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INCLUSION IN THE CONTEXT OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSROOM: TEACHERS' CURRENT BELIEFS AND PRACTICES

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Abstract. *As the perspectives of English language teaching pedagogy change globally, new trends and issues emerge, and achieving effective inclusive language education is one of them. But what are teachers' current beliefs and practices of inclusion? This paper explores the beliefs that English language teachers in the Sultanate of Oman have confidence in and feel about inclusion giving most of the attention to integration of visually impaired students into the mainstream classroom. Based on the findings of a year-long research project conducted at the Centre for Preparatory Studies of Sultan Qaboos University, these cover such mostly cited and supported by research components, or factors and conditions of inclusive education (Bricker, 2000), as classroom practices, including teaching strategies, classroom environment, classroom management, collaboration and teaming, including special needs students' interaction with regular students in the mainstream English language classroom, participation in group activities, and teacher attitude, including teachers assumptions regarding inclusion, in general, and in the context tertiary education English language teaching and learning, and teacher professional development. Shared experiences and beliefs, as well as the components of inclusion, may lead to stronger culture of inclusion within the researched institution and a broader context of Oman's tertiary education.*

Key words: *inclusive education, English language teaching and learning, special needs, tertiary education, visually impaired students, Sultan Qaboos University, Oman*

1. INTRODUCTION

Recent global changes in perspectives of English language teaching pedagogy have led to the emergence of new trends in teaching methods, evaluation and innovation (Lopes & Cecilia, 2018). One such perspective is about achieving effective inclusive language education where inclusion is viewed as a “pedagogical approach that starts with the learning of everybody” (Black-Hawkins, 2017, p. 13) in spite of any factors, including psychological and physiological factors that play a significant role in foreign language teaching and learning as explained in a study by Bestchastnova and Bestchastnova (2023). For example, Zehne (2018) argues that ‘English conceptualized as a lingua franca

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... contributes to individualization and individual learning goals as a central aspect of inclusive teaching practices in ELT' (n.p.). Though not challenge free at different levels of language education, including the university level, as reported in some studies that have identified limited educational programs that accommodate to the visually impaired language learners (Cárdenas & Inga, 2019; Cárdenas & Inga, 2011). a limited focus on planning and material design (Al-Busaidi & Tuzlukova, 2018; Tuzlukova et al., 2023), as well as limited knowledge of suitable methodologies and strategies to teach the different language skills (Cárdenas & Inga, 2019), many scholars strongly support inclusive language education. Cantos et. al (2022) highlight the significance of raising the awareness of the educational community on the subject of inclusion and diversity. According to the researchers, inclusion "must be present in classrooms and be part of all the elements that integrate the teaching process and learning because we are all part of a diversity with particularities, strengths, and weaknesses, which enrich the classroom in the formation of values and new knowledge from an integrality (p.152). But what are English language teachers' current beliefs and practices of inclusion? This paper explores the beliefs that English language teachers in the Sultanate of Oman think and feel about inclusion with the focus on integrating visually impaired students into mainstream English language classroom.

2. STUDY CONTEXT

McMaster (2014) argues that 'while there is no set recipe for achieving a 'world class inclusive education system', each example offered ingredients that schools could use to create their own 'flavour' of inclusion' (p.42). This study was conducted at the Centre for Preparatory Studies at Sultan Qaboos University in Oman. In research, Oman's context of higher education is referred to as an English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) context (Mathew & Narayanan, 2023). The Center for Preparatory Studies is one of the units of Sultan Qaboos University, a national leader in higher education and community service in Oman, that primarily focuses on the English language education and offers both foundation and credit English language courses. "To excel in teaching and learning, research and innovation, and community service" (Mission, n.d., n.p.) is among the university's objectives and goals. Though still a relatively new experience of teaching and learning, inclusion of special needs English language learners is among institutional policies and practices with a special focus on departing students' learning and adaptation to the educational process from their needs.

