An investigation of prospective language teachers' knowledge and attitudes towards inclusive education in Turkey

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Abstract

The purpose of the present study is to find out the knowledge of prospective language teachers about inclusive education, and their skills and professional competences about inclusive practices. Moreover, this study aims to investigate prospective language teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education and their suggestions to make inclusive language education practices successful. The participants of the study were a total of twenty 4th year prospective English language teachers. A questionnaire consisting of 8 open-ended questions was given to the participants to gather data. The responses were examined one by one and interpretational approach was used to determine the categories and themes. Four main themes were generated. These themes were knowledge about inclusive education, professional competence, teachers' attitudes towards inclusion and disability, and things to do. The findings showed that although the majority of the participants knew the meaning of inclusive education, only few of them described the detailed process of inclusive education. This study also revealed that although most of the prospective language teachers did not have enough expertise and skills for teaching students with learning difficulties, they had positive attitudes towards inclusive language education. Prospective language teachers also expressed the necessity of pre-service trainings on inclusive education.

Keywords: Inclusive education, language teaching, prospective teachers

1. Introduction

1.1. The problem

Globalization has led teachers to meet increasingly diverse population of students. Nowadays, teachers have found themselves dealing with students from a diverse range of abilities, disabilities, and backgrounds rather than in the past. Therefore, teachers have a fundamental role in implementing an open and inclusive environment for all children

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in the classroom (Costello & Boyle, 2013). As stated by Savić (2009a) "responding to diversity and considering individual needs of learners is a requirement of contemporary education at any level" (p. 19). However, school curriculum, teaching methods and techniques, organization and resources need to be tailored to ensure that all learners, irrespective of their ability, can successfully participate in the mainstream classrooms (Mittler, 1995). Among a variety of diverse students, disability issues and students with special education needs are very much on the focus of attention not only in Turkey but also across Europe and for international organizations, such as UNESCO (Potts, 2000). With the introduction of English as a compulsory lesson in Turkey starting from grade 2, English language teachers have also faced a number of challenges and problems, one of the greatest of which has stemmed from the inclusion process of these learners. Unlike primary school teachers, English Language teachers are not prepared enough to teach these students in inclusive classes and teaching English to the learners with special education needs makes teaching process more challenging in foreign language classrooms. These challenges are insufficient knowledge about inclusive practices, inadequate teaching materials, and deficiency in teaching methods and techniques. Therefore, it is necessary to measure the knowledge of English language teachers about inclusive language education. Moreover, teachers' positive attitudes towards inclusive language education are accepted as essential to implement successful inclusive education (Rezai, Jabbari & Ahmadi, 2018; Savić & Prošić-Santovac, 2017). O'Gorman and Drudy (2011) also stated that "positive attitudes on the part of teachers facilitate more successful inclusion" (p. 10). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to reveal the knowledge of prospective language teachers about inclusive education, and their skills and professional competences about inclusive practices. Moreover, this study aims to investigate prospective language teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education and will provide comprehensive suggestions to make inclusive language education practices successful.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Inclusion as a Term

Inclusion, as a term, has been described as including students in mainstream regular schools irrespective of their abilities. In other words, regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other conditions, all children should be included in regular classes (UNESCO, 1994). Teaching students with disabilities or special needs in regular classes is a relatively new concept. However, in earlier times children with disabilities or special needs were not admitted to regular schools. At that time, the system had its own reasons for not including these students to regular classes. It was believed that learners with disabilities could not match the pace of other learners and they had to be taught by teachers who were specially trained. The teachers, school

administrators and parents of these learners thought that if they were taught separately, the outcomes would be better. However, it is because of the nature of the inclusive education, all students should be accepted to regular classes irrespective of their learning difficulties or special needs. Since every learner is equal and learns in a different way, they should be given the equal opportunities and included in the same group in regular classes. The philosophy behind inclusive education advocates respecting and valuing all students with their abilities, disabilities, and different learning styles (Carrington & Elkin, 2002). Therefore, it is necessary for all students to have equal support and encouragement that they need to participate in learning activities.

