and socially inclusive world, where the needs of the most vulnerable are met», the United Nations 2030 Agenda, in Goal 4, calls on member countries to ensure «inclusive and equitable quality education», promoting lifelong learning for all. Furthermore, starting from the assumption that «every student is equally important», UNESCO argues that «education can contribute to building inclusive societies if it considers student diversity not as a problem but as a challenge: identifying individual talent in all its forms and creating the conditions in which it can flourish²».

The acronym S.L.D. (D.S.A. in Italian) refers to the macro-category of Specific Developmental Learning Disorders recognised by Italian Law 170/2010, such as dyslexia, dysgraphia, dysorthography and dyscalculia. The regulatory protection of specific learning disorders has led to the need for educational institutions, including universities, to implement «special dispensatory and compensatory measures for teaching flexibility», as well as «appropriate forms of assessment and evaluation» for students diagnosed with SLD. As «educational and teaching support measures», the law provides for «the use of individualised and personalised teaching [...] that also takes into account the specific characteristics of the individuals [...] (as well as) the introduction of compensatory tools, including alternative learning methods and information technology» (Law 170/2010, Art. 5³), which are essential for facilitating learning processes and compensating for students' learning disorders.

The CNUDD Guidelines (2024⁴), approved by the National University Conference of Delegates for Inclusion, represent an emerging reference framework for inclusive practices in Italian universities, addressing students with disabilities, SLD, and other special educational needs across academic life and learning environments, including curriculum and support services. These guidelines emphasise the need to adopt accessible curricula, multimodal teaching strategies, and tailored support.

As a direct consequence of all these premises, the *Inclusive Learning course* represented a concrete response to the law requirement and an opportunity for inclusive language training for students with Specific Learning Disorders (SLD) attending the university.

¹ Maffione, L., 2024, “Progettazione, metodologie e tecnologie didattiche per l’insegnamento della lingua inglese a studenti con DSA” in *Cross-Media Languages. Applied Research, Digital Tools and Methodologies*, 2, 77-88.

² UNESCO, *Inclusion in Education: all means all*, 2021: 7.

³ See Law No. 170 of 8 October 2010, ‘*New regulations on specific learning disorders in schools*. The subsequent MIUR Ministerial Directive of 27 December 2012 ‘*Intervention tools for pupils with special educational needs and territorial organisation for school inclusion*’ introduced the acronym SEN, Special Educational Needs (BES in Italian), to bring together under a single macro-category students with Special Educational Needs such as disabilities, Specific Developmental Disorders including SLDs, ADHD, Cognitive Borderline Disorders, Non-specific Learning Disorders, Mood disorders, Anxiety Disorders; students with socio-economic, linguistic and cultural disadvantages and students with high cognitive potential.

⁴https://www2.cruil.it/cruil/cnudd/Llinee_guida_CNUDD/LINEE_GUIDA_CNUDD_2014.pdf

3. Theoretical Framework

Artificial Intelligence can be considered the heart of a technological renewal that is profoundly transforming education, and it is having a profound impact on learning and teaching practices as a whole.

The growing centrality of AI in education is recognised at the European policy level through DigComp 2.2, the European Digital Competence Framework for Citizens, which introduces significant updates concerning citizens' ability to acquire, understand, and consciously use skills related to Artificial Intelligence, now considered essential components of advanced digital literacy. The framework explicitly encourages the development of AI-generated content through creative tools for automated text, image, and video production, simultaneously highlighting the importance of teaching also accuracy, copyright compliance, and ethical awareness.

From a pedagogical perspective, AI offers new opportunities to rethink learning design to go beyond mere content transmission methods. As Mollick notes, «thanks to AI, different tasks will be possible, and we will be able to generate new pedagogical approaches to keep pace with students' aspirations» (Mollick, 2025: 129). Such innovation must be guided by a balanced approach, where there is an integration of «AI into the learning process without compromising the development of fundamental skills» (Mollick, 2025: 128). Similarly, Cinganotto argues that «AI plays a crucial role in shaping learning designs and pedagogical strategies to achieve a high level of educational efficacy», because it allows learners to become «evaluators, critical thinkers, and knowledge creators», thereby shifting the focus from the content acquisition to the learning process itself (Cinganotto, 2025: 34).