3. STUDY METHODOLOGY

An interview instrument was developed to explore the teachers' backgrounds and experiences with English language teaching in the context of inclusive English language classroom. Eight teachers from the Centre for Preparatory Studies at Sultan Qaboos University who had taught special needs students in an inclusive class were interviewed. They were asked to reflect on their beliefs and practices of teaching visually impaired students in a mainstream classroom. The focus was on diverse aspects of student learning, classroom teaching practices, their challenging and advantageous aspects. For qualitative analysis, participants' free responses were coded using observed components, or factors and conditions of inclusive education (Bricker, 2000) that emerged. Two general types of

coding were performed. Free responses were grouped thematically, where possible. To keep data correctly and draw meaningful conclusions, additionally, free responses were coded and grouped to track the participants' individual responses. Each study participant received a code name "Teacher" followed by a number from one to eight.

4. STUDY FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings are based on the data analysis of teacher interviews. Identified teacher beliefs cover such components, or factors and conditions of inclusive education (Bricker, 2000), as classroom practices, teacher attitude, collaboration and teaming. These components are mostly cited and supported by research in inclusive education (Bricker, 2000; Janssen, 2006).

4.1. Classroom practices

4.1.1. *Teaching strategies and classroom environment*

While acknowledging the encouragement in the process of enabling and exercising the elements of inclusion in the English language classroom, the participants in the study, as the findings reveal, reported on the ways they developed and used to include visually impaired students in the wider context of the mainstream English language classroom. One illustration is teachers' discussion about whether they had to modify any teaching strategies and classroom environment to enhance the learning of students with special needs. Teacher 1 confirmed that she had to "make it a point" that in "every single" class, special needs students were asked questions and asked to read as any normal student. She also "discouraged" any special needs student to "think they can take extra time just for the sake of it", but she also saw how "genuine" the need was to "give extra time for any extension to deadlines". Though Teacher 7 reported no "change" of any teaching strategies, Teacher 2 expressed the same sentiment as Teacher 1. This participant, for example, stated that he had to increase the "proportion of collaborative and peer-learning" in his lessons. He "paired" students with special educational needs with other students, and when "required" gave roles to the students in the "group". For example, in a reading comprehension task he would give the sighted student the role of "reader" and the blind student the role of "thinker", the former would read the question and read or reread sections of the text, while the blind student would try to "figure out" the answer. Teacher 5 mentioned using WhatsApp messages to record writing classes whenever a new color-coded sample was introduced in the course. Teacher 8, however, stated that having special needs students in her classes does not "compel" her to make any "changes" to the classroom "routine" or "lesson strategies"; "the only thing" is that she often uses the note taking time or activity answering time to write the lesson notes on the concerned student notebook or explain a given point to him/her. Teacher 3 stated that "modifying" teaching strategies and "adapting" the classroom environment are "important steps" in "enhancing" the learning of students with special needs in an inclusive classroom. Teacher 4 also asserted that she had to "modify" a few teaching activities and assignments to "enhance" the learning of visually impaired students. Further, this study participant mentioned that regarding the environment, she had to "incorporate" most of the activities where there was group work to make sure that visually impaired students were "really following". She stated that she had assigned the two visually impaired she had in one group, but then realized that they "separate" [d] themselves from the rest of the group, so she "instinctively" mixed them with other groups.

4.1.2. Strategies adopted for inclusive English classroom and use of assistive technology

Susanto and Nanda (2018) argue that visually impaired students can study a foreign language with a unique support of assistive technologies. Closely related are the findings in the study by Cárdenas and Inga (2019) who contend that the adoption approaches that are meaningful and that integrate innovative technologies can enhance the learning of visual impaired students. The researchers believe that technologies can assist visually impaired students in developing more autonomy and independence in learning and boost their engagement and communication in a heterogeneous classroom setting. These ideas resonate with the findings in this study.