2.2. Inclusive Education in Turkey

Inclusive education is clearly understood by the government in theory. Turkey is a member of international organizations and have signed many international agreements about inclusive education such as The Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994). These agreements shape the Turkish perspective about inclusive education. At the national level, Turkish government has also legislated a number of policies to provide equal education for all students. In addition, comprehensive reports have been published by Ministry of National Education in Turkey. For example, in 2010 General Directorate of Special Education, Guidance, and Counselling prepared a report to enlighten teachers, parents, and school administrators about inclusive education (MoNE, 2010). Another guideline prepared in 2015 focused on statistics, educational programmes, and inclusive practices (MoNE, 2015). Moreover, Çakıroğlu and Melekoğlu (2013) collected statistical data together with Ministry of National Education and stated that the percentage of students in inclusive education in Turkey is higher than many European countries. Furthermore, they highlighted the need to focus on improving the schooling rate of the students with special needs and the quality and variety of special education services within inclusive education. A report prepared in coordination with MoNE evaluated inclusive education practices of primary schools in Turkey (Varol, 2010). The findings of the report showed that school administrators and teachers did not have enough knowledge about inclusive education and primary schools were not prepared for inclusive practices. Moreover, the report showed that schools did not have enough support about inclusive practices and teachers had serious problems about material, time management, and crowded classrooms in the preparation process of individualized education programme. Consequently, it can be proposed that although Turkish government and MoNE clearly understood inclusive education processes, there were serious problems in implementing inclusive education at the school level.

2.3. Knowledge about and Attitudes towards Inclusive Language Education

Previous studies have showed that teachers' attitudes towards, and knowledge about inclusion are crucial for implementing successful inclusion (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Avramidis & Kalyva, 2007; Dapudong, 2014). Some of previous studies pinpointed the relationship between knowledge about inclusion and attitudes towards inclusive education (Avramidis & Kalyva, 2007; Forlin & Chambers, 2011; Mónico et al., 2020). For example, in the study of Avramidis and Kalyva (2007) 60 percent of the teachers stated that more knowledge about inclusion would affect their feeling in a positive way. According to Agbenyega (2007), as the professional knowledge level of the teachers about inclusive practices increased, their attitudes towards inclusion changed from negative to positive. Similarly, Mónico et al., (2020) stated that "teachers are more likely to maintain positive attitudes when they have the appropriate knowledge and skills to use inclusive pedagogies." (p. 529). Ahmmed, Sharma and Deppeler (2012) conducted a study in the context of primary education in Bangladesh aiming to examine variables influencing teachers' attitudes towards inclusion of students with disabilities in regular classrooms. The result of their study demonstrated a statistically significant relationship between the educational qualification of the teachers and their attitudes towards inclusion. Interestingly, teachers with master's degree or above qualification have lower attitudes compared to the teachers with bachelor's degree. They also highlighted that perceived school support for inclusive teaching practices in the form of cooperation from the peer colleagues, school administrators, parents of the students and supply of teaching resources made significant impact on teachers' attitudes towards inclusion.

The abovementioned studies were conducted with special education, primary or pre-school education teachers. The number of studies conducted with prospective English language teachers was very limited. Among these studies, Montes et al. (2016) conducted a research based on literature on this issue and investigated both the acceptance of total inclusion and positive or negative attitudes towards the inclusive education. They underlined that most of the teachers appeared to be positive towards the overall concept of inclusion, but there was criticism about its implementation because of the feeling of anxiety, de-motivation and doubtfulness. Another study held by Costello and Boyle (2013) consisting of 193 pre-service secondary teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education revealed that participants held positive attitudes towards inclusive education but they underlined a significant decline in positive attitudes through the years of study. In a similar vein, Rezzai, Jabbari and Ahmadi (2018) focused on EFL teachers' attitudes towards inclusion of learners with disabilities. They conducted a comprehensive survey and collected data from 254 Iranian EFL teachers. The results of study revealed that Iranian EFL teachers held neutral-to-positive attitudes and perceptions towards inclusive education. In addition, "understanding of individual differences through group interaction, social and emotional development, promoted communication and social life skills, enhanced motivation and life expectancy, improved teaching knowledge, conveyed sense of effectiveness for teachers, and nurtured good behavior among those involved"

were stated to be the perceived benefits and challenges of inclusive language education (p. 284). On the other hand, another study conducted with EFL teachers in Serbia by Savić and Prošić-Santovac (2017) reported that the participants generally held negative attitudes towards inclusive language education. Moreover, teacher competences and conditions, not to the severity of children's disabilities, were found to be key factors influencing teachers' attitudes towards inclusive language education.

