

A Framework for Preparing EFL Student Teachers to Teach English to Students with Special Educational Needs in Egypt Using Inclusive Education

By

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Abstract

This research study aims to explore the current state of EFL student teacher education programmes in preparing teachers to teach English to students with special educational needs (SEN) in Egypt and other Arab-speaking countries, and subsequently, to propose a framework for preparing English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers to teach students with SEN in Egypt based on experiences in Egypt and other Arab-speaking countries. This involves identifying the main challenges and needs of EFL student teachers and their educators in relation to teaching English to students with SEN in Egypt based on experiences in other Arab-speaking countries along with the existing policies and practices that support or hinder the implementation of inclusive education for EFL learners with SEN in Arab-speaking countries in general and Egypt in particular. The proposed framework is based on a review of the literature on inclusive education (IE) and foreign language teaching for SEN learners, as well as semi-structured interviews with 50 EFL teacher educators from seven Egyptian universities. The study identifies three main components of the framework: (1) developing general and pedagogical knowledge and skills of EFL teachers to cater for the diverse needs of SEN learners, (2) enhancing self-efficacy beliefs and positive attitudes of EFL teachers towards IE and SEN learners, and (3) incorporating relevant information and communication technology (ICT) tools to support EFL teaching and learning for SEN learners. The paper also discusses

the challenges and implications of implementing the framework in the Arab context, especially in Egypt, and suggests directions for future research.

Keywords: EFL student-teachers, students with special needs, Inclusive Education (IE).

العنوان باللغة العربية: إطار عمل لإعداد معلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية لتدريس اللغة الإنجليزية للطلاب ذوي الاحتياجات التعليمية الخاصة في مصر باستخدام التعليم الشامل (الدمج) المستخلص باللغة العربية:

تهدف هذه الدراسة البحثية إلى استكشاف الحالة الراهنة لبرامج تدريب الطلاب-المعلمين تخصص اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في إعداد المعلمين لتدريس اللغة الإنجليزية للطلاب ذوي الاحتياجات التعليمية الخاصة في مصر وغيرها من البلدان الناطقة باللغة العربية، ومن ثم اقتراح إطار عمل لإعداد معلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية لتدريس الطلاب ذوي الاحتياجات التعليمية الخاصة في مصر بناءً على الخبرات في مصر وغيرها من البلدان الناطقة باللغة العربية. يتضمن هذا تحديد التحديات والاحتياجات الرئيسية لمعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية ومعلميهم فيما يتعلق بتدريس اللغة الإنجليزية للطلاب ذوي الاحتياجات التعليمية الخاصة في مصر بناءً على الخبرات في البلدان الأخرى الناطقة باللغة العربية الأخرى جنبًا إلى جنب مع السياسات والممارسات الحالية التي تدعم أو تعيق تنفيذ التعليم الشامل (بالدمج) لمعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية ذوي الاحتياجات التعليمية الخاصة في البلدان الناطقة باللغة العربية بشكل عام ومصر بشكل خاص. يعتمد الإطار المقترح على مراجعة الأدبيات حول التعليم الشامل بالدمج وتدريب اللغة الأجنبية للمتعلمين من ذوي الاحتياجات التعليمية الخاصة، بالإضافة إلى مقابلات شبه مقننة مع 50 معلمًا للغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية من سبع جامعات مصرية. تحدد الدراسة ثلاثة مكونات رئيسية للإطار: (1) تطوير المعرفة والمهارات العامة والتربوية لمعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية لتلبية الاحتياجات المتنوعة لمعلمي الاحتياجات التعليمية الخاصة، (2) تعزيز معتقدات الكفاءة الذاتية والمواقف الإيجابية لمعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية تجاه متعلمي التعليم العام والاحتياجات التعليمية الخاصة، و(3) دمج أدوات تكنولوجيا المعلومات والاتصالات ذات الصلة لدعم تعليم وتعلم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية لمعلمي الاحتياجات التعليمية الخاصة. كما تناقش الورقة التحديات والآثار المترتبة على تنفيذ الإطار في السياق العربي، وخاصة في مصر، وتقدم اتجاهات للبحوث المستقبلية.

