

EDITORIAL NOTE

Thematic papers collection on

Inclusive English Language Education in Tertiary Education Context: Policy and Practice

Eds.: Jamila Al Siyabi, Victoria Tuzlukova, Nadežda Stojković

Serving as a forum for language researchers and practitioners to reflect on, this thematic papers collection of *The Journal of Teaching English for Specific and Academic Purposes* (JTESAP) is aimed at exploring diverse circumstances that form the contemporary setting for inclusive English language teaching and learning in the context of tertiary education, and in terms of which it can be fully understood in order to minimize or remove barriers to English language education and facilitate the success of all learners.

This thematic papers collection has been prepared in response to ideas of discovering and presenting the work done that have always been supported by the JTESAP, as well as to signify promoting inclusivity in English language teaching and learning. With the changing perspectives and trends on English language teaching and learning, it has now become a pivotal point to ascertain where more scholarship should be exerted, 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; Douglas & Landry, 2021; Douglas et al., 2021). One dimension of this focus is the discussions on the importance of diversity and inclusion in English language teaching, and creation of classroom settings that “bridge educational inequality, reflect diversity and promote the inclusion of typically underrepresented groups” (Chong, 2021, n.p.). Indeed, inclusive education is viewed by many as “a dynamic approach of responding positively to pupils with diversity and seeing individual differences not as a problem but as an opportunity for enriching learning” (Mariga et al., 2014, p.25). However, though the importance of this theme is continuous, it is still underdeveloped and not enough is known about local policies and teaching and learning practices of inclusive English language education, or challenging and successful episodes of such practices that could be incremental to the context. Also, it is significant to define inclusion as based on the principle that individuals have different learning needs and abilities and that educational institutions need to innovate and adapt their structure, policies and practices, in order to accommodate those needs (Sharma, Loreman & Forlin, 2012). Teaching that aims at improving inclusive education settings (Bellacicco & Farinella, 2018) need to be promoted. Nevertheless, the concept of ‘inclusion’ in the area of English language teaching and learning, still viewed as manifold and complex, due to its ever-changing nature is not yet clearly defined and explored.

To meet the existing gaps and make research on inclusive English language education available for public scrutiny, this thematic collection of *The Journal of Teaching English for Specific and Academic Purposes* is about searching for knowledge, putting isolated facts, practices and experiences into perspective, helping making connections across academic and language teaching communities, and contributing to scientific value and social significance of language educators and pedagogues involved in diverse practices of inclusive English language teaching and learning. The topics covered in this thematic collection include, but are not limited to, inclusive policies and practices in English language teaching and learning across the tertiary education context, innovations and technologies in inclusive English language classroom, as well as teachers' perspectives, successful and challenging aspects of addressing the problems faced by students in the context of inclusive English language classroom. The issue also includes studies on the international perspectives on inclusive English language teaching and learning in order to better understand how to facilitate a supportive, effective and appropriate classroom environment and enhance students teaching and learning in the context of an inclusive classroom.

In their paper "Inclusion in the Context of English Language Classroom: Teachers' Current Beliefs and Practices", Jamila Al Siyabi, Victoria Tuzlukova, Khalid Al Kaabi, and Asila Almaawali explore English language teachers' views about integration of visually impaired students into the mainstream classroom. The exploration is based on the findings of a year-long research project conducted at the Centre for Preparatory Studies of Sultan Qaboos University that examined diverse conditions of inclusive teaching and learning settings, including teachers' assumptions regarding inclusion, teaching strategies, classroom environment and management, special needs students' interaction and collaboration with other students in the mainstream English language classroom, and teacher professional development. In the opinion of the authors, teachers' shared experiences and beliefs may lead to stronger culture of inclusion and its better understanding.

The paper entitled "Differentiating E-learning Content in ESL Courses to Meet Special Needs of Students with Learning Difficulties" is contributed by Olga Domorovskaya with the SMART International Online Institute of Psychology. It reports on a study that focuses on special learning needs of students with reading and writing difficulties, or dyslexia, who take English as a compulsory course at the institutions of tertiary education in Russia. The study is rooted in the authors' strong belief that "inclusive education is not about highlighting the difference but about how to support everyone in the class". Here, the author employs a wide approach to inclusion in education as a principle aimed at catering for all students and directing all education policies and practices. In more detail, guided by understanding of importance of content, process, product, and learning environment's differentiating, the study focused on students struggling with foreign language learning when achieving their educational goals. It involved 320 tertiary education students who took an online self-study English language course with differentiated content to identify their special learning needs and difficulties in English language learning. The results of the study demonstrate students' higher engagement and success rates when working with differentiated content since it provides options for completion, choosing one's way to present the results, and to complete the course assignments.