Studies about inclusive education in Turkish context especially within the context of inclusive language teaching are very limited. Therefore, the aim of the current study is to find out knowledge and competencies of prospective English language teachers about inclusive education and reveal their attitudes towards inclusive language education. The following questions have been formulated in line with the aim of this study.

1. What is the prospective EFL teachers' knowledge and expertise about inclusive language education?

2. What are the prospective EFL teachers' attitudes towards inclusive language education?

3. Method

3.1. Participants

The sample of the research was a total of twenty 4th year prospective teachers studying at the department of English Language Teaching at Nevşehir Hacı Bektaş Veli University, Turkey. 15 of the participants were female and 5 of them were male. The participants volunteered to take part in the study. The participants did not take any course specific to language teaching in inclusive classes or to students with learning disabilities. However, some of their methodology lessons had topics related to teaching students with special needs. The participants did not have any experience about special needs education.

3.2. Data Collection and Analysis

The current study used qualitative research method in which open-ended questions directed to the participants. The open-ended questions were developed in line with the previous literature about inclusion and teacher perspectives about inclusion. Open-ended questions were used in the data collection process because they allow for getting individual responses and are seen as a valid way of data collection about attitudes and opinions (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2011). A questionnaire consisting of 8 open-ended questions was given to the participants and they were asked to answer the following open-ended questions.

1. What do you know about inclusive education?

2. Do you know the difference between "inclusive education" and "special education"?

3. Do you feel that your 4 years ELT training programme had prepared you for teaching students who have 'learning difficulties?

4. Do you think teaching students who have 'learning difficulties' should be part of a language teacher's job? Why? Why not?

5. Do you think students who have 'learning difficulties' unfairly take teacher time away from the other learners in the class? Why? Why not?

6. Do you think training on inclusive education can be a part of your Continuing Professional Development? Are in-service and/or pre-service training programmes effective for teaching students who have 'learning difficulties?

7. How does Ministry of National Education and Universities (especially faculties of education) approach the issue of 'inclusion' in Turkey?

8. What are the topics that should be covered in a course and/or training programme about 'inclusive education'?

Prospective teachers' responses were examined one by one and interpretational approach was used to determine the categories and themes. Four main themes were generated. These themes were knowledge about inclusive education, professional competence, teachers' attitudes towards inclusion and disability, and things to do. Based on these categories and themes, generalizations have been made and participants views were directly presented in order to support these generalizations in the findings section. The names of participants were kept hidden and they were given numbers in order to protect the confidentiality of all the participants.

4. Findings

4.1. Knowledge about Inclusive Education

Content analysis showed that the majority of the prospective teachers knew the meaning of inclusive education. Although majority of them had knowledge about the concept (n=13), there were some participants who heard the concept for the first time (n=4). Some of the participants partly knew the concept (n=3). The following quotations exemplify the knowledge of the participants:

> *Inclusive education means all children in the same classrooms, in the same schools. It means real learning opportunities for groups who have traditionally been excluded – not only children with disabilities, but speakers of minority languages too. (P5)*

> *In my opinion, inclusive education is about looking at the ways of organizing the lesson which are designed in order to find ways to develop relationships between the students. (P3)*

> *Till now, I have never heard the term so I do not know the meaning of the term. (P13)*

As for the differences between inclusive education and special education, the content analysis showed that although most of the participants knew the meaning of special education, they were not generally aware of the differences between them. Some of the participants views about the differences between inclusive education and special education are as follow:

> *I think that special education may be used to describe the education given to students in the process of learning from their peers who have a mental or physical disability.* (P12)

> *I thought that they were same.* (P9)

> *To me it should be like this; the special education teacher aids the general education teacher in planning different strategies for students. Inclusive education allows children with special needs to receive a free and appropriate education along with non-disabled students in the regular classroom.* (P17)

The responses of the participants showed that prospective English Language teachers had general knowledge about inclusive education; however, they did not know the details about it. It was also found that participants' knowledge about special education was more than that of knowledge about inclusive education.

