ESTABLISHED PRACTICES, CHALLENGES AND ACHIEVEMENTS IN CREATING INCLUSIVE ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSROOMS IN OMAN'S INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract. *Research in the context of Oman's higher education indicates that well-established support service systems and procedures, innovations in technology and English language pedagogy could be crucial for special needs undergraduate students' language learning and their effective inclusion into the classroom. However, limited attention has still been reported on the common teaching and learning practices, as well as challenging and successful episodes of such practices that could be incremental to the context. This design-based study yielded data and descriptive information collected in order to better understand teachers' unique perspectives and opinions about English language inclusive teaching practices currently employed across higher education institutions in Oman. Accounts on challenges and achievements in creating inclusive English language classroom were gathered through the structured interviews with six faculty of the Centre for Preparatory Studies at Sultan Qaboos University. The analysis involved data management, description, and identification of the themes that brought meaning and unified diverse experiences into meaningful wholes. The results of the study reveal sensitivity and very positive attitude shown by teachers toward inclusive English language teaching. However, there are several challenging aspects, including misinterpreted concepts, limited knowledge and expertise. Though the study looked only at teachers from one institutions of higher education, it is evident that search for both formal and informal means of helping teachers in developing new insights into inclusive language pedagogy is essential. Being supplied with access to relevant teacher professional development and resources on innovations in education and technology, the teaching community will be provided with better pedagogical tools, and many barriers in teaching and learning will be removed.*

Key words: *English language classroom, inclusive education, special needs' students, Sultanate of Oman*

1. INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education, as stated in Mizan (2022), "definitely works to identify all barriers to education and remove them and covers everything from curricula to pedagogy and teaching" (n.p.). According to the OECD Education Working Paper (2022) that gives the social and economic rationale of inclusive education and overviews the outcomes in education for diverse groups of students, inclusive education "has become a core concept in education theory discourse over the last few decades" (p.7). In Oman, though inclusive education and the special education services are relatively new (Emam, 2017), the efforts of the Omani government to protect the rights of people with disabilities to education (Welfare and rehabilitation law, 2008) and provide them with the necessary facilities, materials and resources are enormous and widely acknowledged. In agreement with Oman Vision 2040 policy document, inclusive education is one of strategic directions and national priorities in the areas of education, scientific research and national talents that are aimed at creating a high-quality educational system with communal partnerships that empowers human capabilities (Oman Vision 2040, n.d., n.p.). As reported in the study by Al-Busaidi and Tuzlukova (2018), institutions of higher education in Oman have also followed this suit by accepting visually impaired students among other students with disabilities and taking some practical steps to construct a learning environment specific for these students, including providing necessary facilities and resources (e.g. special computer laboratories, laptops with refreshable Braille display devices, e-books, etc.); setting up assistive technologies (e.g. computer access aids, communication software, alternative keyboards, etc.); developing peer-tutoring practice in educational institutions, and encouraging inventions to support effective teaching and learning.

The ideas on inclusive education have been sharpened and elaborated in academic and public discussions and publications by local researchers in Oman. Emam (2017), for example, examined how inclusive education is managed in Oman's schools, while specifically focusing on challenges and tensions between theory and practice, as well as strengths and difficulties. The researcher suggested basing inclusive education discourse on empirically validated perspectives to advance it and develop a framework for action. Acknowledging the existing challenges of the development of inclusive education in school education in Oman, Al-Mahdy and Emam (2017) explored how school leadership affected teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education. Related are studies on improving the accessibility of English language learning for visually impaired students, which is a common goal of Oman's government, academic and research communities. (Al Ghafri, 2015; Ramzi, 2019; Al-Busaidi & Tuzlukova, 2018, Al-Bright, 2018; Al Siyabi et al., 2022); however, while their results and conclusions appear to be rather valid and valuable for the community in general, limited attention has still been reported on the common teaching and learning practices, as well as challenging and successful episodes of such practices that could be incremental to the context, and still deem to be important. As explained in the study by Al-Zyoudi (2006), for inclusive education to become a sustained reality, it requires "teachers' beliefs and acceptance of the policy and philosophy of inclusive education" (p.61). This study focuses on established practices of inclusive English language education that are currently being employed across higher education institutions in Oman as perceived by the English language educators with specific focus on challenges and achievements.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

