

Inclusive EFL Teaching for Young Students

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Contributor: Jinjin Lu , Han Jiang , Yi Huang

The Ministry of Education emphasizes that school principals should attempt to train teachers in special education and in assisting students with special education needs (SEN) in regular classes via supportive services. However, EFL teachers usually have insufficient training and do not know how to adjust their teaching methods for students with SEN in regular classes.

special education needs

learning in regular classrooms (LRC)

EFL teaching and learning

1. Introduction

Inclusion is considered a critical issue in discussions on human rights and education equality; it has led to inclusive instructional practices worldwide ^{[1][2][3][4][5][6][7][8]}. In China, significant progress has been made in recent decades regarding the development of inclusive education. The policy related to inclusive education has been continuously revised to assist more students with disabilities ^[9]. The Ministry of Education, in a recent educational reform (i.e., since the 1980s) initiated the 'Learning in Regular Classrooms' (LRC) initiative. Moreover, *suibanjiudu* (随班就读) was proposed and implemented in some small regions and less developed cities ^{[10][11]}. Xu and colleagues ^[11] believe that the types of SEN (regarding students) should include intellectual disabilities, visual impairment, and hearing impairment. However, besides the three types of SEN, the LRC policy proposed that physical disabilities, speech and language disabilities, mental disorders (ASD is under this category), and multiple disabilities be included in mainstream classrooms ^[12]. This policy was documented as an important milestone in the Special Education Promotion Plan ^[13].

Although the quality and equality of education have improved, the LRC initiative is still lagging, particularly regarding EFL teaching practices. English is an important foreign language in China; it has been a compulsory subject since the restoration of the college entrance examination in China. As EFL education gradually develops in China, many research studies are focusing on Chinese pupils learning English from various aspects, such as EFL learning motivations, e.g., ^{[14][15][16][17]}, EFL learning styles, e.g., ^{[18][19]}, EFL teaching strategies, e.g., ^{[20][21][22]}, language proficiency, e.g., ^{[23][24][25][26]}, and language policies, e.g., ^{[27][28]} in China. However, most of the previous studies focused on EFL students in Chinese universities and teachers' instructional practices, which involved higher education or students without SEN. Few research studies have focused on investigating instructional practices and English teachers' attitudes toward the acceptance of young Chinese students with SEN (all categories included) into the LRC initiative. In this case, researchers examined EFL teachers' teaching practices, attitudes toward the LRC initiative, and their professional training in terms of supporting students with SEN in a Chinese context.

2. The Policy and Practice of LRC

An increasing number of Chinese students with SEN are enrolling in public schools [29]. The number of students with SEN enrolled in special schools has increased by 10.85% since 2020. In China, more than 50% of students with SEN are placed into LRC initiatives in public schools. The LRC initiative is a major form for students with SEN to join public schools. The other forms are home-based teaching and special education (rather than inclusive teaching). According to the National Bureau of Statistics of China [30], the number of students with SEN in LRC initiatives at primary schools was twice the amount compared to middle schools. That is, public primary schools have inclusive teaching; learning MOE [13] requires that students with SEN be encouraged to receive education in inclusive teaching and learning environments, as part of the 14th five-year strategic plan.

Scholars have not reached a consensus on the definition of inclusive education. Some researchers believe that inclusion refers to the placement of all students in regular schools and classrooms, regardless of their level of ability [31]. Others argue that the definition of SEN is broad and that researchers need to consider disability categories to include all children who need additional support. Florian [32] noted that it is important to consider the different needs of students with SEN and to further explore how to educate 'all'. In the Chinese context, the LRC initiative was proposed to be within the umbrella of the global inclusive education program [33]. Despite Piao [34] claiming that this is just a representation of a commonality in the evolution of special education, the commonality of today's global trend in special education is inclusive education. Most nations, including China, have embraced the idea of inclusive schools and society created by the Salamanca statement, which was released in 1994 and provides these countries with reasons and incentives for establishing objectives and strategies for inclusive education [35]. China's LRC initiative has been incorporated into the worldwide wave of inclusive education; this shared experience is a result of the internationalization of the LRC initiative. This is also reflected in the Chinese Special Education Improvement Act (SEIA) [13], which puts a lot of effort into assisting more children with SEN, so they could have equal rights to enjoy education in China.