4.2. Professional Competence

The current study also sought answers about the professional competence of the participants required for inclusive or special language teaching. Most of the prospective language teachers stated that they did not have enough competence and skills for teaching students with learning disabilities (n=14). Most of the participants expressed that although they had courses such as teaching methods, teaching English to young learners, there were not any specific language class focusing on inclusive language teaching or special language teaching in their curriculum. Only 6 of the participants stated that they were ready to teach English to any group of learners. The quotations of the participants are as follow:

I have never had a comprehensive course for students with learning difficulties in my four-year undergraduate process, but I think that a course focused on this topic should definitely be in teaching programs. (P9)

Our four years ELT training program had prepared us for teaching students who have learning difficulties. But I can't remember any course which focus on inclusive education. I don't think our ELT training program prepares us to teach foreign language to students with learning difficulties. We do not have a course on inclusive education in the curriculum. I think there should be a lesson on inclusive education. (P11)

I do not feel well prepared for teaching students who have learning difficulties because we did not take special course for it. (P16)

Yes, I believe my 4 years ELT training program had prepared me for teaching students who have learning difficulties. I also experience it with my niece. She has learning difficulty and hyperactivity. I know that she needs special education and a lead teacher. I try to help her to be a more successful student as a lead teacher. (P19)

4.3. Teachers' Attitudes Towards Inclusion and Disability

Majority of the prospective language teachers had positive attitudes towards inclusion in language teaching or teaching students with learning disabilities (n = 13). The participants thought that teaching English to students with learning disabilities should be part of language teachers' job. They emphasized the importance of being teacher and the necessity to include students with learning disabilities in the regular classes. On the other hand, some of the participants stated that special education experts should teach English to students with learning disabilities on the account that they need special care (n = 7). Statements typifying these views are presented below:

Of course, it should be. Because being a language teacher is firstly is a matter of being a teacher. At first, the content area of us is not important if we are language teachers or any kind of teacher. As language teachers, we should consider our learners as if they are learning to overcome difficulties by the means of language. (P2)

Absolutely it should be part of teachers' because we always meet children who have learning difficulties. They are different and need special interest to be more equal to other students. As we teachers should deduce the effects of these differences. (P18)

It can be very difficult to teach language even to normal students, while language teaching to students with learning difficulties will certainly be very challenging for us. Therefore, I find it more appropriate for the experts to be interested in this matter rather than us. But as a teacher, we should have a little knowledge of what we can do to these students or how we can recognize the learning difficulties of these students. (P20)

I think that it should not be. Because I believe that these students need really a special education and this is possible only with professional teachers about special students. (P1)

Although the majority of the participants had positive attitudes towards teaching students with learning disabilities, they generally thought that students with learning disabilities might unfairly take teacher time away from the other learners in the class. Prospective language teachers had the opinion that all students have individual differences and cannot learn in the same way. However, they were worried about balancing between regular and disabled learners in terms of teaching material and time management in inclusive language classes. A participant proposed that students with minor learning difficulties should be included in regular classes. The views of prospective language teachers are as follows:

I think students with learning difficulties can take the time of their teachers and classmates. Because there is a difference in learning speed, it will be difficult for the teacher to find a balance between the regular student and these students who have difficulty. (P3)

They take time but there is no one to blame for it. Teacher can take care of them out of the class and give extra homework to teach them. Actually, it is okay to have special students in my class but other students may be cruel for those students. (P4)

If teachers can manage the time well and make the lesson in an effective way, they can balance the time between normal students and students with disabilities. The thing that is important in inclusive classes is planning the lessons effectively. (P12)

There are degrees of learning disability problem. The lower ones can be sent to normal classes but the other group who are in the last stage can sometimes even get one to one education with a teacher sometimes a separate class can be created for 5 6 students who has similar learning difficulties. (P6)