For an inclusive classroom, teachers in the context of Oman's tertiary education English language classroom employed different strategies for teaching English and used some assistive technologies. Teacher 1 used Braille copies, and her students brought their audio-enabled special needs software installed on their laptops. Teacher 7 employed some active learning strategies such as think/pair/share, jigsaw reading (visually impaired students have their own version of the reading book, they do not have difficulties engaging in this activity), and role play to help her students with visual impairments "benefit more from the class just like the students without disabilities". Considering assistive technology, Teacher 7 found Text-To-Speech (TTS) software "quite valuable" since she could help her students gain more from their reading classes by listening to the text and answering the questions. Teacher 2 stated that he shared low vision materials in advance of lessons and produced Moodle quizzes that were accessible. He also did peer-instruction, collaborative writing, low-vision versions of portfolio and study skills assessment documents. Teacher 2 indicated, however, that he didn't use assistive technology, but his low vision student did. Teacher 5 also indicated that she made sure that she "voiced" almost everything she "explained". WhatsApp and Google Classroom were used "heavily" in her class to create a more "friendly" and easy-to-use learning environment. Teacher 5 also elaborated that she dedicated some of the class time to sit next to the SN student and explain the materials/ activities privately, and she resorted to peer work too. Teacher 8 stated that she often used collaborative learning, pair work and peer correction activities. For visually impaired students, she always used voice feedback (from Google) either for their assigned work submitted to Google Classroom or their project tasks (via WhatsApp). Teacher 3 said that she used different teaching methods, adjusted materials and activities as needed, provided individual support and used assistive technology. She added that she communicated with the student using WhatsApp since her visually impaired student was trained to use a screen reader, and she requested a soft copy of the teaching materials and shared it with the student for "easier accessibility". Teacher 4 stated that she tried to focus more on "detailed verbal" descriptions and instructions and tried to do more peer work and group activities. She also proposed that it was an excellent experience for both the visually impaired students and his classmates as it allowed "mutual learning". Teacher 6 stated that her students with visual impairments were familiar with Google Classroom; therefore, this platform helped her to "monitor" them, and there were times when they had to "upload" assignments. She also mentioned that her students used some devices that helped with their learning such as magnifiers and screen readers. Teacher 6, however, contended that she did not use much assistive technology as she had "no recommendations or suggestions" from the administration of

the course she taught despite her frequent requests. She added that she “felt very guilty”, and that she “needed more training” on assistive technologies.

Emerging assistive technologies can pave the way for more efficient integration of the visually impaired students into the mainstream English language classroom as they can make use of a range of resources with the screen reader technology such as Non-Visual Desktop Access (NVDA) and Job Access with Speech (JAWS) (Susanto & Nanda, 2018). There is a need for higher education institutions to be more inclusive via adapting their classroom methodologies to make them more appropriate and incorporate emerging technologies (Cardenas & Inga, 2020).

4.1.3. Inclusion and discipline

Teachers were asked to discuss whether they thought inclusion might cause any problems with discipline in classroom management. Teacher 1 stated that teachers “must expect issues of normal students “wanting to sit separately” and “away from” the special needs”. As a teacher, Teacher 7 noted that she did not have any problems with her classroom management since she tried to explain “each and every activity” to her visually impaired students and “put them in groups” of two or three to be “engaged with the activity”. Teacher 2 stated that the “only issues” he could “foresee” are “managing” the rest of the class while “attending” to the “needs” of the special needs students one-on-one and “managing exclusion” or “bullying” if it occurs. Teacher 5 believed that inclusion could “cause” problems, while Teacher 8 disagreed stating that inclusion does not “lead to” problems “at all”. Similarly, Teacher 4 disagreed that inclusion could lead to issues with discipline. Teacher 6 noted that visually impaired students sometimes have other psychological issues, and that teachers have to be “informed” about students’ “details”. This is a clear reference to the significance of student profile and how teachers can interact with them in a more informed manner. Teacher 3 stated that the concept of special needs inclusion, where students with “diverse abilities” are “included” in mainstream classrooms, can present “unique” challenges for classroom management; however, it is important to note, she argued, that these challenges can be “effectively addressed” with “appropriate” strategies and support.