However, this pedagogical shift due to the advent of artificial intelligence requires a redefinition of the role of the teacher, who is nowadays increasingly called upon to be a facilitator of learning and a mediator between technology and pedagogy as well. In this regard, Cinganotto emphasises that «teachers, as key facilitators of learning, must not only promote innovative pedagogical practices but also play a crucial role in promoting digital literacy and AI literacy, as well as the critical implementation of AI in formal educational contexts» (Cinganotto, 2025: 2).

The pedagogical potentialities of AI also lie in its ability to respond to students' specific preferences by providing personalised learning environments tailored to students' needs and preferences (Betal 2023: 2). In this sense, within inclusive educational contexts, AI-based technological tools could be used as *scaffolding devices* that enhance students' access, participation, and agency during their learning processes. The precious pedagogical aid provided by AI could be especially useful in Foreign Language Education for students with Specific Learning Disorders (SLD). These learners usually experience persistent difficulties in phonology, morphosyntax, vocabulary acquisition, decoding processes, lexical retrieval, and in using language effectively for social interaction. Consequently, the accessibility of the linguistic learning process for these students could be guaranteed by designing inclusive AI-based training pathways, capable of addressing their «Specific Language Needs» (Daloiso 2016) and to provide multiple ways to access input with multimodal mediators. By the combination of the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) – of its principles of multiple means of representation, action, expression, and engagement (cfr. Murawski et al. in Dell'Anna 2021: 13) – and an informed use of AI-based tools, it could be possible to enhance accessibility, personalisation, and learner agency, while supporting the development of students' linguistic competence.

4. Participants' learning profiles and needs analysis

The participants in the second edition of the *Inclusive Learning* B1 educational programme were 7 volunteers (4 girls and 3 boys) from various degree courses at the University of Bari Aldo Moro, with

different cultural backgrounds and fields of study. Specifically, there was 1 Biology student, 2 Animal Science students, 1 History student, 1 Political Science student and 1 Sports Science student.

With the aim of designing the course in line with the students' needs, during the first lesson they were asked to answer some questions to find out about their learning profile, their difficulties in studying English, their preferences and any requests that the teacher should take into account when designing the course. 66.7% of them said they had dyslexia, 16.7% dysorthography, and another 16.7% a combined disorder that included dyslexia, dysgraphia, and dysorthography. They were asked which aspects of English they found most difficult, and the items that received the most votes included grammar (83.3%), vocabulary (83.3%) and speaking (66.7%). Furthermore, 66.7% of participants stated that they had difficulty understanding the meaning of a text in English as well as remembering information after reading it. All respondents (100%) reported difficulty organising their ideas when writing in English, and 83.3% had difficulty in remembering the correct spelling of English words. In addition, 50% of students also reported difficulty in understanding spoken English.

As for their learning preferences, 83% of course participants preferred to learn English through interactive activities such as games or quizzes, while 66.7% preferred practical exercises and classroom lessons. As for compensatory learning tools, 83% of participants identified concept maps, tables and structured diagrams as the most useful aids. In addition, 50% considered the use of visual aids for study, such as images and graphs, to be very effective. Among the topics that students expressed interest in exploring further were those related to travel and employment. Finally, when asked about the factors that most contributed to overcoming difficulties in learning English, 66% of respondents emphasised that the support provided by teachers was the most significant, followed by visual aids and the personalisation of teaching materials.

5. Methodological Design

Given the positive results obtained from the first edition of the educational experiment, most of the methodological strategies that characterised the previous edition were deliberately incorporated into the design of the second edition of the *Inclusive Learning* course. In particular, the methodological structure of the course was characterised by the following choices:

- implementation of a multimodal pedagogy, focused on the diversification of inputs and activities to be carried out through the use of popular songs, quizzes, riddle activities, mind maps, and audio and video supports;
- attention to cognitive load, applying lessons divided into blocks and systematic repetition and reformulation of linguistic inputs at the beginning and end of each training session to ensure redundancy and support students' memory;
- the use of AI-based activities to improve accessibility and learner agency;
- application of Universal Design for Learning principles throughout the course, designing activities and materials to accommodate students' different learning styles and personal sensory preferences, because, as Rose and Meyer argue, «learning is enhanced when information is presented in multiple modalities and learners are allowed flexible ways to express what they know» (2002: 76).