The characteristics of LRC do not conflict with inclusive education. Inclusive education is still being explored and developed globally. That is, countries (including many developed countries) do not have global success stories regarding the implementation of inclusive education [36]. In other words, each nation needs to develop a model that adapts to its educational system and culture. Due to historical and cultural differences, the promotion process of LRC is not that smooth and still needs a lot of work in rural and remote areas. Xiao [37] described specific methods for implementing and promoting LRC in China. From the document regulations, these essential methods include the following: (1) students with SEN should be provided with the same subjects as other students in inclusive classrooms; they should be assisted by instructors who could help them deal with problems that ordinary classroom teachers are unable to resolve; (2) the enrolment of students with SEN should be in the same fashion as normal students; (3) the teaching materials for students with SEN should be the same as those for ordinary children, but they should be adjusted to students' unique educational needs; (4) teachers' qualifications and professional development should be a very rigorous process so they could understand and master specific skills/knowledge about the LRC initiative [37]. Though the plan starts with good intentions, there is a big gap between government policies and practice in schools. There is only one empirical study that was undertaken; Deng

[33] found a number of conflicts or gaps between urban and rural areas in central China in terms of the policy and implementation, as well as inadequate resource provision in implementing the LRC programs. Various conflicts were found in previous studies, including gaps between policies and insufficient resource provisions, different understandings from teachers and school principals, an elite selection of examination drilling, quality outcome-based education from a children-centered perspective, and Western and Chinese cultural differences toward inclusion [7][9]. These issues raised Chinese scholars' concerns about the quality and efficacy of the LRC initiative; researchers tended to view 'Learning in Regular Classrooms' as 'sitting in regular classrooms' [38][39].

3. Teachers' Attitudes toward Inclusion

Teachers' attitudes toward inclusion have been discussed widely in the West and in China. Researchers believe that teachers' attitudes and their sustained professional training in terms of specialized knowledge of SEN are important factors. Previous studies found that teachers' attitudes impacted the learning experiences among pupils with SEN [40][41]. Taylor and Ringlaben [42] argued that teachers' negative attitudes toward inclusive education would have a significant impact on school culture and, as a result, on student learning performances. Hamre and Pianta [43] evidenced that teachers who have positive attitudes toward their students tend to give them more positive attention, enhancing the students' feelings of efficacy; this shows the effort invested in providing positive learning experiences. However, practically, teachers tended to have more negative attitudes toward their students with SEN [44], which resulted in negative learning outcomes. Xiao [37] argued that "teachers generally lack basic knowledge and skills in special education in China" [37]. Currently, pre-service teachers who work in regular schools do not need to take lessons or finish professional development programs in special education [12]. This has resulted in a great majority of teachers in regular schools who do not have knowledge about theories and teaching strategies in the special education field. Consequently, this will lead to a number of issues in their daily work lives if they have difficulties in dealing with students with SEN.

4. EFL Teaching Practices in Inclusive Contexts

EFL is one of the most important subjects in both primary and middle schools in China and in other countries as it connects closely with educational and economic development in the 21st century [45][46]. In Europe, the Teaching Languages at School in Europe provides a comprehensive overview of language learning, teacher training and qualifications, and educational programs for teaching languages in European countries [47]. The reports indicate the important status of English in the European Framework of Reference for Languages. Russak [48] argues that researchers would not neglect the needs or rights of students with SEN who are required to learn English and other foreign languages according to policy document advocates (regarding inclusion and language education) as a large amount of research has shown that students with SEN might have more difficulties in linguistic functioning (in learning languages) than others [49][50][51]. For example, Andreou et al. ([49]) found that students with learning difficulties would be more likely to have academic problems, such as phonological awareness, and oral or written speech comprehension. Similar results were also found in Hong Kong, China. Ho and Fong [52] evidenced that the students with dyslexia performed significantly worse than those in the control group in nearly all English tests.

Marashi and Dolatdoost [53] studied the relationships among Iranian EFL learners with ADHD and their speaking complexity, accuracy, and fluency (CAF). The research results revealed a significant negative correlation between ADHD and speaking complexity; this indicated that the higher the level of ADHD in learners, the less complicated their language. In this case, it is essential to pay more attention to those students with SEN in EFL learning.

English is one of the most important foreign languages in the Chinese formal educational system, which might result in more challenges in the LRC tryouts. As part of the fast development of EFL education in China, English is emphasized from primary school to university; its important language status has influenced many Chinese students at all examination levels. As a foreign language, undoubtedly students with SEN experience more hardships during the learning process. The MOE [54] requires that students with SEN undertake English as one of the selective courses from year 7 in special schools. Meanwhile, English is required to be delivered to students with physical disabilities such as the deaf and blind in special schools and vocational schools.

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