

# University Students with Disabilities and ELT

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## *Abstract*

Contemporary society is under constant pressure to provide people with disabilities with equal opportunities. Logically, the first step in that direction implies providing them with access to all levels of education. At first glance, this task seems quite simple, nevertheless a closer look at the core of this issue reveals the immensity and complexity of the matter. First and foremost, there is a wide range of physical and mental disabilities. In addition, their manifestations could vary from mild to extremely severe ones. This immediately raises a series of contentious issues. Are mainstream EFL teachers adequately prepared to deal with such a great challenge? Is it really possible to teach students with disabilities alongside with regular students? Is it possible to turn the regular classroom into equally conducive environment for all types of students? This paper examines the current state of affairs regarding the inclusion of students with disabilities in the EFL academic courses in the Republic of Macedonia. The findings brought to the forefront rest on interviews with university teachers of English and students of English who agreed to share their experiences and viewpoints regarding this issue.

**Keywords:** students, disabilities, tertiary education

## **Introduction**

In this paper we tackle a very sensitive but currently extremely relevant topic – the inclusion of students with disabilities in higher education. Although instigated and upheld by adequate legislation globally, still it seems that even the most developed and advanced societies have a long way to go to fully materialize this, unquestionably, very noble goal set for the benefit of all.

As the bottom line of this study is to discuss the-state-of-art of inclusive education at tertiary level in the Republic of Macedonia, its scope will be gradually narrowed down from discussing the legally binding character of the inclusion, to what the inclusion actually involves, and what

obstacles higher education providers need to overcome to successfully meet the requirements stipulated by law. Finally, we turn our attention to a specific segment of higher education – the inclusion of disabled students in the context of students majoring in the English language and literature. The findings presented here have been obtained by means of conducting questionnaires aimed at eliciting both EFL teachers and regular university students' opinions regarding inclusive education.

## **Theoretical background**

### *Legislation on inclusive education*

Since the turn of the new century, more and more modern societies seem to have recognized the need of raising the general awareness of people that individuals with disabilities, or as some prefer to call them – people with special needs, are entitled to the same rights as the people without disabilities. This implies that communities are increasingly committed to finding ways to present people with disabilities with equal opportunities and conditions so that they could realize their full potential, and, thus, become useful members of society.

Quality education is definitely one of the main precursors of quality life. Tertiary education is clearly critical for young disabled people in the construction of their identity and in obtaining qualifications which can have a major impact on their future labor market prospects.

The integration of students with disabilities into the higher education has been undertaken by numerous countries all over the world. They have all primarily opted for introducing changes in their legislation so as to ensure that making explicit mention of this category of students in the legal documents will set the stage for adequately catering for their needs.

Thus, in the USA, for instance, the crucial breakthroughs for educational opportunity for students with disabilities came with the enactment of two pieces of federal legislation. The first is Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, which prohibits discrimination against otherwise qualified persons with disabilities in any program receiving federal funds, including education. The second is the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (1975), which mandates a free appropriate public education for all children with disabilities. The Education for All Handicapped Children Act was renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1990. These two laws were powerfully reinforced by the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990), a civil rights law that prohibits discrimination in employment, public services, transportation, public accommodations, and telecommunications against anyone who has a disability (Wolanin and Steele, 2004).

In the same vein, in the UK, the Equality Act which was passed in 2010 protects people from discrimination on the grounds of age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage, etc. The Equality Act prohibits a school or other education provider from treating disabled students unfavourably. In fact, an education provider has a duty to make 'reasonable adjustments' to make sure disabled students are not discriminated against. These changes could include providing extra support and aids (like specialist teachers or equipment). As to Higher Education, the Equality Act states that all universities and higher education colleges should have a person in charge of disability issues that disabled students can talk to about the support they need to receive.