While the field of English language teaching and research anticipates the future, many reviews suggest that it is crucial to examine perspectives on major trends and determine where more scholarship should be done, what gaps in knowledge should be filled, what issues and groups remain insufficiently represented, what questions are still unanswered, and which priorities can inform future research initiatives and change the way English language teaching community works (Sun, 2014; Chong, 2021; Douglas, 2021; Liashenko & Hnapovska, 2020; Marjanovikj-Apostolovski, 2023). As reported in Chong (2021), one of the inspiring trends for the new future of English language teaching and English language teacher development programs together with using the real world, using English to communicate with the world, managing cross cultural communication, flexibility in the tasks and the trends in the life skills, is the trend related to bridging educational inequality, reflecting diversity, promoting the inclusion and catering for learners with a wide range of needs. This instructional and research trend in English language teaching and learning stands out for its widespread adoption by many teaching communities and educational institutions seeking to innovate and adapt their structure, policies and practices in order to accommodate diverse learning needs (Sharma et al., 2011), including students with visual impairments whose challenges in learning a foreign language are significant as described by Cardenas & Inga (2021). For example, Troiya (2023) examined key findings regarding writing instruction for students with disabilities using examples of evidence-based instructional activities that can be used in inclusive environments for struggling writers. To determine the scholarship to be done, Cardenas & Inga (2019, 2020, 2021) explored approaches for teaching the English language using emerging information and communication technologies for students with visual impairments, and propose an innovative methodology. This methodology is rooted in creating meaningful learning environments and using emerging technologies 'to lead and encourage visual impaired students to learn the English language process' (Cardenas & Inga, 2020, p.28). The researchers explain that the development of both receptive (listening and reading) and productive (speaking and writing) skills is essential for foreign language learning and assessment, and effective learning is challenging when verified in the scenario of visually impaired students' learning. Therefore, there are unavoidable challenges for students. In a similar vein, while investigating the methods of mitigating student challenges in inclusive English language classroom with assistive technologies' support, Tuzlukova et al. (2023) argue that there is need for improvement of English language educators' knowledge of how to access valuable insights into productive assistive technology-supported practice. Relatedly, is the ethnographic case study by Susanto and Nanda (2018) who identified inadequate modifications of the English language classroom instruction and suggest scenarios of unique ways of learning foreign language by visually impaired students with support of the assistive technology. Also, according to Cardenas & Inga (2021), teachers may face difficulties in the inclusive settings with integrating these students into the mainstream classroom, achieving and articulating such classroom. From the perspective of Cardenas & Inga (2020), these difficulties are "due to the absence of educational didactic resources available at the school and the lack of knowledge of appropriate teaching methodologies and strategies to develop the different language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing that go with the educational process in the acquisition of the English language" (p.28).

3. STUDY

The study was conducted using six English language educators at the Centre for Preparatory Studies at Sultan Qaboos University. The Centre for Preparatory Studies is a large institution in the Sultanate of Oman that for more than 30 years has provided services in the English language teaching to support Omani students and prepare them for further academic studies and future roles in the workplace. The mission of the Centre involves its commitment to developing students' knowledge, attitudes, language, technical and life skills necessary for them to enter, participate and thrive in their academic undergraduate programs (CPS mission, objectives and values, n.d.). A diverse faculty of more than 200 Omani and expatriate English language educators contribute their unique teaching philosophy, educational experience and academic habits. All of them do their best to help students adjust to the English language academic environment of the university and improve their language skills.

As explained in numerous studies (You et al., 2019; Tiwari et al., 2015), teachers' background variables, including their education, training in pedagogy and teaching experience in inclusive education context significantly impact their beliefs towards inclusion. As for the sample in the study, it consisted of the female teachers with varied number of years of the English language experience in general, and in Oman, in particular. Their mean years of experience was 12 years. Only some of the study participants have had limited specialized pre- or in-service training in teaching students with disabilities. The decisions regarding subject selection for interviews were based on the evidence informing the study and its theoretical perspectives (Sargeant, 2012). Hence, the subjects sampled were considered by their experience of teaching students with visual impairments in the context of inclusive classroom to be able to inform important facets and perspectives related to the study.