"Ensuring Inclusivity through Critical Thinking in EFL Contexts" by Sandhya Rao Mehta draws on the results from a study that examines the extent to which students in a

supervised undergraduate research project course felt equipped to work independently using a range of critical thinking skills developed within the course. The author brings into discussion critical thinking as an important, but challenging component in the context of English as a foreign language, and links it to inclusivity that embraces the quality of diverse skills, interests, competency levels and corresponding outcomes. She argues that “critical thinking skills are best developed when students are given autonomy for their learning and when they are discussing issues based on their cultural environment”. She also asserts that “giving students autonomy empowers them to think critically and creatively, making learning more inclusive”. The research by Dr. Sandhya Mehta based on a qualitative study of student questionnaires and focus group interviews reveals that critical thinking should be seen as a series of teachable skills. As specified by the author, these skills make it possible for students to develop individual pieces of work that will enable them to find their own voices. Findings of this study also show that providing opportunities for autonomous learning in the context of the English language classroom ensures inclusivity, equipping students with required skills.

In their paper “Using BLENDI Approach to Improve the EFL Students’ Language Skills”, Irina Kazumyan and Nagamurali Eragamreddy explore the implementation of blended learning that incorporates both online and in-person instruction for a more productive learning environment and inclusion in teaching English as a foreign language. Their study also looks at how the BLENDI method affects various language components and whether it can help English language learners enhance their linguistic proficiency. The authors are of the opinion that the BLENDI approach can be implemented with a wide range of students and learning environments. The BLENDI approach is described by the authors as “a forward-thinking and successful technique for enhancing the language proficiency of EFL students in modern educational settings”. However, according to them, to promote inclusion in blended learning environments, strategies that cater for various types of students should be implemented. Additionally, further exploration of elements such as student motivation, teacher facilitation, and the long-term effects on language proficiency becomes important.

The paper by Gennady Medvedev entitled “Common Pronunciation Problems in Inclusive Educational Settings” focuses on pronunciation difficulties of certain segmental features related to Oman’s local English language teaching environment that includes language learners of different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. Drawing its conclusions from research findings, Dr. Medvedev’s paper looks into some commonly mispronounced words, in and outside the English language classrooms, the paper explains the reasons behind such challenges and suggests some practical ideas to avoid common pronunciation problems in the context of the inclusive English language classroom.

A related paper by Iryna Lenchuk and Amer Ahmed “Because I Speak Jibbali ...”: A Case Study of the Use of Minority Languages in Dhofari Educational Settings” explores the extent to which the linguistic diversity present in the Dhofar region located in southern Oman is reflected in educational settings for the purpose of creating inclusive teaching and learning practices. The specific focus of the paper is on the use of Jibbali, an endangered indigenous South Arabian language as one of the minority languages spoken in Dhofar, with the aim to answer the question of the level of multilingualism in the Dhofar region, and whether such multilingualism is reflected in the educational settings. As explained by Lenchuk and Ahmed,

learners of English in the context of their research draw heavily on their rich linguistic repertoires in their daily interactions; however, the current educational practices fall short of reflecting that reality. Thus, shared indigenous language(s) primarily tag the context of the interaction as informal and intimate, and space should be given to the use of indigenous languages in educational settings. In the authors' view, inclusion of indigenous languages may significantly contribute to the educational settings currently in place, since as the authors put it, "one way to revitalize the language is to bring the language to the educational settings to the benefits of the language, its speakers and the broader community". This can be viewed as a step towards achieving a more equitable, safe and inclusive learning environment.

The purpose of a paper "Exploring Aspects of Inclusion to Enhance Oral Proficiency in Higher Education EFL Classroom" by Aneta Naumoska and Biljana Naumoska-Sarakinska is to take a closer look at various aspects related to inclusion for the purpose of enhancing English as a Foreign Language learners' oral skills proficiency, addressing the potential need of materials development, and the importance of establishing and promoting clear and objective criteria. The exploration of the aspects of inclusion for oral proficiency's enhancement is supported by the authors' discussion of the need to rethink the way in which oral communicative skills as a vital segment of their communicative proficiency are dealt with in the context of the tertiary English classroom, and whether learners receive proper guidance, support and scaffolding to help them improve them. In the words of the authors, "care ought to be taken so that it is done in a more inclusive fashion to correspond to the new attitudes and expectations of the diverse 'global village' we are living in".