The Republic of Macedonia has followed in the same footsteps as well. The development of the National Strategy on Achieving Equal Rights for the Persons with Disabilities in the Republic of Macedonia rests on European and national legislation and on the Standard Rules for Equalization of the Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities. Accordingly, the inclusion and the equal treatment of people with special needs in education are stipulated in the Laws on Primary, Secondary and Higher Education. According to the Laws on Primary and Secondary education, students with disabilities, depending on the form and degree of disability, can either study in special schools for disabled children, or they can study in special classes within regular schools and, in some cases, they can even study alongside with regular students. The Law on Higher Education, on the other hand, solely outlines the obligation of the University units to provide special conditions for the realization of the studies of this category of students and gives them free hands to independently regulate these matters.

If further expanded, this research will, undoubtedly, confirm the fact that the legislation upholding "the inclusion of the disabled" has indeed become a global phenomenon and a common practice.

#### *What does 'the inclusion' encompass?*

Considering the fact that the inclusion of people with disabilities in the education process is clearly and unambiguously laid out in laws and in legally binding documents, and that the outcome of the inclusion is expected to be favorable and beneficial not only for the people with special needs but for society at large, one might believe that its materialization can in effect occur quite easily and quickly. On the contrary, a closer look at this intricate issue almost immediately reveals both its immensity and complexity. Providing equal educational opportunities for students with disabilities, especially at tertiary level, does not pertain only to providing wheelchair-friendly routes around university buildings and campuses. In fact, that is

only one of the many possible starting points. The actual inclusion is extraordinarily multifarious and requires a very careful deliberation and planning of so many different aspects simultaneously.

What comes in particularly handy in that context is the fact that the inclusion of the disabled students has attracted the attention of many researchers who have approached the phenomenon from many different perspectives. In fact, a quick literature overview discloses that many researchers are essentially committed to identifying the stumbling blocks which prevent the complete materialization of the inclusion from taking place. Understandably, some of them are mainly concerned with finding pragmatic and viable solutions which can effectively alleviate the inclusion process itself.

Thus, in the UK, Fuller et. al (2007) in *Barriers to Learning: a systematic study of the experience of disabled students in one university* present the findings from a survey of self-reported disabled students in a single UK higher education institution. This article in fact reports both statistical data about the quality and variety of students' experience of learning as well as their qualitative comments about learning and assessment. The analysis of the survey points to the need for providing parity and flexibility as well as staff development in making the 'reasonable adjustments' required by disability legislation. Hollowey's (2010) study, *The Experience of Higher Education from the Perspective of Disabled Students*, also examines the perspective of disabled students at a university in the United Kingdom, and makes recommendations for policy and practice. Hollowey aims at identifying *factors which create a positive experience* for disabled students, but he also does not exclude those *which effect discriminatory practice and marginalization* as well. He discusses the implications of his findings significant for policy and practice, concluding that there are some requirements to be met: central policy which would support the philosophy of an accessible learning environment for all students; central co-ordination to implement the policy with practical guidelines to/for departments; ongoing monitoring and evaluation procedures which would involve disabled students and staff training.

Vikerman and Blundell (2010) also address this issue in their article titled *Hearing the voices of disabled students in higher education*. Their study reports the findings of disabled students' experiences and views of transition from induction through to employability within one HE institution. The study concludes that there is still much work to be done in leveling HE experiences for disabled students. More importantly, this study identifies five key issues to be addressed in order to enable access and entitlement to HE: pre-course induction support; commitment by HE institutions to facilitating barrier free curricula; consultations with disabled

students; institutional commitment to develop support services; and embedding of personal development planning.

Very positive signals are emitted by Sachs and Schreuer's study *Inclusion of Students with Disabilities in Higher Education: Performance and participation in student's experiences*, (2011), which looks into the inclusion of students with disabilities in higher education in Israel. Surprisingly enough, their findings suggest that – in terms of academic performance, these students do not lag considerably behind peer students without disabilities. They attribute that to the fact that these students invest much more time to meet the demands of their studies at the expense of extra-curricular and social activities and networking. Nevertheless, they conclude that higher education institutes still have a long way to go to reduce the gap in social inclusion of students with disabilities and to adjust academic standards for their needs.