1. INTRODUCTION

Teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) to students in general and to those with Special Educational Needs (SEN) in particular presents difficulties for many nations worldwide. Similar to numerous other Arab nations, Egypt faces

additional difficulties due to a deficiency of resources, a lack of a support structure, the difficulties of teaching English as a foreign language in general, and a number of ongoing obstacles that educational institutions must overcome (Emam, 2016; Fareh, 2010; Eno, 2018). Because it is widely used in business and education worldwide, English is arguably the language that is being taught as a foreign or second language in most nations at an accelerated rate. This status-quo of English as an international language adds to the challenges that need to be addressed in Egypt and many other Arab countries.

Although several nations started introducing English from grade 1, Egypt introduced it as a foreign language starting in early kindergarten (KG1 and KG2) and elementary classes (Eno, 2018; Al-Abri, Emam, & Al-Seyabi, 2019; Mahmoud, 2015). Students who suffer from a specific impairment or other disorders that may negatively impact their learning achievements are often classified as having special education needs (SEN). Children with health concerns, underprivileged kids, students from marginalised households, and students of a special colour or ethnic background may be among those classified as SEN students. Hence, the goal of the current research paper is to provide a plan or framework of action to help EFL teachers get ready to educate SEN students in Arab-speaking nations despite the current difficulties and challenges encountered. Therefore, the main goal is represented in reviewing the existing body of research on effective inclusive education (IE) practices across national boundaries as an expansion of that study. This endeavour is based on reviewing the existing literature on good practices for IE in across countries and building on the research that was conducted on IE in the Arab contexts to date.

To be inclusive, education must take into account the disparities (i.e. individual differences, varying learning styles and different ways of processing information) among all students. Advocates of IE view variations among students resulting from special education needs or disabilities as a benefit rather than a hindrance. In public schools, IE promotes diversity and permits students with SEN or disabilities to study alongside their more capable peers. Ever since its inception, IE has been associated with social justice because it is seen as a human rights advocate for people with disabilities (Shyman, 2015; Lingard & Mills, 2007). Dyson (1999) asserts that justification discourse and implementation discourse served as the foundation for IE models worldwide. Studies based on the justification discourse typically concentrate on the idea that IE is a type of social justice (Lalvani, 2013). Within this paradigm, researchers examine IE mandates and policies that are issued by governments to advance IE and provide social, political, and educational rights to people with disabilities. On the other hand, studies based on the implementation discourse give priority to examining the barriers preventing people with disabilities from participating fully in social and educational contexts.

Researchers under the umbrella of this paradigm study IE policies and mandates issued by governments to boost IE and grant individuals with disabilities their social, political and educational rights. Alternatively, research grounded in the implementation discourse prioritizes the investigation of hurdles that limit the participation of individuals with disabilities in social and educational settings. Within this paradigm, researchers examine IE mandates and policies that are issued by governments to advance IE and provide social, political, and educational rights to people with disabilities.

On the other hand, studies based on the implementation discourse give priority to examining the barriers preventing people with disabilities from participating fully in social and educational contexts. Within this research paradigm, researchers are interested in investigating how schools respond to the demands and requirements of IE and how these efforts affect the learning outcomes of all students, teachers' attitudes toward IE, teachers' self-efficacy beliefs regarding teaching students with SEN, teachers' skills in differentiating instruction, and the effectiveness of teacher education programmes in producing general educators who are capable of meeting the needs of students with a variety of needs. (Forlin, 2013; Loreman, Deppeler, 2011; Lemperou, Chostelidou, Forlin, 2013; Lemperou, Chostelidou, 2011; Loreman, Deppeler, & Harvey 2011; Sharma, Forlin, Deppeler, & Yang. 2013).

2. RESEARCH PROBLEM & OBJECTIVES

There is a reported lack of special education teacher preparation for teaching English language learners (ELLs) with disabilities. The research problem is represented in the need to explore the current state and challenges of EFL teacher education programmes in Egypt and other Arab-speaking countries in relation to preparing teachers to teach English to SEN students in inclusive settings. The objectives include exploring the current state of EFL student teachers' education programmes and proposing a framework to enhance their quality and effectiveness.