The study was designed to apply one sampling strategy, namely interviews. Interviews with personnel, as explained by Rapp and Corral-Granados (2021), can be effectively used in research on inclusive education. Interview questions were asked about the participants' professional background, their involvement with teaching students in the context of English language classroom, their perceptions about the practice currently in place, in addition to experienced challenges and achievements. Semi-structured interviews were conducted. The interview responses were summarized and transcribed, core themes were extracted and relevant comments were grouped and analyzed. Content analysis was employed to elucidate the interview data (Ozdemir, 2014). The responses were grouped into three categories: practices, challenges and achievement. The comments were analyzed and compared against the findings of the previous studies in the field.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study provided valuable insights into the perceptions of the English language educators from the Centre for Preparatory Studies at Sultan Qaboos University regarding creating inclusive learning environment for visually impaired students. The data reveals that there has always been strong belief at the Centre in inclusive education and the idea has been to bring students with disabilities to the mainstream classroom and make it as smooth for them as possible with assistive technology, with the kind of support that is needed by providing them with special software, special labs, and trained staff; however, the journey has not been easy as seen from the different aspects of practices currently in place.

4.1. Practices

When the participants were asked to provide their accounts on their practices of teaching visually impaired students in the context of inclusive classroom at the Centre for Preparatory Studies, they shared their personal stories that clearly demonstrate the 'willingness' in place and the overall support on the part of the administration and teaching community towards inclusion. Participants explained that since 2010, it was an institutional requirement to include special needs students in the English language programs offered by the Centre for Preparatory Studies both at foundation and post-foundation levels that resulted in the changes both in policy and practice.

However, as noted by one study participant, the changes in practice 'were caused not just because of the fact that it was compulsory to include them, but because someone was passionate about this inclusion and tried to change the existing system to make this integration happen." This perspective was also shared by another teacher participant who emphasized the importance of doing things 'from one heart' and 'being passionate'. This result is supported by Al-Zyoudi (2006) who indicated importance of teachers' willingness to include students with disabilities in mainstream classroom. The passion that teachers have, as explained by one study participant, may lead to more solid practice and better support of students. To illustrate, this study participant recollected that teachers' passion in the context of the Centre for Preparatory Studies has led to creation of a new system, 'in terms of registration of the students, teacher allocation, the teaching load of the teacher who also teach special needs students, even the room allocation." From the point of view of this participant, it was considered very important 'to put the students with visual impairments in a classroom that is more accessible for them to reach.' The participant explained that 'the class that has a special needs student has to be less in number because it is very demanding and time consuming for the teacher to address the needs of two groups of students together in the inclusive classroom: the mainstream students and the visually impaired students.' Also, 'it is very important to adapt to the inclusion and change the policies accordingly like thinking about all the details, who is going to provide the support and thinking about the whole context'. In the similar vein, Mariga et al. (2014) argue that developing clear and manageable systems, such as individual education plans, curriculum guidelines, and training strategies can contribute to making inclusive education successful. In addition, to the certain needs 'for providing support in terms of who, how and when', there are also issues related to 'adapting to possible increase in the number of visually impaired students accepted in the University's colleges, and the diversity of such students' potential specializations, e.g. law, education, social sciences, economics, etc. In response, as recollected by the participant, the administration of the Center for Preparatory Studies established the special needs committee that acts as an umbrella for teaching, assessment, administration, and providing technical support.

When discussing teaching related aspects of the practice in place, one participant noted the usefulness of integrating flipped classroom approach. That participant explained: 'I will assign them the work before class, ask them to finish it, read the questions and come prepared for the class. It helped them a lot… so much. It made the class run so smoothly. And it also helped the other students because you don't want to affect the class time as a whole. It facilitated the whole process.' According to that participant, different class modes are also possible, including group work, and teachers ' just need to learn that it can be done with the help of technology, other people and with the help of the special needs students themselves'.