4.1.4. Attention to students in class

Teachers were asked to discuss any difficulty that they experienced in giving equal attention to all students in an inclusive class, and they came up with interesting points to ponder over. Teacher 1 proposed that normal students can become “impatient, even possessive” for the teacher’s attention. Further, Teacher 7 found it “a bit challenging at times”, especially when students had a listening/reading (i.e. receptive skills) practice since the visually impaired students “needed special attention” to do the activities and she had to “provide other students with whole class feedback”. Teacher 2 indicated that “occasionally” he had “difficulty ensuring” that his attention was “well-distributed” and ensuring that the “needs” of “all” students were “supported” and their learning was “appropriately scaffolded”. Teacher 5 proposed that visually impaired students “require” a longer time to “process” the learning materials, “locate” the activities and “form” the answers. They “need much more attention”, Teacher 5 explained, than “expected” especially in reading classes. Teacher 8 thought that inclusion can be at times “difficult” to give “equal” attention to all students, and that is why she sometimes “delegate” [s] to

excellent students and those who are willing to help their peers, and they “accept” to support her in engaging with special educational needs peers. Teacher 3 proposed that in an inclusive classroom, it can be “challenging” to give “equal” attention to all students, due to their “unique needs”. Teacher 6 stated that the “main challenge” was “ensuring” visually impaired students were “following up” with her or not. She had to ask them at the end of the class and “see if they are there”. She would ask questions such as, ‘Are we on the same page? Do you know what you are supposed to do for the next class? Have you absorbed what we have discussed today?’ She also indicated that even though their responses were “positive”, she was never “sure” if that was the case. Teacher 4, however, stated that she had encountered “no difficulty” in this regard.

4.2. Collaboration and teaming

4.2.1. Special needs students’ interaction with regular students

As specified by Vygotsky (1978), students learn through their interactions with more knowledgeable fellows. One of the interview questions encouraged study participants to share their perspectives on whether they thought students with special needs are easily accepted by students without disabilities. Teacher 1 indicated that this could be a “challenge”: “there is this – us and them – divide, unfortunately”. Teacher 7 maintained that all the students in her class were so “cooperative and helpful” and did their best to help her visually impaired students. She further contended that *‘it all depends on the classroom environment. If the teacher builds a good rapport with their students and creates a friendly environment, it is not hard to ask all students (both with disabilities and without disabilities) to work together’*.

Teacher 2 argued that interaction can be very dependent on both the personality of the students and the instructor’s teaching style. He mentioned that he had a physically disabled student who had a small group of preferred partners who she worked with, but she seemed isolated from other female students in the class. This student would often sit alone in the classroom before class while the others were on the balcony; as she used the male corridor to enter and leave class, she left the classroom alone and travelled to class alone. Teacher 2’s other special needs student was a blind male student, and he was accepted by the class; however, this student suggested that it was due to Teacher 2’s teaching style, as in a previous level his classmates were described as being afraid to talk to him. Teacher 2 used a large amount of pair work, and small discussion activities, and he regularly changed people’s partners. The students also did a writing lesson in which they discussed problems and solutions for issues faced by blind people. This led to other students in the class asking him questions about the problems he faced. This seemed to make them more “empathetic” about the challenges he faced, and “respectful” of how he “overcame” them. Teacher 2, however, emphasized that this would not “work with” all blind students, as some would not “enjoy discussing their disabilities”. He argued further that autism and other psychological or personality conditions often have “worse social consequences” than physical disorders. Teacher 5 pointed out that her SN students were “accepted warmly”, and most students “supported them in one way or another”. She also stated that most of them were “lucky enough” to have “dedicated” classmates to be “available” even outside class time. Teacher 8 also proposed that students without disabilities are very “kind and willing” to help their peers with disabilities, and that she would normally “approach” some and “inform” them about “what is expected” from them in terms of “help and collaboration”, and they accept with no “problems or objections”. Teacher 3 indicated

that in her classroom, students with special needs were “easily accepted” by their peers without disabilities; the other students were “helpful, supportive” and “treated” them with “kindness and respect”, and this created a “positive and inclusive” classroom environment. Further, Teacher 4 stated that all the students loved the visually impaired student she had and were very “helpful and friendly”. Teacher 6 maintained that her students were “very willing” to help, and they were “interested” in working with them in groups.