With regard to USA HE, Marshak et al. (2010) in *Exploring Barriers to College Student Use of Disability Services and Accommodations* draw attention to the fact that – despite the federal legislation requirements that colleges and universities should provide equal access and reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities, many students still do not fully avail themselves of college disability services and accommodations. In this qualitative study five major barriers to why some students might not seek-out or more fully utilize disability services and accommodations in post-secondary education were identified: (a) identity issues; (b) desires to avoid negative social reactions; (c) insufficient knowledge; (d) perceived quality and usefulness of services; and (e) negative experiences with faculty.

Numerous other studies, undoubtedly, have made invaluable contributions to disclosing all relevant aspects related to the inclusion of students with disabilities in education and higher education in particular. Nevertheless, all these research attempts unquestionably lead to one major general conclusion – despite the progress made, university schooling of the disabled on a global level still faces numerous serious challenges ahead. The areas in need of special attention and consideration in this context, as Tinklin et al. (2004) suggest, are teaching and learning of disabled students, monitoring and evaluation of disabled students as well as their socializing as an equally valuable segment of academic life and experience. The need for urgent teaching staff development is another aspect which should under no circumstances be overlooked if we aim at quality tertiary education in which teachers are adequately prepared to act professionally in a variety of situations related to students' disabilities.

Evidently, all these are the major pillars supporting the structure of tertiary education which, now that there is such a pressing need to include disabled students as equal stakeholders in higher education, need to be seriously reconsidered and readjusted. The undertaking of such a

huge and significant feat puts higher education in front of a major test. In order to become much more appreciative of new flexible policies and strategies, modifications need to be introduced to the entire 'academic mindset', or – as Dhawan (2005) underlines, *flexible approaches in education are needed to respond to the diverse abilities and needs of all learners, but if the curricula and teaching methods are rigid and there is a lack of appropriate teaching materials, teachers will feel constrained in fulfilling their responsibility.*

#### *The versatility of students' disabilities*

Having established the fact that HE institutions should get accustomed to embracing changes and to subjecting their structure and organization to a complete overhaul, several other issues of paramount importance need to be brought to the forefront.

One of these is the broad array of students' physical and mental disabilities which poses a particularly serious challenge to the process of inclusion. Students might suffer from learning disabilities, visual impairments, auditory impairments, physical disabilities, behavioral disabilities, social/emotional disabilities, pervasive developmental disorders or even cognitive developmental delay. Additionally, the manifestation of the different disabilities normally can vary considerably from person to person. In some students the symptoms of the disabilities can be mild but in others they can be quite severe. Furthermore, as practice has shown so far, what sometimes works for one student with a particular type of disability will not necessarily work for another student with the same type of disability in the same context. This realization particularly accentuates the exigency of setting as flexible standards as possible to successfully accommodate a truly broad spectrum of students.

The process of inclusion can be especially challenging and trying when disabled students suffer from multiple disabilities simultaneously as the education providers would have to figure out ways to genuinely cater for these students' needs as well. What they should also bear in mind in creating their policies is that sometimes a student's disability is not easily discernible, thus some students keep silent about their disabilities for fear of not being accepted, which – without doubt, considerably undermines their chances of success.

Finally, the type of disability should be very carefully gauged against the nature of the university study the student is embarking on. Establishing a correlation of this type imposes itself as one huge determining factor which makes the difference between successful completion of the studies and failing to do so. In other words, not every university study is completely compatible with every type of disability, in the sense that the disability could really present an insurmountable obstacle to studying and, later – after graduation, to working in a

particular field. Thus, for instance, it would be inconceivable for university studies which prepare future teaching professionals to accommodate students with speech impediments, serious physical impairments (deafness, muteness and blindness) or some severe mental disability. This implies that in building their inclusion policy, education providers should mandatorily specify what disabilities would not be a complete hurdle for completing a particular type of university education.

### *Disabled students and ELT*

Although a lot of research has been conducted on the inclusion of students with disabilities in general, to the best of our knowledge, not much has been written about the inclusion of these students in the context of English language learning.

