Opportunities and barriers to teaching English language in inclusive classrooms: Examples from the Styrian region in Austria

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Abstract

Inclusive education has grown to be a vital part of current social philosophy. Teachers are expected to guide society in managing groups of children with diverse abilities. Intending to examine English language teaching and learning in inclusive classrooms in the Austrian region, Styria, the study interviewed ten teachers regarding their perceptions, attitudes, and challenges they experience while teaching English in inclusive classrooms. Their responses reveal more general challenges in inclusive education than specific challenges while teaching English. The results highlight that these teachers are aware of children's diverse learning skills and their cognitive abilities, and they understand that these skills/abilities need to be balanced with the teacher's teaching style. They also report that the lack of teacher training for inclusive classrooms, the lack of 'extra' teaching material, and the lack of 'extra' teaching/learning environments make this balance difficult to achieve. In addition, their large class sizes present an additional challenge on inclusive education. Therefore, this study suggests the implementation of the abovementioned teachers' needs that would provide both sustainable pocket opportunities and innovative pedagogical practices appropriate for diverse learners.

Keywords: inclusive education, English language, challenge, attitude, classroom

1. Introduction

Different students have different abilities and needs, and therefore some of them have difficulties adapting to general requirements. Accepting and acknowledging those differences can foster mutual respect. Mutual respect needs more trumpeting as many teachers (and learners) face difficulties trying to balance their teaching (learning) abilities and adapt to the requirements of all (Benko & Martinovic, 2021, p.112). Many stakeholders and complex factors play a role when it comes to implementing inclusive education, such as learners, institutional policies, the sociocultural environment, teachers, economic climate, etc. (Lindner et al., 2022). The school environment is supposed to be the place where all students have the same chance of success (UNESCO, 2020). It is ultimately the teachers' job to create a friendly learning environment, one where students feel free to participate and where everybody feels accepted equally (Lindner et al., 2022, p. 5). A supporting and encouraging classroom environment is critical for student achievement (Erling et al., 2023, p. 73). Although, as stated by Gitschthaler et al. (2021b), considerable effort is required for the creation of an inclusive learning environment (p.67), therefore, the degree of pedagogical support is decisive for the allocation of resources (Gitschthaler et al., 2021a, p.15; Gitschthaler et al., 2021b, p.68). According to Jardinez and Natividad (2024, p.57), "the idea of inclusive education has become a transformative catalyst for present-day pedagogy". In line with the changes toward teaching students with SEN (Special Education Needs) in inclusive schools, it is the teacher's job to utilize the best pedagogical practices by understanding each individual's needs, desires, and areas for growth and thus allowing learning possibilities for all students. This is supported by Erling et al. (2023, p. 79), who, in their study, found that a positive classroom atmosphere is based on a teacher's awareness of students' learning abilities and cultural backgrounds. In our case, the learning abilities study is based on the understanding of the abilities of SEN students when learning English in inclusive classrooms in Austria, in the Styrian region, as highlighted by Wang (2021), to support affective and cognitive learning in instructional settings.

2. Literature review

People are alike in many ways. However, each person is also unique and has qualities differentiating them from others, and when trying to identify someone's needs, it is important to focus on their differences and their individualities rather than their similarities with other people. These human individuals come with different needs and different abilities requiring different approaches in everyday social life. This is especially relevant for the educational area where diverse learners need to be offered different learning opportunities. The issue of addressing this diversity in the classroom is called "inclusive education," and many authors have offered different definitions of the term.

Mitchel (2009) defines inclusive education as 'Education that Fits,' and inclusive school as 'A School for Everyone' (p. 55). Similarly, UNESCO (2020) highlights the importance of identifying barriers learners encounter in education and emphasizes inclusion as 'Education for All.' Kirschner (2015) defines inclusive education in more explicit terms:

> the inclusion of persons with physical and mental impairments, such as sensory or mobility limitations, intellectual disabilities, learning disabilities, language disorders, behavior disorders, and autism spectrum disorders [...] but also by those who face exclusion due to their ethnicity, social class, gender, culture, religion, immigration history, or other attributes (2015, p. 403).