4.2.2. Group activities

Janssen (2006) emphasizes major components that constitute inclusion represented in “administrative support, teacher attitude, parental support and involvement, collaboration and teaming, and classroom practices” (p.7). More support is needed for visually impaired students to succeed in their learning (Hiago & Sade, 2020).

The teachers also discussed whether it was easy to conduct group activities involving special needs students with general students. Teacher 1 contended that the “nature” of the course she taught did not “require” this. Teacher 7, however, believed that it can be “challenging” because “students without disabilities are not trained to know how to behave with special needs students”, and that “can cause some problems”. If the teacher “monitors” the class “meticulously” and pays enough attention to all groups, she further argued, they can “make sure” the activity is “conducted successfully”. Teacher 2, on the other hand, indicated that this was “not necessary”, but with “adequate planning and experience”, and “a willingness” to change activities and “sequences” of learning, it was “do-able”. Teacher 5, similarly, thought that group activities are “alright” in speaking classes, but it is “very challenging” when it comes to the other skills, especially reading and listening. She mentioned that she tried group work in reading classes, and the result was “time-consuming” tasks and “failing to finish on time”. Teacher 8 indicated that group work is challenging and time consuming to “a great extent”. Teacher 3 stated that conducting group activities that include both special needs and general students can be “challenging” and may “require extra planning and instruction”. Teacher 3 added that it is important to consider each student's abilities and make “necessary adaptations” to “ensure” everyone can “participate and benefit” from the activity. Teacher 4, however, indicated that it was “easy to involve” visually impaired students in group work. To Teacher 6, it was also “easy” to conduct group activities where group members were assigned roles for discussion, critical thinking, group reading and comprehension questions.

4.2.3. Academic and social effects for special needs students

The interviewed teachers also talked about the concept of positive academic and social effects for students with special needs. Teacher 1 argued that the experience can be positive in “many ways”, especially when one sees them “struggle and prove themselves”, but it can be “negative” when other students “do not include them and perhaps hurt their feelings”. She further proposed that “in case of other related psychosomatic disorders”, it can be “quite disconcerting” to the teacher and other students. Considering the positive aspects, Teacher 7 contended that inclusion helps visually impaired students “achieve better academic outcomes”, and it gives them the “opportunity to socialize” with their classmates. On the other hand, Teacher 7 asserted that “the only negative effect” is “the limited attention” that teachers can give to visually impaired students, especially in “mixed-ability” classes.

Further, Teacher 2 highlighted some positive impacts such as “developing skills” for inclusion in society and the workplaces, “developing awareness” of the challenges of studying, working and socializing in a “world designed for non-disabled” people, developing strategies for “coping with” this and developing social skills and social connections. He also added that this could help “encourage tolerance” among both students and teachers, “demystifying disabilities” for those who are not “experienced” with disabled people. Yet, Teacher 2 thought that special schools “allow” them to “develop relationships and solidarity” with people with “similar” experiences, SEN students can receive “specialized support”, and therefore, “unnecessary challenges and barriers” are “removed”.

Teacher 5 asserted that one positive aspect of inclusion is “creating a sense of belonging and unity” among students. She further explained that inclusion can lead to “a wider network” of friends for students, and they may receive help from their peers. Teacher 5, however, contended that the “gap in proficiency levels” between students can become “apparent”, especially in activities that involve photos, and that this can make some students “feel lost or different”. She also added that “implementing” inclusion can be “time-consuming”, and teachers may “struggle” to cover all the required material within the course schedule. According to Teacher 5, teachers may also need to explain activities “multiple times” to “ensure” that all students understand, a situation that can require extra effort on their part. Teacher 8 emphasized that positive effects lie in “boosting” the students’ “morale” and providing them with enough support and help them “overcome” “obstacles” to be able to “prove themselves”. Teacher 8 also maintained that if those students are used to being “treated as babies” and “incapable” of doing anything on their own, this will “make the teacher’s job extremely hard” and the students won’t be able to make any “progress” nor “push” themselves out of their “comfort zones”.