5.1 Implementation of UDL principles with Choice Board

The UDL principles have been implemented, thanks to the use of an AI-based tool, called *Choice Board*, available within the website of *MagicSchool*⁵.

⁵*MagicSchool* (<https://www.magicschool.ai/>) is an AI-driven educational platform designed to support educators and students by enhancing learning experiences through tailored generative tools. The platform offers a comprehensive suite

The Choice Board provides structured options for learning activities that can vary in terms of modality, level of support and means of expression, thus promoting student autonomy, motivation and equitable access. It is a student-centred teaching tool that promotes inclusive learning by offering different paths to achieve the same learning objectives. Based on the principles of Universal Design for Learning, the use of this design tool allows teachers to proactively address learner variability and reduce barriers to participation, enabling all students, especially those with Special Educational and Language Needs, to interact meaningfully with content through differentiated but aligned tasks. In more detail, students were given the autonomy to select the activity they wished to complete among those suggested on the board (see Figure 1). Consequently, personalization was not imposed or predetermined by the teacher; rather, students actively chose the task they perceived as most aligned with their individual learning preferences. This learner-centred approach could foster students' engagement and motivation for the task execution. This activity with the *Choice Board* was usually assigned as homework, with the twofold aim of giving students the chance to consolidate the grammar rules or vocabulary introduced, as well as complete the task with all the time they needed. The follow-up phase was conducted in the following lesson, when each student was invited to present the completed chosen task and share it with the other students. This collective moment of presentation and discussion functioned as an opportunity for guided revision, peer learning, and fostering active participation.

CHOOSE ONE ACTIVITY TO DO AMONG THE FOLLOWING:

HOMEWORK

Assignment Title	Assignment Description
Role Play Scenarios	Create a short skit using present continuous and simple tenses in dialogue.
Daily Journal Entries	Write three journal entries describing your daily activities using present simple.
Picture Descriptions	Choose a picture and describe it using present continuous and possessive adjectives.
Peer Interviews	Conduct an interview with a classmate, focusing on using present simple and pronouns.
Grammar Quiz Creation	Create a quiz for classmates covering present continuous, present simple, and possessive pronouns.
Video Presentation	Record a video explaining the differences between present simple and present continuous with examples.
Online Discussion Board	Participate in an online forum discussing hobbies using present continuous and possessive adjectives.
Creative Story Writing	Write a short story incorporating both present simple and continuous, along with possessive adjectives.
Interactive Games	Design a game (like a board game or card game) that helps practice the target grammar points.

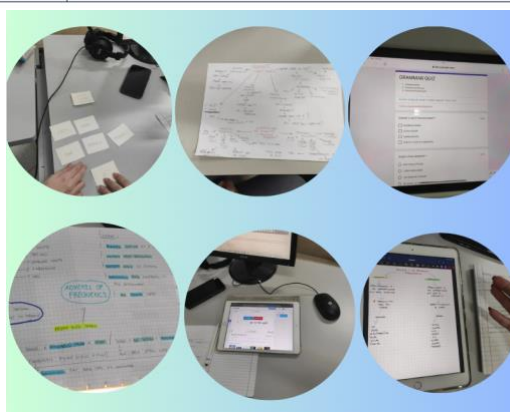


Figure 1.
Example of a Choice board activity.

of AI tools to assist with lesson planning, differentiation, assessment creation, individualized education programs, and communication, with the aim of improving student outcomes.

5.2 Ai-based tools for scaffolding productive skills

The innovative teaching tools and strategies, differently from the ones used during the first edition of the course, involved the proposal of guided educational use of various digital tools based on Artificial Intelligence, to provide scaffolding during the production and consolidation phases of each lesson. During the inclusive learning course, various artificial intelligence tools were used to support students in the difficult phase of writing in English. Among these:

- *Gemini*

For example, students were guided in the use of Gemini to correct short written texts, encouraging them to reflect on the grammar and structures used. The prompt was initially provided by the teacher, after which the students proceeded to work independently. During a study session on the use and difference between two verb tenses (present simple and present progressive), they were asked to write a few sentences on the topic and correct them using Gemini. The prompt provided was as follows: “*Correct the following sentences, checking not only for spelling mistakes, but also whether the present simple and present progressive are used correctly*”.