Padurean's (2014) quite recent study is obviously one of the few studies which tackle this topic. Padurean conducted her research in Romania and shed some very favorable light on teaching English Language to children with special educational needs by examining the stance of almost all stakeholders involved – students with disabilities, students without disabilities, their parents and their teachers. Some of the insights brought to the surface in that respect are completely unexpected and worth considering. Namely, unlike the teachers and parents who are almost unanimous that students with disabilities should not study alongside students without disabilities as their inclusion mainly hampers the progress of the regular students, the students agree that their interaction and cooperation in the classroom is mutually beneficial and enlightening. Hence, Padurean concludes that “English can be taught to children with special educational needs without placing them in special schools. Learning a new language opens their minds, helps them create cognitive relations, organizes their mind and brings satisfaction. English teachers should adapt their lessons to children with special educational needs by using interactive methods and engaging them in classroom activities as much as possible. These methods are beneficial for regular students too, because they are challenging and they favor communication and interaction.”

Bishaw (2012) also deals with the inclusion of disabled students in the context of English language teaching and purports that the inclusion will be effective if teachers are able to respond to a wider range of needs and this could be achieved through greater differentiation of tasks and materials, which in turn, requires training teachers to implement inclusive teaching effectively. In other words, what Bishaw suggests is that EL teachers have to vary their method of teaching to meet different learning styles such as visual, auditory, and kinesthetic type of learners. In training EL teachers, special attention should also be given to enabling teachers to adapt the

teaching materials and design appropriate activities which would make students with disabilities actively involved in the lesson. Teachers, according to Bishaw, should also be provided with training on how to communicate with different types of disabled learners. He points out that other supporting materials and technological devices should also be available to facilitate the process of teaching and learning.

Malanek (2014)<sup>5</sup>, on the other hand, approaches this issue in a very pragmatic way and offers some practical ideas and tips, which – if incorporated into the ESL classroom, would neither disrupt the other students nor draw attention to the disabled ones only. In addition, according to Malanek teachers should focus on the learners' strengths and praise them. They should also prepare a wide range of activities in each class which incorporate different learner styles e.g. visual, interpersonal, intrapersonal, kinesthetic. Then, they should give instructions in different formats e.g. orally and written, and they should break them down and simplify them. Students should be given enough time to process the instructions and task information, etc.

Evidently, all these findings and insights into studying EFL at tertiary level in the context of inclusive education are rather general and offer a broad perspective of the matter. Future studies should step out with more precise delineation of all the aspects of the issue and, consequently, with concrete and reasonable solutions to all dilemmas and challenges.

## **Disabled Students in ELT setting in Macedonian Tertiary Education**

### **Research methodology**

In this section of the study the focus is on students with disabilities in the context of studying English Language and Literature at state Universities in the Republic of Macedonia. We set out to confirm our initial hypothesis that university EFL teachers in Macedonia have not been sufficiently exposed to this issue and that they lack in training corresponding to deal with the inclusion process adequately. Furthermore, we were interested in the students' point of view as well since the inclusion process in their case embeds studying alongside with students with disabilities.

Both EL teachers and university students without disability who major in English were interviewed by means of short questionnaires.

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5 <http://elt-connect.com/learning-disabilities-esl-classroom/>

The teacher's questionnaire included the following questions:

1. Do higher education EFL teachers have the necessary knowledge and skills to teach students with disabilities and to integrate these students into the EFL teaching process successfully?
2. Is it possible to teach students with disabilities alongside with regular university students without impeding the progress of regular students?
3. Is it possible to successfully turn the regular classroom into an equally conducive environment for all types of students including the ones with disabilities?
4. Is it possible for EFL teachers to apply equally fair and objective assessment standards for both students with and without disabilities?
5. In your teaching experience so far, have you ever worked with students with disabilities?

Similarly, the students' questionnaire was composed of the following questions:

1. Is it possible to study alongside with students with disabilities?
2. Can the regular classroom be successfully turned into equally conducive environment for all types of students including the ones with disabilities?
3. Is it possible for EFL teachers to apply equally fair and objective assessment standards both for students with and without disabilities?
4. Have you ever studied alongside with students with disabilities?  
If yes, was your experience positive or negative? Why?
5. Would you be willing to help a fellow student with disability learn a particular subject matter?