Currently, a lack of special education teacher preparation to effectively meet the needs of English language learners (ELLs) with disabilities is reported (Cheatham & Barnett, 2016). Therefore, a purposeful and coherent teacher education programme is necessary to adequately prepare teachers to effectively teach ELLs (Hamann & Reeves, 2013). Preparing and training EFL teachers to deal with students with learning disabilities involves developing some competencies and professional skills. EFL competencies in special education contexts suggest a shared knowledge base that all English language teachers must have so as to provide linguistically and culturally responsive instruction and intervention that is differentiated to meet students' language-, literacy-, and/or disability-related

needs (Ortiz & Robertson, 2018). In this regard, Patton et al. (2003) and Tran, Patton and Brohammer (2018) argue that regardless of the vehicle chosen to obtain the knowledge and skills needed to be a special education teacher today, it is essential that teachers are culturally and linguistically competent and diverse in both instruction and assessment.

In general, research in many Arab countries, as Hussain (2010) reported, is limited when it comes to the preparation and training of special education teachers in general. Most special education and disabilities research in the Arab world focusses mainly on inclusion and inclusive schools (e.g. Ali, 2018; Awad, 2016; Ghoneim, 2014). According to Hadidi and Al Khateeb (2015), shortcomings are still common in most aspects of special education teacher training in Arab countries at both the pre-service and in-service levels. Training programmes should include more emphasis on practical experience and need to be based on professional standards for practice.

While Egypt is currently taking serious steps towards inclusive language education, there is a clear need for ongoing professional development opportunities for teachers in general and EFL teachers in particular. Equipping language teachers with the knowledge, competencies and skills required to create inclusive learning environments is crucial for ensuring that all students, regardless of their abilities, have the opportunity to succeed in learning English.

Thus, the research problem of this study is represented in the need to explore the current state and challenges of EFL teacher education programmes in Egypt and other Arab-speaking countries in relation to preparing teachers to teach English to students with SEN in inclusive settings. It is argued that EFL teachers need to develop general and pedagogical knowledge and skills, self-efficacy beliefs, and positive attitudes towards inclusive education (IE) and SEN learners in order to provide quality and effective foreign language instruction for this diverse group of students. The study also aims to propose a framework for action to enhance the EFL student teachers' education programmes based on a systematic literature review and semi-structured interviews with 50 EFL teacher educators from seven Egyptian universities. The paper addresses a significant gap in the research literature on IE and foreign language teaching in the Arab context – especially Egypt, as well as the practical challenges and barriers that hinder the implementation of IE for EFL learners with SEN.

Therefore, the main research aims are represented in:

1. exploring the current state of EFL student teacher education programmes in preparing teachers to teach English to students with SEN in Egypt and other Arab-speaking countries;

2. proposing a framework for action to enhance the quality and effectiveness of EFL student teachers' education programmes in addressing the needs of students with SEN in Egypt and other Arab-speaking countries.

Hence, the research questions are:

1. What are the main challenges and needs of EFL student teachers and their educators in relation to teaching English to students with SEN in Egypt based on experiences in other Arab-speaking countries?
2. What are the existing policies and practices that support or hinder the implementation of inclusive education for EFL learners with SEN in Arab-speaking countries in general and Egypt in particular?
3. What are the key components and principles of a framework for action to improve EFL student teacher education programmes for teaching English students with SEN in Egypt based on experiences in other Arab-speaking countries?

3. METHODOLOGY

This research study employs a qualitative research methodology since the main purpose of the study is to reach a framework for action. This involves: (1) a systematic literature review and (2) semi-structured interviews conducted with 50 EFL teacher educators affiliated with many faculties of education in Egypt to come out with deep accounts that would help with reaching the desired framework.

3.1 Literature Review

Inclusive education (IE) is a global movement promoting the education of all students, including those with special educational needs (SEN), alongside their typically developing peers (UNESCO, 2016). This approach requires educators to adapt their teaching styles and create accessible learning environments. In Egypt, the growing focus on IE necessitates equipping language teachers with the knowledge and skills to effectively teach English to students with SEN (Parnell, 2020).