Besides the definition, Mitchel (2009) further proposes that inclusive education is a multi-dimensional concept that requires a 'Magic Formula' for its successful implementation:

> Inclusive Education = V + P + 5As + S + R + L (V=Vision; P=Placement; 5As=Adapted Curriculum, Adapted Assessment, Adapted Teaching, Acceptance, Access; S = Support, R = Resources, L = Leadership). Pokrivčáková (2015, p. 8) categorized learners with SEN (Special Education Needs) under the following categories:

> "a) a disabled learner (who might be an ill learner, or a learner with a mental, hearing, sight, or physical impairment; disturbed communication skill, autism or other pervasive developmental disorders, learning and attention disorders);

> b) a learner from a socially disadvantaged environment (i.e., an environment which does not support learner´s optimal development and progress, which may lead to a risk of learner´s social exclusion);

> c) a gifted learner (with above-average intellect, music or sport skills)" (Pokrivčáková, 2015 p. 8)

Inclusive education—providing access to quality education for all students—is also defined as a priority by the European Commission (2015). Porsch and Wilden (2021) argue that changes in inclusion policies have contributed to increasing numbers of children with SEN in regular schools, supported by Kirschner (2015), Moriña (2017), Benko and Martinovic (2021), and Lindener et al. (2022). The inclusion of students with SEN is an important topic in current educational systems in most European countries (Benko & Martinovic, 2021; Zabeli et al., 2021; Gitschthaler et al., 2021b), as children with SEN can benefit more from education in inclusive schools than from education in special schools (Padurean, 2014; UNESCO, 2020). As UNESCO (2020) points out, the education of children with special needs is an important part of improving education overall for a few reasons: (1) Educational justification: inclusive education demands developing and adapting innovative teaching strategies that respond to individual differences, for the benefit of all children, (2) Social

justification: inclusivity encourages children to accept differences, (3) Economic justification: it is simply less costly to establish and maintain inclusive schools (p. 11,12). In the prepared Report on the implementation of the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET 2020), the European Commission (2015) states that education and training must be organized such that learners can experience inclusion, equality, and equity (p. 28). Indeed, the experience of inclusion, equality, and equity requires teaching approaches appropriate for each individual's needs.

This implies that teachers must approach teaching differently depending on the student's needs, which is challenging. In general, the main challenges for teachers working in inclusive classrooms are the lack of proper training, insufficient information, inappropriate teaching materials, and time management (Pokrivčáková, 2015; Benko & Martinovic, 2021; Padurean, 2014; Kirschner, 2015; Moriña,2017; Porsch & Wilden, 2021; Zabeli et al., 2021). Wang (2021) considers that teachers are the main actors who can trigger the students' progress, encourage them and expand their interaction, engagement, and cognitive learning. i.e., he emphasizes the immediacy of teachers. In addition, Gitschthaler et al. (2021a) highlight that insufficient resources in schools can negatively influence teacher's ability to foster inclusive classrooms.

2.1. Foreign Language Learning, English Language Learning in Inclusive Classrooms

Based on the Language Education Policy Profile (LEPP) in Austria issued by the Ministry of Education, the Arts and Culture and Ministry of Science and Research (2008b), "Austria was among the first countries in Europe regarding the introduction of modern foreign language (MFL) learning nation-wide at primary stage" (p. 37). MFL was introduced in third grade in 1983 and introduced as an obligatory subject from first grade in 2003–2004. According to Dalton-Puffer et al. (2019), English is the most commonly taught foreign language in Austria. It is a compulsory foreign language (FL) at the primary level (grades 1–4) in nearly 100% of schools.

This is also supported by Erling et al. (2023, p. 72), and the Ministry of Education, the Arts and Culture and the Ministry of Science and Research (2008b), who state that English is the most dominant foreign language in schools in Austria, where it is also considered an obligatory subject. The LEPP (2008b) states that primary school teachers in Austria are generalists and they integrate MFL/English with other courses (Integriertes Fremdsprachenlernen) utilizing the Foreign Language as a Medium of Instruction (CLIL – Content and Language Integrated Learning) approach (FsAA Fremdsprache als Arbeitssprache) (p.19). The application of this approach requires trained and skilled teachers to apply various integrative teaching methods and didactics. The LEPP Report (2008a) promotes the 'integrated' approach to these primary students (so-

called mini-CLIL), which integrates everyday English vocabulary, initially emphasizing the development of listening and speaking skills, later shifting to the development of other skills, and there are no "doubts on the effectiveness of mini-CLIL" (p. 30). However, there are also schools with separate English language teachers.