## **Results and discussion**

University EFL teachers from all over the country were invited to take part in the survey – in most cases via email. Unfortunately, not all of them responded. The lack of response from some of the teachers was most probably due to the fact that the questionnaires were sent out at the beginning of the fall semester – a period of the academic year when they are busy conducting the exam session alongside preparing themselves for the new semester. Another explanation for the lack of response may be that the research topic did not strike them as interesting, relevant or familiar enough. Thus, only 15 (fifteen) teachers emailed back their filled-in version of the questionnaire. Despite this initial setback, the immensely positive outcome when conducting this research was that there were responses from representative of each of the state universities.

The majority of the interviewed EFL teachers, as expected, stated that they had had no experience teaching disabled students, which is completely in line with the students' answers discussed further down. Only a couple of teachers did confirm to have worked with children with special needs but they all added that their experience was mainly positive as their students were not with severe forms of disabilities. They singled out stuttering, for instance, and further explained that this disability was easily overcome and did not affect the actual outcome owing to students' huge enthusiasm and hard work.

The notion that the majority of the teachers have not been in a position to deal with inclusive education merely points to the fact that the inclusion of disabled students in tertiary education is still pretty much work in progress in the higher education setting.

The teachers were unanimous that they had neither had formal training within their formal university education nor knowledge and skills to teach students with disabilities. One of them actually mentioned that this topic was only scantily touched on within the general courses of pedagogy and psychology, which is, in any case, far from enough. What makes things even worse, perhaps, as some of them pointed out, is that “... *EFL teachers have never had any opportunities to attend any training, seminars and workshops related to inclusive education...*” in the course of their teaching career either.

The interviewed EFL teachers were not in agreement when it came to their point of view regarding questions two, three and four. Namely, some expressed their belief that teaching students with disabilities together with regular students was impossible. Some were more tentative and claimed that it all depended on the type of disability, adding additional explanation which said: *If a student has a hearing impairment that the teacher can assist the student by “speaking more loudly than usual, using visual prompts and aids, presentations and handouts more often, but if a student suffers from a mental disability, that could only disrupt the normal flow of the teaching process and cause some “very awkward and uncomfortable situations” to emerge. Nevertheless, some of the teachers were confident that with “... adequate and proper training...” EFL teachers could acquire all the necessary knowledge and skills which would assist them in handling the process of inclusion efficiently.*

Similarly, their opinions were divided when it came to turning the regular classroom into an equally conducive learning environment for all students. The proponents of the negative stance purported that without suitable financial aid and support directed at modernizing considerably the traditional teaching and learning space with various assistive technical gadgets, it would literally be impossible and unreasonable to expect it to happen. The other lot tended to believe that all it took to completely transform the traditional classroom was teachers' good will and

determination which – in the long run, should surely be based on adequate training and acquisition of certain know-hows in the working context of teaching students with disabilities. Several of the teachers were evidently skeptical and brought the degree of the disability to the fore once again: ... *no matter what changes we introduce in the classroom and what teaching techniques we use, we would not find them much helpful in the case of advanced mental impairment, for example.*

With respect to the equally fair assessment standards, the teachers did not have a common ground. Half of them shared the opinion that applying the same standards and assessment criteria might be extremely difficult in some disability cases, as it would be certainly done to the disadvantage of the disabled students. One of the respondents very wittily depicted the impossibility of equally fair assessment by actually comparing it to the completely inconceivable and unacceptable competition between Paralympic games athletes and Olympic athletes. Only few of the teacher took a positive stance and claimed that assessment could be equally fair and objective if teachers developed and applied two completely different assessment systems, one for the disabled students and one for the non-disabled.