Another possible use of Gemini was for generating pictures starting from written prompts given by students. This approach integrates written production with visual elements, whereby students were required to recreate given photographs through prompts written in English. More specifically, students were asked to recreate two images with contrasting elements by writing a suitable prompt in Gemini to generate an image closely resembling the original one. This activity encouraged purposeful use of language, and it was also engaging because once the photo was shared, it was possible to decide who had generated the photo closest to the original one, creating a kind of competition.

- *Quillbot*⁶

Another valuable tool proposed during the course as an aid during writing sessions was QuillBot. QuillBot is an artificial intelligence-based digital platform, originally designed to support academic writing and text revision. Its main features include paraphrasing, grammar checking, summarising, and vocabulary support tools. This AI-based tool was used as an inclusive tool during the course because it provided support to students with syntactic organisation and lexical choice issues. More specifically, thanks to the use of the grammar checker and paraphrasing functions, students were helped to revise their texts in a guided manner, developing linguistic awareness and maintaining their active role in the writing process. For example, during a writing session, students were asked to write a text about predictions for the year 2050, and the text was developed and checked independently by the students using QuillBot's functions. The learners were unfamiliar with the tool and were excited to discover it.

- *InVideo.io*⁷

To enhance motivation and engagement during written production, learners were asked to copy and paste a text they had composed within a video-generation platform, that is, InVideo.io. This is an AI-based tool that enables users to transform written scripts into short videos by automatically combining text with images, animations, and audio-visual elements. This tool supported multimodal learning — allowing students to translate linguistic content into visual narratives and visualize their written work — with the aim to encourage a better understanding and a greater engagement with content by «translating meaning across modes» (Kress, 2010: 27). The resulting videos were shared on a Padlet, a collaborative digital space, in which each student could show their work to classmates. This sharing phase encouraged reflection on learning outcomes, fostered peer awareness, and promoted a sense of accomplishment. As noted by Robin, digital storytelling environments support learner agency and motivation by enabling students to «create, share, and reflect on their own learning products» (Robin, 2008: 224). From an inclusive perspective, the activity aligns with Universal Design for Learning

⁶ <https://quillbot.com/>

⁷ <https://invideo.io/>

principles by offering multiple means of representation and expression, which are known to reduce barriers and support meaningful participation for diverse learners (Rose & Meyer, 2002: 76).

- *Mizou*⁸

Another AI-powered tool used during the course to support students while they were practising writing skills is Mizou. Mizou is an AI-powered educational platform designed to support interactive learning through conversational chatbots. It could allow teachers to create pre-trained chatbots and engage students in structured dialogues in keeping with specific learning objectives, such as practising grammatical structures or reviewing content knowledge. Specifically, during a lesson, students were asked to have a brief written conversation with a chatbot in Mizou using the passive structure. This interaction with the chatbot not only ensured their engagement during the activity, but also offered them immediate feedback, with a consequent reduction of performance anxiety. The active and dialogic learning promoted by Mizou resulted to be much more motivating than isolated formal exercises.

- *Gliglish*⁹

During the *Inclusive learning* course even oral production has been practised, thanks to the use of an AI-based tool called Gliglish. Gliglish is an educational tool which allows to practise speaking skills by simulating realistic conversations within several communicative scenarios (job interviews, travel, greetings, etc.). Pretending real-life communicative situations has made language learning more immersive, while trying to enhance learners' fluency.

The platform adapts its linguistic content on each students' needs, becoming in this way an educational tool for promoting self-regulation and metacognitive skills. Moreover, it provides feedback on the learner's linguistic output and the *check function* informs them of any mistakes made, also suggesting corrections and alternative forms. During the course this tool was introduced by the teacher in response to the learners' request of practising more speaking skills while keeping low their strong «language anxiety» (Daloiso, Ghirarduzzi 2025: 341). It was used autonomously by learners to improve during study at home at their pace.