Researchers' interest in examining the many chances provided to SEN kids in literacy, mathematics, and content disciplines has grown within the conversation around IE practice and implementation. More recently, however, there has been an interest in analysing models of effective practices in providing learners with SEN with various possibilities for high quality foreign language teaching (Nijakowska, 2019). Researchers contended that in order for kids with SEN to be able to learn foreign languages, they need to have adequate support and be taught using evidence-based methods. To reach this purpose, studies have underlined the essential and crucial function of teacher education programmes (Akcan, 2016; Lemperou, Chostelidou, 2011; Miranda, Wells, & Jenkins, 2019).

There has been evidence that successful teacher education programmes have a favourable impact on student learning outcomes, including those with SEN, based on the recent trend of implementing value-added evaluations in the field of teacher education (Lemperou, Chostelidou, 2011). As a result, future educators are probably going to judge how well students with special education needs are taught foreign languages. There is a dearth of research in Western nations in general and in Arab-speaking nations in particular on the calibre and efficacy of teacher education programmes in training teachers to teach foreign languages to students with special educational needs.

Scholars have generally argued that three key components determine teachers' readiness to teach FL to students with SEN in inclusive settings (Counts, Katsiyannis, & Whitford, 2018; Nijakowska, 2019; Ortiz, & Robertson, 2018; Verdon, McLeod, & Wong, 2015): (a) general knowledge of the needs of students with SEN and pedagogical knowledge and skills of how to cater for these needs; (b) possession of self-efficacy beliefs in implementing inclusive practices and differentiated instruction for students with SEN (Ismail, 2019; Chen, 2020); and finally (c) having positive attitudes towards IE and the rights of students with SEN to be treated equally as their typically capable or advanced peers.

In both pre-service and in-service teacher education programmes, the three elements or factors were thoroughly investigated in a variety of subject areas, including science, math, reading, and other areas of content. But recently, academics who study foreign language instruction started to pay attention to these aspects. In Western countries, the three criteria were thoroughly studied in connection to fields and academic areas other than foreign language instruction, where there was a dearth of research. However, the three elements or factors were only lightly studied in literacy and content areas in Arab-speaking nations, while they were given little consideration in the field of teaching foreign languages. Therefore, the researcher provides a brief overview of the literature on the three elements below.

First, it was noted that one important factor influencing how well pre-service and in-service instructors help students with special education needs is their overall understanding of such needs (Nijakowska, 2019; Yazan, 2017). The failure of school inclusive practices may be attributed to a widespread lack of understanding of what a disability is and how the features of children with disabilities may affect the way they should be taught. Good understanding of the unique traits of each group of SEN kids was linked to effective teaching or instruction (Tran, Patton, & Brohammer, 2018). Thus, it stands to reason that instructing kids with learning disabilities (LD) could call for particular methods that are different from those used when teaching foreign languages to students

with ASD. Studies indicate that obtaining general knowledge needs to be the main focus of a teacher education programme. Furthermore, studies have indicated that preservice teachers are not happy with the professional knowledge and skills that are being provided to them in order to prepare them for inclusive classrooms (Nijakowska, 2019; Ortiz & Robertson, 2018).

Second, based on the idea that a teacher's efficacy for inclusive practices (TEIP) differs from the broader conception of self-efficacy, teacher self-efficacy was recently conceptualised with an emphasis on inclusive practices (Loreman et al., 2011; Emam & Al-Madhy, 2020). This suggests that a teacher may feel more effective while instructing children in general than when instructing kids with special education needs. According to Forlin, Sharma, and Loreman (2014) and Tran, Patton, and Brohammer (2018), TEIP is a measure of instructors' perceived competency and capacity to meet the requirements of students with SEN, deliver differentiated and remedial quality instruction, and control behaviour to enhance learning outcomes. There is a claim that teacher preparation shapes TEIP. As a result, it is unlikely that foreign language instruction for SEN students will be idealised until after student teachers have grown in their ability to employ inclusive approaches during their teacher preparation courses. There is also a claim that student teachers' perception of their own efficacy in implementing inclusive practices is influenced by the knowledge and abilities they pick up.