4.4. Things to do

Almost all prospective language teachers stated that inclusive education can be a part of their continuing professional development. They highlighted the necessity of pre-service and in-service training on inclusive education. Some of the participants expressed that there should be pre-service and in-service training on inclusive education not only for language teachers but for all teachers because students with learning disabilities or difficulties are a part of the society. The following quotations illustrate this view:

> *I think that training on inclusive education can be a part of my continuing professional development. In-service or pre-service training programs will certainly be very effective for me during my teaching process while working with students who have 'learning difficulties'. All of them will a guide us through our teaching process.* (P12)

> *I think that every teaching program should include training on inclusive education. Because of the reason that we can face all kinds of students in our teaching process especially in real-life conditions. Both in-service and pre-service training programs can be effective for teachers to develop themselves.* (P4)

According to the data, prospective language teachers thought that the support of MoNE and universities in Turkey on inclusive education was insufficient. The participants indicated that MoNE should promote the inclusion policy in the university level and the role of teachers and administrators should be stated comprehensibly in order to implement the theory or policy with inclusive practices. The following quotations are representative of these views:

> *The Ministry of National Education has highlighted the importance of inclusion and explained the components and principles of inclusion in official papers, but they do not match with realities in Turkish education system. In addition, the principles of inclusion are not clear regarding the duties of teachers and administrators in Turkey.* (P15)

> *Ministry of National Education and Universities (especially faculties of education) in Turkey should take an important step towards inclusive education. They should provide special programs or courses about inclusive education to the teachers. As prospective teachers we don't know what to do for learners with disabilities.* (P17)

As for the skills and expertise required for inclusive education, prospective language teachers suggested the inclusion of lessons such as special teaching methods and techniques, psychological aspects of disabilities, classroom management in inclusive classes, needs and abilities of students with learning difficulties, family education, and practicum with students with learning difficulties. The participants indicated the

necessity of these topics for successful inclusion. The following quotations support these views:

> *The topics that should be covered in a course and/or training program about inclusive education can be: special teaching methods/techniques, what are the characteristics of learners who have learning difficulties, who are the learners? how can we prepare a lesson for them? how should we behave them? how can we use our time more effectively for them etc.* (P11)

> *To me, in these training programs they should make us to meet with students with disabilities. Because, only if we encounter them face to face, we can see the reality.* (P7)

> *These topics can be covered in a course and training program; firstly, individual goals, needs, abilities and group work with a broader level, then training program for families, behaviors in a community, real life situations etc.* (P16)

5. Discussion

The findings of the current study show the challenges and complexity of prospective English Language teachers face about inclusive education and children with learning disabilities. Although the majority of participants knew the meaning of inclusive education, only few of them described the detailed process of inclusive education. This finding was in line with the previous findings. For example, in a qualitative study, Sukbunpant, Arthur-Kelly and Dempsey (2013) also found that in-service pre-school teachers in Thai context have limited knowledge about inclusive education. Similarly, Sucuoğlu et. al. (2014) conducted an Inclusion Knowledge Test to 169 pre-school teachers (87% prospective pre-school teachers) and found that pre-school teachers had very limited knowledge about inclusive education in Turkish context. In a similar vein, Maria (2013) aimed to find out the perception, knowledge, and behavior of 200 in-service teachers about inclusive education in Romanian context and revealed that there was a huge gap between what teachers think know about inclusive education, what they really know, and what they actually do in class. On the other hand, Nketsia and Saloviita (2013) investigated the experiences and knowledge of 200 pre-service teachers from Ghana about inclusive education. The researchers reported that 84% of the participants were able to define an inclusive classroom. However, in their study, one third of the participants had children with special education needs and almost all participants had been introduced the concept of inclusive education.