Practice of the inclusive English language teaching in the context of the Centre for Preparatory Studies shows that planning and preparation are important. As elucidated by the participants in the study, 'the support of the special needs is not limited to textbooks'. It should be extended 'to the provision of supplementary materials that are related to teaching or testing'. The procedure currently in place is as follows: 'whatever the student needs in a Braille format, the teacher will contact the person in charge, and the assistive technology specialist will provide the right materials at the right time'. So, it is a lengthy process that needs a lot of planning from the side of the teacher.

As for the use of assistive technologies, study participants made it clear that currently visually impaired English language learners are provided with the necessary technical devices. To facilitate students' learning at the Centre for Preparatory Studies, main stream devices are used. Students are provided with the Braille devices and laptops that have installed screen readers to allow using electronic materials. This requires the availability of all teaching and learning materials in electronic format so that they would have equal access, and this is an on-going project at the Centre.

4.2. Challenges

Recent research (Chauhan & Mantry, 2018; Mizan, 2022) indicates that there are certain challenges associated with inclusive education. These include but are not limited to teachers' perceptions about themselves as not well equipped or trained to work with special needs children; about the pace of learning as being slowed down due to the need to attend both students with and without disabilities; about the classroom settings as being not adequately adapted to meet special students' needs in an inclusive education system (Mizan, 2022). With regard to the challenges, the study participants discussed, for example, challenges related to lack of knowledge and experience in using assistive technologies, and also referred to a need in a paradigm shift in the way teachers think, what our teaching philosophies are, and what our psychological training is in order 'to take these students as normal, and not to react when no reaction is needed.' As explained by one participant, 'sometimes teachers think that teaching a visually impaired student is scary, but it's actually not that scary, but we as teachers go with preconceived ideas. Sometimes we feel that we are going to be burdened with extra work.' The teacher-related challenges, as described by another study participant, are 'the biggest'. This participant explained that she felt there was 'resistance from the side of the teachers' because of the fear of the unknown and because of the overwhelming for teachers to teach special needs students if they do not go through the experience or if they don't know anything about it.'

Not surprisingly, the participants also expounded on the challenges related to the necessary financial resources. According to them, these resources are crucial for purchasing technological devices without which the teaching and learning of the English language in the context of inclusive classroom is 'almost impossible'. In the opinion of the study participants, it is also time consuming to develop and adapt materials for the inclusive classroom. There are so many individuals involved in quite a lengthy process that needs a lot of preparation, including a course teacher, a course leader and an assistive technology specialist. It is also important to train technical staff on the best practices because the technical staff are a great support for the teacher and the student for the whole process. They are a key element of success. As suggested by one participant, 'you

cannot just rely on the fact that they know how to do it, and a focused training on how things to be done for effective language teaching and learning is needed; however, unfortunately, this is not always a case.' Related was the discussion on the staff members of the Special Needs Lab opened at the Centre for Preparatory Studies, and the need for having more qualified specialists there to produce Braille copies of the required teaching, learning and testing materials. Training and preparation of teachers was also viewed as important in order to eliminate any potential gaps in the process and to train teachers to deal with the visually impaired students and to attend to their needs. This corroborates with Laarhoven et al. (2012) who argue that lack of expertise and adequate professional development programs are among the largest barriers in effective teaching.

The challenges felt by the study participants also included lack of information about the students, including their learning profile and prior learning experience. As noted by one study participant, each special needs student is a unique case. Some of them, according to this participant, have been enrolled in special institutions and received better training to cope with their disabilities; however, some are still in denial, especially students who were categorized as low-vision students but their condition could deteriorate at any moment, and they could become nearly blind.

4.3. Achievements

Bowden and Boyle (1995) clarify that "the quest for quality in any activity is a constant struggle to maximize the extent to which goals have been achieved despite constantly changing contexts: contexts which not only affect both process and outcome but also catalyze changes in goals" (p.12). The findings of the study demonstrate that although the process of integrating visually impaired students into the mainstream English classroom was challenging, it was overall a successful one.

One of the most important factors that contributed to such success is teachers' acceptance of this integration that appears to be the key element behind the success of integrating the special needs students in general, not only the visually impaired. It is evident that with this acceptance comes all the support of all kinds, as well as the willingness to overcome the challenges. Teachers, as observed by the study participants, want this experience to be successful no matter what. One of the participants, for example, gave the following comments: 'So, you will put from heart, your time, your effort to make it successful, to make students' life easier because they already have problems. You don't want to be an extra problem for them. You really want to support them. With acceptance, a good rapport with the students will be established. They will be safe and motivated to communicate with the teacher because special needs students can be a great help for the teacher'.