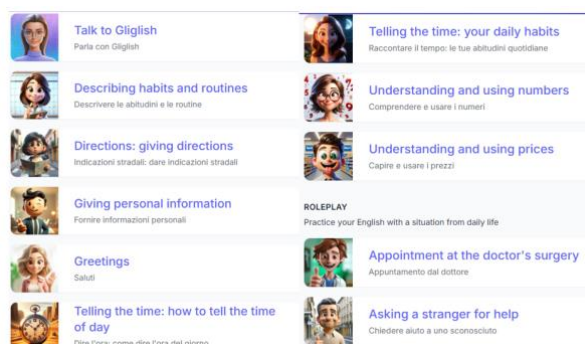


Figure 2
Scenarios available in Gliglish

5.3 Ai-based tools for scaffolding receptive skills

Considering that English language receptive skills are particularly challenging for students with Specific Learning Disorders, as their decoding difficulties place significant demands on working memory and interfere with comprehension (Snowling, 2000: 4), during *Inclusive Learning Course* the AI-based tool *Suno*¹⁰ was used to support grammar learning. The combination of grammar with music was applied also in the second edition of the course, because - as Murphey observed - «songs

⁸ <https://mizou.com/explore>

⁹ <https://gliglish.com/intl/it>

¹⁰ <https://suno.com/home>

stick in the head much more easily than words or phrases learned in other ways» (1992: 3), and they «facilitate memorization and language awareness by combining linguistic input with rhythm and melody, which enhance recall and engagement» (Murphey, 1992: 3). Moreover, music-based activities represent a multimodal way of learning, as they allow to integrate verbal, auditory, and emotional channels, in line with Universal Design for Learning principles.

More specifically, during the course students were asked to choose a grammatical rule studied in class and, as homework, transform it into a song with the help of *Suno* platform. This unusual task required learners to actively manipulate linguistic forms and embed them in a rhythmic and melodic structure, while promoting a retention of the grammatical input. Each song created by the students was shared with the rest of the class, allowing all participants to listen to their peers' productions.

- *Zenmic*¹¹

To further enhance grammatical competence, the teacher made use of the tool *Zenmic* to convert a text into a podcast about the use of the English articles. With the podcast, students were involved in a fill-in-the-gap exercise as a while-listening activity. Since not all students were able to identify all the missing words during the listening in-class activity, they could listen to the podcast at home, revise the content at their own pace and accomplish the task beyond the classroom setting.

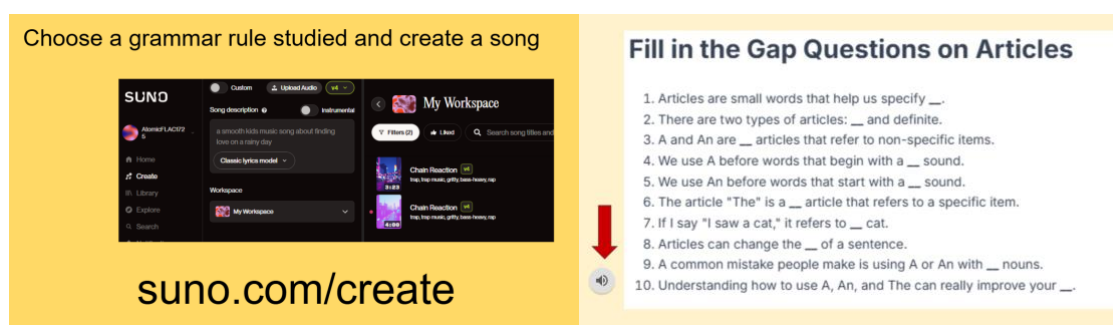


Figure 3
Example of activity with Suno.

6. Feedback and results

Feedback collected from participants at the end of the course indicates a high level of satisfaction with both the methodological choices and the inclusive strategies adopted.

With regard to the teaching methodologies used, all participants (7/7) identified grammar quizzes as the most effective activity for their learning, while a large majority (5/7) also highlighted the usefulness of segmented lessons combined with systematic revision phases.