This shift of language development in grades 3 and 4 towards more literacy activities is also pointed out by Dalton-Puffer et al. (2019). As indicated by the LEPP Report (2008a), Austria prioritizes social cohesion. LEPP points at education as a necessary precondition for full participation in society, adding language as a key element in an individual's inclusion within society.

When discussing foreign languages and educating children with special needs, it is important to mention Schwarz (1997), who is considered a pioneer in the field. He pointed out that for learners who do not have learning difficulties, learning a foreign language can be motivating. For children with SEN on the other hand it can be humiliating and stressful. Benko and Martinovic (2021) highlight that learning a foreign language can be beneficial for students with SEN as it helps them develop valuable skills (p. 114). Similarly, Jardinez and Natividad (2024) argue that inclusive education is beneficial not only for the students with disabilities but also those without, stating that "students without disabilities can also receive advantages from inclusive education" (p. 63), and teachers' attitudes play an important role in this process. Positive attitudes towards learners with special needs should be considered a 'must' (Pokrivčáková, 2015; Moriña, 2017; Porsch & Wilden, 2021; Benko & Martinovic, 2021; Zabeli et al.,2021; Cimermanová, 2017). According to Porsch and Wilden (2021, p. 213), inclusive English classrooms are positively influenced by teachers with experience. It is a teacher's responsibility to gauge the effectiveness of their teaching for all the students in an inclusive classroom, as well as enable each student to contribute and learn as much as possible (UNESCO, 2020). Lang-Heran (2022) introduces the term 'mediation' to describe the combination of receptive, productive, and interactive language activities that make communication possible among students. 'Mediation' is seen as a crucial factor for all learning processes. Therefore, it is beneficial to see how this 'mediation' works in inclusive classrooms.

There are frequent discussions about whether "foreign language learning is necessary for students with SEN in the first place" (Benko & Martinovic, 2021, p. 113). Despite this, some studies are highlighting that EFL education can positively contribute to a person's communication, openness, tolerance, and responsibility (Porsch and Wilden, 2021). According to Pokrivčáková (2015), "The foreign language education of learners with special educational needs is one of the fields of language pedagogy which constantly demands more attention from teachers, researchers, teacher trainers, education-system decision-makers and managers" (Pokrivčáková, 2015 p. 7).

Certainly, more strategies need to be taken into account by English teachers (Padurean, 2014). Studies regarding EFL in inclusive classrooms in various countries, such as Croatia (Benko & Martinovic, 2021), Serbia (Savić & Prošić-Santovac, 2017), Romania (Padurean, 2014), France (Peker& Regalla, 2018), Germany (Porsch & Wilden, 2021), Spain (Barrios Espinosa & García Mata, 2009), and Slovakia (Cimermanová, 2017), convey various challenges, such as inappropriate curriculum, teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education, the teaching material, the lack of adequate training, etc.

As there are self-contained special schools in Austria, Lindner et al. (2022), Buchner & Proyer (2019) state that the transformation from special to inclusive education faces strong challenges in Austria nowadays. Buchner & Proyer (2019) succinctly describe the disabled students' participation in education. They begin with the first era, when these students attended special schools; then integrated ones; lastly, the progress made to the most recent educational era: inclusive schools. In all three of these eras, they highlight specific challenges. However, no matter the era of teaching /learning we address the alignment of language activities, cognitive approaches, language strategies, and language competencies in inclusive classes is needed nowadays to fulfill the educational (and social) policies. As pointed out by Lang-Heran (2022), this can be achieved with a combination of curriculum, teaching, and assessment. Similarly, this was explained by Jardinez and Natividad (2024), who claim that inclusive education is based on a humanistic perspective that assists growth, i.e., cognitive growth, and "ensures that all learners, especially those with unique needs or disabilities, are accepted into the regular classroom, provided with necessary support and resources" (p .61).

2.2. Research questions

Based on the above-mentioned factors that impact inclusiveness, our study's main purpose is to explore and discuss the Austrian teachers' perceptions of teaching a foreign language in inclusive classrooms—in this case, the English language. Taking into consideration Padurean (2014) that "English can be taught to children with SEN without placing them in special schools" (p. 314), our study aims to offer an overview of how foreign (English) language is taught in inclusive classrooms in the Styrian region in Austria and which challenges are associated with it. The study posed the following questions:

Q1: How do Austrian teachers perceive their involvement in inclusive classrooms?