The student's questionnaire, on the other hand, was distributed among thirty students of English at the Faculty of Education in Bitola. Following the analysis of their answers what becomes immediately obvious is that, except for few respondents, students in general haven't had any experience in studying alongside disabled peers. One of those students who stated that they had had such an experience described the experience as unfavorable as the disabled student who was in their class disrupted the classes very frequently and “made everybody very upset while trying to help him”, whereas the other described the experience as “mainly positive and beneficial for all”.

The fact that the majority of the interviewed students had attended different local and regional high-schools in various parts of R. Macedonia, but had never been exposed to the inclusion process nor had any first-hand experience of the kind in their education, is rather indicative about the extent to which the inclusion of disabled students is materialized, or perhaps even more appropriately, not materialized in our society at large. Another immediately noticeable finding is that all of the interviewed students showed unanimous agreement and willingness to be of help to a disabled peer as “*all have equal rights*”, “*it is a natural and human thing to do*” and “*all deserve equal opportunities*”.

Students' opinions were divided when it came to the first, second, and third question. In other words, they were not all confident that studying alongside disabled students was always and in all cases possible and favorable for all. Some of them even stated that depending on the

disability, sometimes the inclusion could even have a detrimental effect on regular students as the entire tempo of class activities might be significantly “... *slowed down*...”. They expressed the same concerns when it came to using the regular classroom to accommodate students with disabilities along with those without disabilities. The disabled students again – depending on the type of disability, might have “*some special needs*” and consequently “*needs for special conditions to be provided for them*”, according to the words of the interviewed students. While some of the interviewed students were confident that their teachers could and would find ways to objectively assess both disabled students' knowledge and theirs, some voiced their concerns that objectivity and applying 'the same yardstick' in this situation would be practically impossible. EFL teachers, they explained, might need “... *to lower the standards for the disabled*...” and “... *maintain the high academic standards for the rest*...” despite the fact they will all end up getting diploma on the same qualifications at the end.

## **Conclusion**

Inclusive education was in the focus of this paper. This aspect of education although legally covered and supported by various regulations and laws in many different countries, including the Republic of Macedonia, is still – as numerous studies show, extremely complex and in need of a very delicate and well thought-out approach in the implementation of all theoretical solutions into practice.

More precisely, the accent of our research was on inclusive education in the framework of tertiary education, i.e. in the context of majoring in the English language and literature in R. Macedonia.

A questionnaire conducted among university students and teachers of English reveals the state-of-the art of inclusive education in R. Macedonia. Despite the fact that these are only preliminary results, based on a study with a limited scope and we would like to avoid the pitfall of making any overhasty and unfounded generalizations, still we deem it rather safe to state the inclusion of students with disabilities at this stage in the Republic of Macedonia is perhaps only at its inception.

Namely, even though a much larger and more comprehensive study is needed to come to any firm and inescapable conclusions, yet it seems that both teachers and students lack in experience of working and studying, respectively, with disabled students. In addition to that, EFL teachers are particularly concerned about the fact that they have never received any form of formal education or training to work with students with disabilities.

As to the other relevant aspects tackled in this study – handling mixed classes i.e. classes consisting of both students with and without disabilities, assessment standards, and classroom conditions, it is also strikingly evident that, generally speaking, both teachers and students are undecided. Their awareness of the humane and moral aspect of the inclusion does not diminish their concerns about the practical implementation of the inclusion. In fact, on the basis of both teachers and students' answers, our general impression is that some disabilities, especially physical impairments, do not present a major impediment to studying English at tertiary level, but severe mental disabilities, for instance, cannot be permissible in such a context as they would require completely different conditions and treatment /teaching approach.

Finally, the main conclusion which can be drawn on the basis of the overview of the recent research on inclusive education within all levels of education especially at tertiary level, is that the inclusion is a global phenomenon which develops slowly but steadily, a phenomenon the occurrence of which has not been circumvented in the Republic of Macedonia as well, and the application of which can solely be based on the principle of flexibility. Training teachers to accept be as tolerant as possible; preparing flexibility-based curricula; accepting flexible assessment standards, etc. are at the core of a successful implementation of the inclusion of students with disabilities in higher education in general, including the context of studying and teaching English as a foreign language.

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