Another key aspect involves effective communication between various stakeholders, including teachers, special needs students, other students in the class, even parents, peer tutors who provide support for the student outside class, and also the administration of the institution. This corroborates with Berger and Luckman (1966, as cited in Rapp & Corral-Granados, 2021, n.p.) who argue that institutions simultaneously react to and create their environments. When explaining the achievements related to inclusion of students with visual impairments into the mainstream English language classroom, the participants noted that over the past ten years the situation in the Centre for Preparatory Studies regarding inclusive education changed completely. Also, the quality of this inclusion evolved with the provision of appropriate teaching materials, resources, and

technological devices. For example, the Braille textbooks and materials that were provided had several problems, but then these problems were diagnosed and then solved to provide the students with good quality materials. This was because of the efforts of all the stakeholders involved, as well as continuous reflections on the practices in place and tried to change them and improve the quality. In addition to materials and paperwork, technical support was provided with the establishment of a special needs lab. This special needs lab at the Centre for Preparatory Studies has the right equipment and the necessary software, such as, for example, scanning applications, screen reader applications, voice recognition technologies, and others to support students' learning, teaching and testing. Another successful initiative involved converting the readers used to fulfill M-reader requirements into audio materials where the students could listen to the story then do the quiz. As described by one participant, the technology gives students wings'. Without the technology, the inclusive education is not going to work at all because it facilitates students' learning, boosts their independence, gives them better opportunities to learn, and increases their functional capabilities. Therefore, teachers should receive training in technology and how to use it for making their classes effective and for all these objectives to be achieved. These results are consistent with other studies on inclusive English language education for students with visual impairments (Al Siyabi et al., 2022).

From the point of view of one study participant, 'what matters most is the ability, not the disability'. This was one of the lessons she learned as a teacher of special needs students. Another lesson was that a blind student with good abilities and attitude is a great assistance to all the students in class. One study participant illustrated this lesson with the following example: 'I actually learned a lot from this student with good abilities communicating with me. Because at some point of time, I thought they need this. They need that. But when I talked to her, I changed my mind. She was like, no miss, no need, I can do it this way. I go like: really? That's great. They can be a great assistance, and you need to talk to them to reach a mutual understanding about the best practice. They can help the teacher for a better understanding for Dos and Don'ts. I also felt that their classes are lively, positive and very collaborative for some reason. I used to enjoy the classes that had visually impaired students. I thought it was only me. But when I talked to a math teacher, she said the same thing. She enjoyed their classes. She thought it was fun, and they are integrated very nicely with the rest of the students. It is really a blessing to have them'.

Of the interviewees, the majority of the participants indicated feeling the difference with the establishment of the special needs committee and appointment of the person in charge with very good leadership qualities. The communication improved. The coordination improved. The whole process improved with a person who was able to coordinate it very well to facilitate the different commination between the different parties.

5. CONCLUSION

This study explored teacher-perceived views on the practices related to creating inclusive English language classroom at the Centre of Preparatory Studies of Sultan Qaboos University, as well as their challenging and successful aspects. In spite of identified positive attitude toward inclusive English language teaching and overall accomplishments achieved by the Centre for Preparatory Studies and its faculty, the results indicate the need for both formal and informal means of helping teachers in

developing new insights into inclusive language pedagogy. Teaching standards of visually impaired students are influenced by how teachers perceive their experiences of inclusive language pedagogy, and how well they are prepared for potential contexts of inclusive English classroom. Being supplied with access to relevant teacher professional development and resources on innovations in education and technology, the teaching community will be provided with better pedagogical tools, and many barriers in teaching and learning will be removed.

LIMITATIONS

This discussion is limited to the data available of a limited number of the English language faculty at the Centre for Preparatory Studies of Sultan Qaboos University. Inclusive English language teaching and learning, however, has general applicability in other academic contexts in terms of both formal and informal means of helping teachers in developing new insights into inclusive language pedagogy.

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