Q2: What main challenges and problems do teachers from the Styrian region in Austria face in implementing inclusiveness in the EFL setting?

Q3: In what ways do the teachers consider that the teaching of an ELT (English Language Teaching) inclusive classroom could be improved?

This study seeks to understand, and provide insight into, the teaching of EFL (English as a Foreign Language) in inclusive classes according to the following attributes:

- teachers' perceptions of inclusive classes

- teachers' ability and challenges to teach English in inclusive classes; and

- teachers' outstanding and influencing roles in performing inclusiveness.

As stated in the LEPP Report (2008a), English has become an essential part of social policy worldwide. General and vocationally oriented proficiency in English is important for the world of work. As such, the teacher is often focused on students' abilities to learn rather than their various learning (dis)abilities. The attitudes towards the challenges Austrian teachers face are the preconditions of this study. We hope our research will elaborate on the potential of teaching and learning English as a Foreign language in inclusive classrooms, to provide an insight into the education system overall (which is similar in many countries regarding inclusive education). Finally, we hope to elucidate current teachers' tendencies and attitudes toward teaching English in inclusive classes.

3. Methodology

This study sets out to explore teachers' perceptions of inclusive classrooms and their beliefs on SEN and English teaching/learning in inclusive classrooms. The research was conducted in the southeastern part of Austria, precisely in the Styria region, in March 2023. As such, the methods used to explore and examine the aforementioned issues, the design, and the description of data collection are presented in this section.

This study applied a qualitative approach. The methodology is based on Zabeli et al. (2021), who clearly explain the notion of 'qualitative research' as a deeper understanding of the targeted groups' perspectives, understanding of their world and their surroundings, and the concepts this targeted group offers for contextual factors for certain issues, which is based on their own experiences and attitudes towards the stated issues.

3.1. Participants

This study targeted teachers from Graz, in the Styrian region of southeastern Austria. Due to time restrictions, we interviewed ten teachers. They had diverse experiences of teaching in inclusive classes. Six teachers were already working in primary schools, two in secondary, and two were higher education teachers with experience working with children with special needs. These teachers were identified as T (2), and T (3)—each number revealing years of teacher's work

experience. For example, T (18)—teacher with eighteen years of teaching experience. Eight teachers were female, and two were male.

3.2. Data Collection Instrument

To explore and examine learning English as a Foreign Language in inclusive classrooms, the study utilized a questionnaire consisting of twelve questions. It was tailored to suit these teachers' teaching experiences to come up with a broader range of responses. The interview questions focused on teaching English in inclusive classrooms, and they were as follows:

1. How long have you been teaching?

2. What are Austrian EFL teachers' views towards inclusive education?

3. Should teachers of English teach children with SEN without any prior training?

4. Do you consider that children with SEN slow down the teaching pace? Give suggestions to change

 this situation.

5. Do you regard inclusive education as a multifaceted and complex burden? What are your

 perceptions regarding hindrances to implementing a fruitful inclusive classroom?

6. What are the main challenges teachers experience teaching EFL in inclusive classrooms?

7. What sorts of extra facilities would you ask for to implement an effective inclusive classroom?

8. What do you view as the most important feature of a fruitful inclusive EFL classroom for students with (intellectual) disabilities?

9. How do your students with learning disabilities progress in learning?

10. Based on your teaching experience, what would you do to make the 'inclusive' curriculum more valuable?

11. Based on your experience, what is the maximum number of students for an ideal inclusive class?

12. Do you think that a diverse classroom is a resource for learning English?

As we aimed to explore and examine teachers' perceptions and attitudes regarding inclusive education and English learning, in-depth interviews were prepared and conducted for the purpose of qualitative data collection, in an informal setting at the interviewee's workplace. The interviews were focused

on three different areas. Apart from the demographic data regarding work experience and schools, the first area included questions related to: (i) the teachers' perceptions of inclusive education, (ii) their challenges while teaching EFL in inclusive classes, and (iii) their points of view regarding curriculum, classroom environment, and number of students in class. After the interview sessions, all recordings were transcribed and the responses were categorized and subcategorized.

Follow-up questions, such as "Why?" were not asked, as the purpose was to let the teachers express their opinion(s) freely.

4. Results

 All interview responses were analyzed using a qualitative approach, utilizing NVIVO software. Based on the content analysis, the results highlight a few factors promoting EFL; however, the results also reveal hindrances to the successful implementation of inclusive classrooms.