Teacher 3 contended that inclusion in education can have positive and negative effects for students with special needs. She elaborated that positive effects include “academic and social growth and improved self-esteem”, whereas negative effects may include “challenges” with “pace and content”, and “limited individual” attention. Teacher 3 also commented that overall, effective implementation, support and resources are crucial in “maximizing” the positive effects of inclusion while addressing potential challenges. Concerning the positive aspects, Teacher 4 mentioned that the visually impaired student she had taught was an amazing example of a hardworking and smart student. She stated, however, that the negative side was that she always needed extra time and effort to work with this particular student at the end of the class. Teacher 6 argued that when regular students help a classmate who needs their help and who does not “enjoy the same advantage” they do, this increases the collaboration and cooperation between students in doing the classroom activities. To her, this is a dynamo effect; when visually impaired students get “better help”, they will understand the materials “better” their “performance” will “definitely be better”.

4.2.4. Academic and social effects on regular students due to having visually impaired students in class

During the interviews, the teachers who participated in the study also reflected on the effects of having students with visual impairments on regular students in their classes. Teacher 1 contended that this differs from “cohort to cohort and from student to student”.

She elaborated further noting that ‘some feel nothing, some feel very motivated to do better and shed off their laziness, some dislike their presence and get impatient’.

Teacher 1 argued further that “there is no one answer to this question” as it is a “dynamic situation” where teachers as adults must “set thinking and attitude right”. Teacher 7, on the other hand, asserted that students without disabilities can “benefit” both academically and socially from being with VI students since being in a “diverse environment” can help “develop a sense of empathy and understanding” among students. Additionally, Teacher 7 argued that “students' problem-solving” abilities can “improve”, leading to “better” academic performance. Teacher 2 agreed that socially, other students “practice tolerance”, inclusion and “develop empathy”, while academically, it “encourages peer-support” which can “consolidate knowledge” and “develop language skills”.

In addition, Teacher 5 proposed that from an “academic standpoint”, it is “possible” that “low achieving” students may “view” their peers with special needs as “positive role models for motivation”, and that regular students can also benefit socially from “interacting with” their peers with special needs. An example Teacher 5 used was a visually impaired female student who “formed” a “close” friendship with a regular student through their “partnership” in class, which, according to her, showed that regular students can “develop” the social skill of “accepting” and “working with” their peers with special needs. Teacher 8 also asserted that she “certainly” believed that there are positive academic and social impacts on students without disabilities; it is an “inspiring” learning experience to them and a “lesson” in “compassion and collaborative learning”. Teacher 3 agreed that having visually impaired students in regular classrooms can positively impact their regular peers. It can increase “empathy”, improve communication skills, “foster” collaboration and teamwork, “enhance” problem-solving abilities, and “raise awareness about accessibility”. Teacher 4 indicated that “all” the students wanted to be “around” him, and he “motivated” his classmates to “work harder and be better”.

Further, Teacher 6 contended that when regular students “interact with” the visually impaired students, this is part of their “social responsibility”, “sense of belonging”, “obligation” and “service” to the “community” they “belong to”. It is also about, she added, feeling “responsible for” and being “considerate about” the people around them as well as reducing “arrogance” as they help someone “who needs help”. Regular students can also become more “giving” and “take the initiative” as they do not “wait for the teacher” to ask them to help. This, Teacher 6 added, “prepares them for real life” so when they meet special needs individuals around them, they are well prepared on how to deal with them.