In terms of learning strategies, the use of compensatory tools (such as concept maps, structured outlines, and dictionaries) during both written and oral assessments was unanimously perceived as highly beneficial (7/7). Similarly, final exam simulations were positively evaluated by almost all participants (6/7), while multisensory stimuli (visual and auditory input), the advance provision of concept maps and structured materials, and the use of artificial intelligence for written text correction (QuillBot) were considered useful by most students (5/7).

The AI-based activities implemented during the course also received consistently positive evaluations. The task of creating a song based on a grammatical rule using artificial intelligence was rated as «fairly useful» by 85% of participants, while the activity involving image reproduction through AI-generated prompts was evaluated as «fairly useful» by 57% and «very useful» by 28% of respondents. Similarly, the creation of videos from students' written texts using AI tools was

¹¹ <https://zenmic.com/>

perceived as «*fairly useful*» by 57% and «*very useful*» by 42% of participants. Notably, interaction with a chatbot to practise and consolidate grammatical structures (Mizou) was rated as «*very useful*» by 71% of students, highlighting the perceived effectiveness of dialogic and low-anxiety AI-mediated practice.

According to the qualitative feedback collected, the teacher's availability, empathy, and ability to understand and respond to individual learning difficulties have been the key strengths of the course. Indeed, students reported that: «*teacher supported students in correcting mistakes and reassuring them along the way*», «*It was a great experience and very formative, I would definitely recommend it to students who face the same difficulties as me*» because «*the course structure is useful for all types of learning styles*». Suggestions for possible improvements have been limited and have mainly regarded some logistical aspects, such as extending the course duration, offering occasional online participation if necessary, or providing additional instructional materials.

Overall, students provided a highly positive evaluation of the *Inclusive Learning* course in its second edition, frequently described by them as «*formative*» and «*effective*». All participants reported that they would recommend the course to other students with Specific Learning Disorders, emphasizing its inclusive structure and supportive learning environment. Several students explicitly stated that the course helped them overcome their long-standing difficulties with the English learning language.

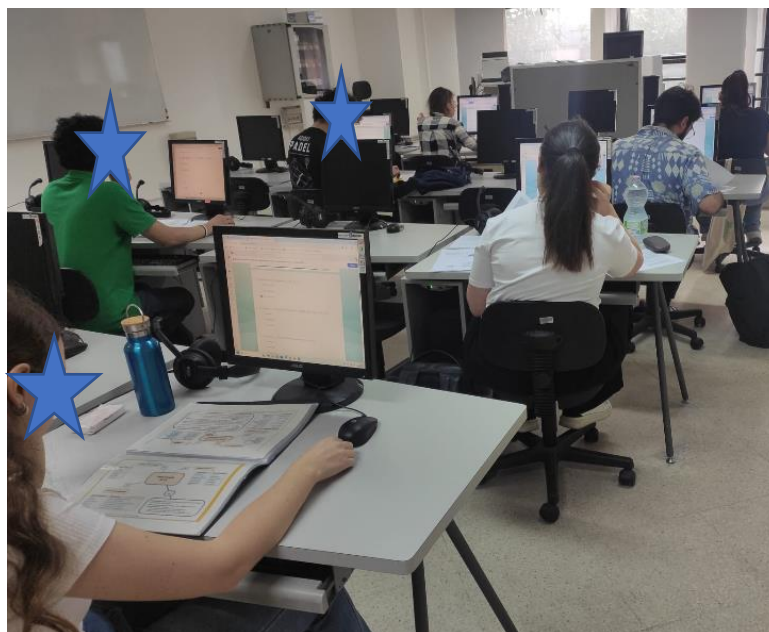


Figure 4
Students during a test

7. Conclusion

The second edition of the *Inclusive Learning* course confirmed the effectiveness of an inclusive and multimodal pedagogy, for the English language learning by university students with Specific Learning Disorders. All participants to the experimental teaching successfully completed the programme and the post-course feedback collected highlighted high levels of satisfaction, engagement, and perceived usefulness of the proposed activities. The pedagogical use of AI-based tools represented the key factor of this edition, as they further enhanced accessibility and provided scaffolding for the development of students' receptive, productive and grammatical skills. In keeping with the UDL framework, the AI-based tools used during the course worked as powerful facilitators for reducing learning barriers and fostering agency of *all* students.

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