4.1. Cases per codes

Regarding our research questions, we created a coding matrix including three codes: A: Challenges and Problems, B: Inclusion, and C: Perception, and applied these codes to all the interviews. Results showed that code C: Perception was the most commonly applied across all transcripts, with a total count of 38, followed by code A: Challenges and Problems with a total count of 28, and B: Inclusion with a total count of 26. For a more detailed explanation, the study will discuss some of the teachers' views related to the questions. Regarding the first study question, Q1, the responses are roughly similar. This similarity can be noticed in their responses to the question "What are your views towards inclusive education?"

For example: T (7): "Children with SEN should definitely learn in the same learning environment with other children. In this way, they learn from each other and feel that they are part of this group"

T (30): "I firmly believe in non-discrimination and of children's opportunity to learn together with other children of their own age, ... I think we have many opportunities as teachers to differentiate in our classes with contents or with methods so that it meets the needs of the different learners". This teacher's claim fully supports Benko & Martinovic's (2021, p. 113) statement: "One of the greatest treasures of humankind lies in its variety of different individuals with different abilities," Or T (16): "I try to create an environment where everyone is accepted." On the other hand, there is teacher T (18), who relates heterogeneity with unpredictable teaching situations: "The more heterogeneity is in the classroom, the trickier it might be to please everyone. And this of course is very

much true for inclusive classrooms. This heterogeneity of course, influences preparing the classes, the material that you choose... Also requires a high degree of flexibility... even more unexpected situations in inclusive classrooms".

These teachers are also aware of the obstacles they face. For example, T (3) showed frustration with working in inclusive classrooms when children do not have the official status of special education needs, i.e., children who do not have confirmed SEN. T(3): "There are children at the edge of becoming pupils with SEN."

The results about Q2, that deals with the main problems Styrian teachers face, reveal that Styrian teachers do face general challenges while teaching in inclusive classrooms. That is, their answers reveal challenges in finding and obtaining extra teaching material, the need for another teacher in class, and extra classroom space where children would go and reflect if they do not feel like attending classes. T (6) mentions challenges related to "understanding of English, yet it depends on the child."

Naturally, there is also concern with the promotion of professional teaching in inclusive classrooms, and this is evident even among teachers with longer teaching experience, such as T (18): "We are not really trained for inclusive teaching. How to cater for the individual needs of learners? How to suit all children's needs? How to balance that? What methods to use? Material design, and sometimes also money issues. There are certain topics which are not suitable for all primary school children, or behavioral different needs because of their different emotional and social needs."

Based on NVIVO software data results, the word "needs" appears as the most frequent word. This suggests that there are significant challenges related to meeting the needs of individuals or groups being studied. The word "children" is also a frequent word, with a count of 9 and a weighted percentage of 4.33%, indicating that the challenges may specifically relate to children. Other frequently occurring words include "material," "learning," and "teaching," which may suggest that there are challenges related to providing appropriate materials for effective teaching and learning. The words "feel," "like," and "really" suggest that there may also be emotional challenges that are present in teachers' working field.

In the answers obtained regarding teaching English in an inclusive classroom, as posed in Q3, the interviewees do not show any frustration with English teaching specifically. When asked for their ideas on how to make teaching English in inclusive classrooms more appropriate, the responses are again generalized. T (28): "Get to know them. Understand them: What they can do well, and what they struggle with?",..." Following children's interests and allowing them to decide how to achieve knowledge, teachers' knowledge of certain competencies to achieve success in teaching, sharing new teaching ideas, to visit other

teachers and see what they do, more teaching material appropriate for inclusive education".

T (30) "Finding ways to make knowledge connections. We have to find out the full comprehension of the concept. Larger number of kids who do speak English, would be helpful in English classes, for sure". This teacher's opinion is in line with Lindner et al. (2022, p. 5) who claim that "peers who have and don't have SEN should support a climate of comfort and self-confidence", and this supportive climate is one of the main factors for fruitful learning. These teachers' responses are also in line with Benko & Martinovic (2021), who point out that "Accepting and acknowledging differences is one of the key principles for creating mutual respect. In the world of education, many individuals have a hard time finding their place and adjusting to the requirements of the system" (p. 113).