In Elena Spirovska Tevdovska's paper "Intercultural Awareness, Inclusion and Learning Experiences in ESP Courses: Students' Perceptions and Views", the author reviews and examines students' perceptions and views on intercultural awareness and inclusivity in the context of tertiary education and ESP setting. Involving both local and international students who come from diverse ethnic, national and cultural backgrounds, the study conducted by Tevdovska aims at exploring students' awareness of inclusion and diversity. In addition, it examined students' attitude towards the learning environment in ESP courses and teaching and learning practices which foster students' intercultural awareness, the necessity of these practices and the ways to improve. Some teaching practices that facilitate inclusivity and promote intercultural awareness in the context of ESP courses are recommended by the author.

The paper "Hybrid ESP Courses as a Part of an Inclusive Academic Environment" by Albena Stefanova presents a study of the students' and faculty members' attitudes and perceptions to hybrid academic ESP courses. The emphasis of this paper is on inclusion and modern education in the context of learning modes and language teaching. The author asserts that "implementing inclusive policies, creating inclusive environments and applying inclusive methodologies are major aspects of modern education as a basis of sustainable personal and societal development". The discussion in the paper is firmly rooted in scholarly thought on inclusion and its different aspects. It is organized with regard to ESP course design that accommodates different learning styles, and the introduction of inclusive and innovative practices that lead to increased involvement, motivation and opportunities for learning in an academic context.

Digambar Ghodke in the paper entitled "English for Students from Marginalized Sections at the Tertiary Level: An Inclusive Approach" reviews the status of tertiary-level English education in India. In particular, the author inquires whether English education in

India is inclusive or exclusive. The observations provided by the author regarding English pedagogy and learning outcomes at the tertiary level in Indian higher education institutes (HEIs), especially in rural and semi-urban areas, made it possible for the author to identify the need in assisting most learners at the tertiary level in developing basic English skills. According to the authors' observations, "children from privileged sections, especially from urban and metropolitan areas get better exposure at an early age to English and its correct usage in real-life situations with accent and decent. Further, other semi-urban privileged children have also been getting good exposure, although not satisfactory, to the English language from an early age". At the same time, as noted by the author, "their counterparts from the socio-economically underprivileged sections learn English as one of the subjects without appropriate exposure to its usage at primary, secondary, and higher secondary levels for twelve years". As a result, as noticed by the author, "the outcomes are seldom visible in their learning". For this reason, the author suggests that thoughtful consideration of learning needs of diverse student population should be taken by the institutions of tertiary education. Also, there is an argument that an inclusive approach to the English language curricula and pedagogy at the tertiary level that emphasize the needs of learners from marginalized sections and are more inclusive and learner-friendly should be implemented.

In her paper "Language Planning and its Effects on Post Foundation Students' Proficiency in Inclusive Vocational Training Environment", Dalinda Zghidi holds that using the native language as the medium of instruction can help students understand the concepts and skills needed to prepare them for the labor market. The aim of her study is to examine language planning that supports an inclusive learning environment in the context of English as Medium of Instruction (EMI), and its potential impact on students' learning experiences in Oman's vocational colleges. While discussing the barriers to learning that students experience when faced with studying technical English or English for vocational purpose (EVP), the author also considers inadequate English language skills as a significant hindrance to understanding course content and acquiring marketable skills. In the author's view, "by overcoming linguistic barriers, the scope for integrating a group of individuals with special needs becomes open". The author also discusses inclusion of disabled people into vocational education and some potential benefits, including those on personal and socio-economic levels. One of the recommendations includes, for example, forming groups for disabled individuals whose disabilities align with vocational education requirements. According to the author, this policy should be implemented to ensure special needs students' integration into society and active participation in the economic cycle. As claimed by the author, such adjustments and move towards inclusive education "would more effectively enable the desired national growth".

The papers in this thematic collection of the *Journal of Teaching English for Specific and Academic Purposes* focus on different aspects of inclusive English language teaching and learning practice in a variety of contexts. However, they share a common understanding of the significance of inclusiveness and diversity for the continued development and enhancement of our students' competencies and skills. It is the wish of the editors and contributors that this issue serves as a valuable resource and reference guide for the comprehensive presentation and coverage of research on inclusive English language education in different local contexts of teaching and learning. It is also our hope that this collection of papers will prove to be useful for both teachers and researchers as a source of inspiration and ideas, and help them discover new perspectives for implementing inclusive education to build upon.

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