4.3. Teacher attitude

4.3.1. Is inclusion a good idea?

Teaching the English language effectively is one primary strategy that the Omani government implements to maintain its sustainable development (Al Jadidi, 2009). However, research in the Omani higher education context of the English language teaching and learning of visually impaired students indicates that teachers’ knowledge and expertise is inadequate (Al-Busaidi & Tuzlukova, 2018). As well as that, teaching programs at higher education institutions are not entirely adapted to the needs of the visually impaired students (Al-Siyabi et al., 2022). As a consequence, active involvement of visually impaired students in their learning processes is hindered (Al-Siyabi et al.,

2022). In addition, failing to adapt teaching approaches that target students who have visual impairment such as using of visual-based modules and pictograms, materials in Braille, digitalized course materials also deprive visually impaired students of equal access to learning (Tuzlukova et al., 2021). These observations resonate with the study by Febtiningsih et al. (2021) that emphasizes that the challenges that visually impaired students encounter in the writing component of the English language class are mainly about curriculum and syllabus not matching the students' need, teaching time constraint, limited learning resources, inappropriateness of teaching strategy, unqualified teachers and negative students' attitude.

On the notion of whether inclusion is good practice in the context of English language teaching and learning at the level of higher education, teachers brought up different perspectives. Teacher 1 noted that inclusion should be "up to a limited number". In a class, a teacher can "handle" up to two special needs students "properly" as it is "gentler on all concerned" when institutions "do it in a very subtle and effective way". Teacher 7 argued that inclusion is "highly recommend" if it is seen from "different perspectives". She elaborated,

from a teacher's point of view, having VI students is a blessing since they can assist these students in reaching their potential and enjoying a sense of fulfillment. Moreover, teachers should be more creative in designing and implementing lesson plans, which can eventually lead to gaining more experience. Considering VI students themselves, they can socialize with other students their age, which gives them the opportunity to discuss their issues with their classmates. Regular students may also find inclusion helpful since they can develop empathy and understanding.

Teacher 2 shared a similar perspective and argued that "failing" to practice inclusion "isolates" special needs students "freely participating" in society, and it "perpetuates" a society that "fails to understand and accommodate" people with special needs. Teacher 5 believed that inclusion should not be recommended unless teachers are "provided" with "good training", and the course materials are "tailored fairly to meet" the needs of students with special needs. She added that without adequate support and accommodations, the "benefits" of inclusion may not be "fully realized", and this could lead to "difficulties" for both regular students and those with special needs. It is crucial, according to Teacher 5, that the "necessary resources and support" are "provided" to "ensure" that inclusion is "implemented successfully" and that all students are given "equal opportunities to succeed".

Teacher 8 also asserted that she would "absolutely" opt for inclusion. She argued further that she is against "excluding" these students and "creating a discriminatory educational system" whereby SN students are taught "separately" from ordinary students, as this is "bound to create negative attitudes" and "mental issues" for both parties. Teacher 3 emphasized that inclusion in education is generally recommended because it "benefits" students with special needs and "promotes" "equality, social integration, and academic growth". Teacher 3 also stressed that "challenges" can be "overcome" with "individualized support and resources", and that "decisions" should be based on each student's "needs, available sources", namely materials and trained teaching staff.

Teacher 4 argued that inclusion helps students with visual impairments to "blend in" with other students and learn from them, and this will help them in their "future career" and will make it "easy" for visually impaired students to "blend into" their future "work environment". Teacher 6 noted that she is "definitely" with preparing the teacher, "everyone and the environment", and the "entire community" to "implement" inclusion.

Teacher 6 also argued that if all the involved “parties” prepare for inclusion, the institution should go for it, but she maintained that her experience was totally the “opposite” as she initially had some sort of “rejection”, and that she had “zero idea” on how to deal with students who have a certain visual impairment. She also stated that she was “lucky” to have students who were “willing” to help, but it might not always be the case. There are still “behaviors” of certain people who still feel “reluctant” to help people with visual impairments and “avoid” them. Teacher 6 also mentioned an “innovative event” called, “Dinner in the Dark” conducted by one of the student associations at the university where regular students get the experience of having dinner with visually impaired students in complete darkness to experience what it is like to be visually impaired to “raise awareness” about this group of students. Teacher 6 also noted that though she never attended the event, she could “picture” it where the concept of dealing with visually impaired students can be “spread” without resorting to merely conventional means such as lectures and speeches.