Again, the teachers consider space to be an important factor in enhancing learning. Based on their statements, children need more space to move around. As reckoned by T (28), "Try to keep the same learning goal, but different ways to get there. It is hard, but we should get there". The results support Erling et al. (2023, p. 97) that a positive learning environment and the awareness of their students' learning abilities relate to students' engagement in the classroom. The collected data also showed the preferred classroom size regarding the number of students in class: an average of 15.

In addition, we applied a cluster analysis to explore the similarity of the codes based on word frequency in each code using the Pearson coefficient. The results show that the highest correlation was found between challenges and problems with inclusion with $r = .36$, indicating a moderate relationship. The correlation between perception and inclusion $r = .29$, and perception and challenges and problems $r = .26$ was lower, indicating an overlap in the word similarity for the respective codes.

The preferences in teaching English language as a foreign language in inclusive classes are diverse. All interviewed teachers are willing to teach in such classes and show great awareness of this practice. Based on NViVo data analysis, the most frequent word for inclusion is the word "children", with a count of 8 and a weighted percentage of 3.20%. This suggests children may be a key focus of inclusion efforts. The word "teacher" is the second most frequent word, with a count of seven, and a weighted percentage of 2.80%, indicating the role of teachers may also be an important consideration in promoting inclusion. Other frequently occurring words include "teaching," "class," "classroom," "extra," "need," "classes," and "space." These words provide additional insight into the specific efforts being made to promote inclusion, such as the need for additional teaching resources or physical space.

5. Discussion

This group of teachers show positive attitudes and welcome students in an inclusive environment, although there are struggles while teaching. They are amenable to inclusive teaching, aware of their needs, their scarcities and lack of resources, and their students' needs. These teachers require more resources when teaching inclusive and diverse classrooms, in order to be successful. This can be accomplished by offering extra material, i.e., materials aligned with the students' individual preferences and needs (Jardinez and Natividad, 2024), more space, and another teacher/co-teaching. Our interviews showed these teachers focus more on their general needs, not specifically English learning (CLIL or mini-CLIL). These findings are in line with Gitschthaler et al. (2021b), who championed the 'need for support' (p. 73), especially for support staff. The majority of interviewees indicate that an extra teacher in their classrooms is a "must."

Regarding heterogeneity in classrooms, Porsch & Wilden (2021, p. 203) claim that heterogeneous classroom(s) are most successful when the teachers are focused on each individual's skills and the differing dispositions of all learners. Similarly, Cimermanová (2017) states that, in general, teachers do "have a positive attitude to integration, however they are afraid of inclusion" (p. 33). All interviewed teachers agree that no one should be left behind. Austrian society embraces social diversity and this includes inclusive education. Every child has the right to learn something new in every lesson, which can be different with different children. This is also associated with Benko & Martinovic (2021, p. 113), who claim that "accepting and acknowledging difference is one of the key principles for creating mutual respect. In the world of education, many individuals have a hard time finding their place and adjusting to the requirements of the system." The responses we obtained underscore that in these Styrian schools, teachers do not hesitate to teach in inclusive classrooms. They have a very positive attitude and positive approach towards teaching in such classes, as they do try "to foster the inclusion of all students in mainstream schools" (Lindner et al, 2022, p. 1), despite the challenges they face.

This study's findings are similar to the findings observed in Lindner et al. (2022). Their subjects also struggled with space issues, the need for additional teaching material and support staff, as well as the social challenge of understanding each student's needs. As pointed out by Lindner et al. (2022, p. 5), the attitude of peers is an important factor in learning. Benko & Martinovic (2022, p. 112) state that "teacher and learner attitudes play an important role in learning success." Our study confirms that interviewees are uncertain whether they possess adequate soft skills to implement successful inclusive teaching. This dilemma raises other concerns in inclusive classrooms, such as whether teachers are capable/trained enough to teach such children, and this concern is in line with Pokrivčáková (2015), who mentions teachers' unintentional mistakes while teaching in inclusive classes. i.e., while trying to help the children there

is a concern of harming them if the children are not properly diagnosed and if the teachers are not properly trained to teach in inclusive classrooms.