In the present study, it was found that most of the prospective language teachers did not have enough expertise and skills for teaching students with learning difficulties. Previous studies also showed lack of knowledge and expertise in inclusive practices. For

example, in Thai context Agbenyega and Klibthong (2014) reported most of the early childhood teachers have little knowledge on inclusive practices in the early years. In a similar way, Sukbunpant et. al. (2013) revealed that participants had lack of confidence in teaching children with disabilities because of their insufficient knowledge about inclusive education. Correspondingly, Gökdere (2012) determined that the concern levels of teachers increased when knowledge about inclusive education was low. The researcher concluded that insufficient expertise and skills for teaching students with learning difficulties cause confidence problem, which increases teachers' level of concern. On the other hand, Forlin and Chambers (2011) found that pre-service teachers' increasing knowledge about inclusion, and improving levels of confidence in becoming inclusive teachers, did not likewise address their concerns, or perceived stress, about having students with disabilities in their classes. In Hemmings and Woodcock (2011) study, 22% of the participants stated teacher qualities were the most important factor for inclusion to succeed and they emphasized the deficiency in pre and in-service trainings about inclusive education by expressing how teachers were often poorly equipped in terms of knowledge and skills required for inclusive education.

This study also showed that prospective language teachers had positive attitudes towards inclusive education. However, they also thought that students with learning disabilities might unfairly take teacher time away from the other learners in class. Therefore, they were worried about time management and teaching material in inclusive classes. A longitudinal study conducted by Costello and Boyle (2013) aiming to identify 193 pre-service secondary teachers' attitudes at an Australian university towards inclusive education indicated that pre-service secondary teachers held positive attitudes towards inclusive education; however, there was a significant decline in positive attitudes through the years of study. A cross-cultural study in Ghana, Germany, and Spain aiming to find out teachers' knowledge and attitudes towards inclusive education revealed that the teachers differed by country in terms of their attitudes towards inclusion, with the teachers from Spain and Germany demonstrating slightly better attitudes (Mónico, Mensah, Grünke, Garcia, Fernández, & Rodríguez, 2020). These studies showed that prospective teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education may differ during the years of education or from culture to culture. In Turkish context, Rakap and Kaczmarek (2010) investigated the attitudes of 194 general education teachers' attitudes towards the inclusion of students with disabilities into their classroom and found that teachers had negative attitudes towards the inclusion of student with disabilities in their class. On the other hand, Seçer (2010) stated that educators who had not received in-service teacher training were observed to have negative attitudes towards their students with special needs and found that teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education became more positive after in-service teacher trainings about inclusive education.

The findings of the current study also revealed that prospective language teachers did not feel the support of MoNE and universities in Turkey on inclusive language education

and they expressed the necessity of pre-service trainings on inclusive education. Prospective language teachers also suggested the inclusion of lessons such as special teaching methods and techniques, psychological aspects of disabilities, classroom management in inclusive classes, needs and abilities of students with learning difficulties, family education, and practicum with students with learning difficulties for inclusion to succeed. Previous studies also emphasized the need of in-service and pre-service trainings for inclusive education and the need of some lessons such as parents-teacher cooperation, curriculum adaptations, individual education plans, classroom management, and material adaptation (Al-Zyoudi, 2006). The findings of Nketsia and Saloviita (2013) also highlighted some deficiencies of pre-service teacher training related to inclusive education.

6. Conclusions, Implications, and Limitations

This study aimed to investigate prospective language teachers' views on inclusive education in Turkish context. The findings appeared to show that most prospective language teachers had an understanding of meaning of inclusive education. Although these prospective language teachers had positive attitudes towards the inclusive language education, they stated to have insufficient knowledge how to succeed it. The participants also emphasized the necessity of both theoretical and practical trainings about inclusive education in Turkey.

English language teaching would be effective and respond the needs of learners if teachers are equipped with necessary qualifications required for inclusion. This could be achieved by differentiation of materials and tasks. Therefore, prospective teachers require trainings in order to successfully implement inclusion in their classes. These trainings should cover material adaptation for teaching students with disabilities, communication with learners with disabilities, effective teaching methods and strategies, and classroom management. It can be clearly stated from the results of this study that there is a great necessity and gap for a specific compulsory or optional courses in ELT programme curriculums in Turkey. Therefore, it is recommended that ELT programmes in Turkey should provide adequate training and practices about inclusive language teaching.

As for the limitations, this study had limited number of the participants. Moreover, the data of the current study were collected qualitatively through open-ended questions and the analysis was conducted based on their views without any quantitative data or classroom observation. Thus, it is recommended for further studies to support qualitative data with quantitative data.

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