4.3.2. *Special training*

Recent research in the context of Oman indicates that there is a lack of awareness about the concepts related to inclusion in higher education (Al-Busaidi & Tuzlukova, 2018). Teacher training and professional development for boosting required competencies of language educators in inclusive classrooms can orient them to innovations and use of technologies and lead teachers to be more prepared to handle inclusive teaching (Al-Siyabi et al., 2022). Teachers should be informed of the needs of the visually impaired English language learners, their levels of impairment and potential training needs teachers engaged to enhance effective student learning (Al-Busaidi & Tuzlukova, 2018).

Teachers who participated in the study reflected on whether they thought that special training is required to teach special needs students, and they also talked about how they managed. Teacher 1 argued that teachers involved in the teaching of the special needs must be interviewed to see the teacher’s intent is “sincere” and not for the sake of “adding a feather in the CV Cap” of having done this and that. It should be a “very genuine urge” to be “useful” and to “support” the blind students “with a balance of compassion, care and also firm treatment” so students do not “make excuses”. In the interview, the focus should be on the teacher’s real intent.

Teacher 7 argued that to teach students more effectively, teachers at some level “require” special training sessions from “experts” to “better manage their classes”. To improve teaching skills, Teacher 7 continued, she read articles, watched videos on YouTube, and participated in online courses. Teacher 2 stated that he managed by “drawing on” his experience of communicative language teaching, peer-learning and differentiation. He added that he tried to “remain empathetic” considering the challenges that each activity may pose, and thinking about how he could get around them while still ensuring his blind student was “engaged and challenged”. He also “liaised” with the special needs committee. Teacher 2 contended, however, that he felt more “training and sharing” is “required” to “ensure good practice” and “expand teachers’ repertoires of strategies”. Teacher 5 also stated that special training is “definitely” significant, and that even though she “learned by experience”, she felt that special training is “necessary”. Teacher 8 strongly believed that special training is “required” for teachers to be able to “handle” SN students “effectively”. She also contended that she managed to teach these students for years “relying” on her “patient nature and willingness” to give and support students in need. Teacher 3 also argued that special

training is important for teachers to “effectively” teach students with special needs; it helps them learn strategies and techniques “tailored to” the “unique” needs of these students. This training equips teachers, Teacher 3 continued, with the skills to “create inclusive” classrooms, adapt materials, and provide “appropriate” support. Teacher 4 contended that professional training must be provided for teachers before taking on such a task. She mentioned that in the beginning, teaching a visually impaired student was “very challenging” since she had never taught students with visual impairments. She also stated that beside getting some help from the course leader, she had to spend hours doing research and reading online articles about how to work with visually impaired students. Teacher 6 contended that teachers have to be “prepared”, classrooms should be “equipped”, and regular students have to be “prepared culturally and mentally”. She suggested that teachers need help on “how to deal with” special needs students; they need to be briefed on “applications and software” that can be used when teaching visually impaired students. However, she added, sometimes even when training opportunities are available, teachers may have “other duties” that prevent them from “joining” training.

7. IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Visually impaired students are at a disadvantage in the English language classroom owing to the limited access to required information they gain through the use of the Braille system or audio recorded materials, a situation that also leads to lacking social inclusion (Cárdenas & Inga, 2011). Modification of teaching material and instruction for visually impaired English language learners is normally inadequate (Susanto & Nanda, 2018). Visually impaired students face obstacles in developing autonomy in language education and language acquisition, (Hiago & Sade, 2020). Visually impaired language learners are still disadvantaged in learning; however, emerging assistive technologies have paved the way for a growing interest in the English language education of visually impaired students, access to knowledge and its success, and it has also led to an increase in the body of literature on teaching and learning of these students in higher education (Arslantaş, 2017). Shared experiences and beliefs, as well as the components of inclusion, may also lead to stronger culture of inclusion within the researched institution and a broader context of Oman’s tertiary education.

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