These inclusive classrooms are teaching diverse learners with diverse learning skills. Furthermore, our findings reveal that teachers are aware of this diversity, which is why they have to multitask.English, specifically, is not mentioned as a barrier to inclusive classrooms. The findings of this study are discussed in comparison to international literature regarding English learning and inclusive education to better understand and respond to the need to develop an inclusive education policy. The present study is comparable to previous research findings reporting that inclusive education is characterized by general challenges to ensure effective English language acquisition in inclusive classroom settings, such as Slovakia (Cimermanova, 2017), Croatia (Benko & Martinović, 2021), Romania (Padurean, 2014) and Germany (Porsch & Wilden, 2021). Our study offers a modest contribution to research in the field of EFL in inclusive classrooms and encourages researchers to follow up with studies on the critical factors that might counteract and challenge the implementation of inclusive teaching. Our results show that both, experienced and novice teachers are eager to apply appropriate pedagogical approaches, embrace diversity and inclusion, and empower their students in all subjects, including English as a foreign language.

Following Lang-Heran's (2022) umbrella term 'mediation', the study findings reveal that this 'mediation' is fruitful only if teachers are competent enough with a teaching methodology that embraces all students and understands their diverse needs. To do this, teachers must apply the most appropriate inclusive teaching approaches, which require various additional teaching materials and additional teaching space. The teachers we interviewed agree that implementing effective inclusive classrooms requires the understanding of the learners' needs and learning styles, exposing learners to more specialized material, a supplementary learning space, flexible teaching (especially with the second teacher in class), more positive energy, and strong commitment.

6. Conclusion

Based on the LEEP report (2008b), Austria is among the countries in which future teachers receive their pedagogical education in various institutions, all of which employ different didactics leading to different diplomas/degrees. The Austrian/Styrian educational system is among the most prominent modern teaching and learning institutions. It integrates inclusive classrooms and English as MFL considering English learning a cognitive domain that includes mental exercises such as thinking, speaking, listening, reading, and writing Although FsAA /CLIL is a well-established teaching approach in the Austrian system of education, offering many teaching materials and in-service training courses, this study defines pockets of opportunity in inclusive English classes.

The interviewed teachers seek helpers (more trained teachers to work with SEN children in inclusive classrooms), extra classroom space, and extra teaching/learning material, which remain the prominent pedagogic factors for fruitful teaching and learning. In the cognitive dimension, encompassing students' reasoning, attention, their perception, or their memorization, these teachers do not view teaching English in inclusive classes as a burden or a barrier, but rather as a challenge to intellectually and professionally grow. This is also in line with the views of Jardinez and Natividad (2024), who claim "that learning is facilitated by social interaction and assistance from others, particularly within a group setting" (p.60).

As such, we conclude that there is a general trend among Styrian teachers to encourage inclusive education. They see inclusive education alongside multiple social benefits. These teachers want to understand individual students' differences and foster an environment of acceptance even in English class, that can be achieved by implementing effective strategies in the classroom. Additionally, if the teachers were offered the services mentioned in this study, then inclusive education would be the best educational system for contemporary global society's needs, also supported by Wang (2021), who claims that teachers' immediacy is important to expand cognitive learning.

Going forward, to identify pockets of opportunity in inclusive classrooms and apply the best pedagogical practices in such classrooms, there is a need for a broader investigation of sustainable teaching and learning, including MFL/English which can be harnessed and extended through teacher and school development, i.e., by applying humanistic pedagogical approach. In-service teachers, more teacher training, more teaching materials, and extra /additional spaces need more trumpeting for sustainable learning and teaching. In this way, MFL/English language learning, and overall learning, will positively enhance teachers' attitudes toward inclusive classrooms as well as reduce the challenges they face daily while teaching.

7. Suggestions

Based on the conclusion, we suggest the Austrian government mobilize more teacher assistants and more financial resources. This mirrors the suggestions of UNESCO (2020) in Action 6: Considering the Report (LEPP, 2008a), "How can a general concept of language and cultural awareness be integrated in basic teacher training?". The current study adapts and modifies the above-mentioned question and poses a similar question requiring further investigation: How can a general concept of teaching a foreign language in an inclusive classroom be integrated into basic teacher training?

As this study is based only on the analysis of a small number of teachers from the Styria region in Austria, it could be followed up with complementary studies of other teachers from other Austrian regions to examine grassroots-level challenges for implementing English language learning in inclusive classroom settings. Although the teachers of this study have suggested sustainable pocket opportunities for implementing English learning in inclusive classrooms, it is necessary to go beyond the current understanding of inclusive education and develop prosperous teaching and learning for all. Therefore, the study recommends further studies regarding the relationship between English language learning and inclusive learning environments, to complement current teaching methods and widen teachers' perspectives on inclusive education.

Acknowledgments

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