Teachers' views on IE are the third factor that determines how equipped they are to teach foreign languages to students with special education needs (Rezai, Jabbari & Ahmadi, 2018). An individual's emotional state that influences their behaviour is referred to as their attitude. In this sense, an attitude contains both behavioural and cognitive components in addition to its obvious emotive component. The concept that has been studied the most in regard to inclusive practices in schools is likely attitudes towards IE. Avramidis and Norwich (2002), in the most widely recognised review of attitudes towards inclusion, found that a teacher's attitude towards IE is influenced by a number of factors, including the kind and severity of their disability, gender, age, years of teaching experience, grade level, and personality traits.

Emam and Al-Mahdy (2022) recently stated that the inclusive school climate, in which teachers and children with SEN coexist, is one significant environment-related factor that influences attitudes towards IE. Additionally, research revealed a reciprocal rather than a one-way cause-and-effect link between attitudes towards IE and the effectiveness of inclusive policies. The results of studies on preservice teachers' attitudes towards IE vary depending on the situation (Emam & Mohamed, 2011). Furthermore, the study's conclusions demonstrated a correlation between preservice teachers' attitudes and self-efficacy (Alghazo, Dodeen, & Algaryouti, 2003).

According to Nijakowska (2019), a conceptual framework for teaching dyslexic pupils foreign languages should take into account the teacher's understanding of dyslexia, their confidence in meeting the needs of the students, and their positive views about their inclusion in public schools. In her research, Nijakowska discusses a different study that used 546 pre- and in-service EFL teachers from three nations—Poland, Greece, and Cyprus—to construct and validate the Teacher Preparedness to Include Dyslexics (TPID) scale. Two elements are included in the 22-item scale: (1) Teachers' self-efficacy beliefs regarding how much they trust their understanding of dyslexia to help them educate and control the behaviour of dyslexic pupils (2) widespread opinions towards inclusion of students with dyslexia.

Abdallah (2017) conducted an action research study in Egypt with the goal of negotiating and improving the structure and delivery of a new special-education language-learning course entitled, "TESOL/TEFL for Special Needs Students," taught to English majors (EFL student teachers) at Assiut University College of Education (AUCOE). This was motivated by the training needs imposed by the new "special education" courses, which were included in the university bylaws and internal regulations of Egyptian colleges of education in 2010, as well as the challenges that followed in relation to course design and content selection. Therefore, over the course of two consecutive semesters during the academic year 2012–2013, an action research methodology of two cycles was used with two different groups of English majors: the first group comprised 106 junior general-section EFL student teachers (1st semester, 2012); and the second group consisted of 51 senior primary-stage EFL student teachers (2nd semester, 2013).

Since data collecting instruments were employed for both formative and summative evaluation, they were different from the start and throughout the two iterations. Questionnaires, online diaries, semi-structured interviews, final feedback reports, and online follow-up logs (on a Facebook page) were among the tools used. The outcome of the two AR cycles was a final framework for the content and structure of the course, along with some recommendations and directions on how to deliver it to the target learners, which include:

1. introducing the field of special education;
2. the different teaching methods, strategies and techniques used for teaching English to students with special educational needs (e.g. Learner-centred approaches: self-paced learning and individualised instruction; technology-assisted approaches: computer-assisted language learning 'CALL', Web-mediated language learning, online learning, e-learning; Collaborative approaches: cooperative learning, peer teaching, group learning, community-based learning; Task-based approaches: task-based learning, problem-based learning, learning projects);

3. the different strategies and techniques used for assessing and evaluating language learning for students with special educational needs (e.g. alternative assessment strategies: performance-based assessment, portfolio, checklists, discussions, extended essays, diaries and journals, self-assessment, oral presentations, questionnaires, rubrics, interviews, logs, observations, research products, re-telling, etc.);
4. how to teach different language aspects, mainly vocabulary and grammar, and the main four language skills (i.e. listening, speaking, reading and writing) to students with special educational needs;
5. how to employ new technologies to enable a supportive and optimum language learning environment for students with special educational needs; and
6. how to conduct a successful classroom management for those students.

According to certain research studies (Ali, 2018; Alkahten et al., 2016; Awad, 2016; Ghoneim, 2014), instructors in inclusive settings in Egypt lack the knowledge, skills, and support necessary to teach students with special education needs. This made it necessary for pre-service and in-service teacher education programmes to address SEN students. In order to better understand the needs and preferences of Egyptian in-service English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instructors about dealing with special-need pupils in inclusive schools, Ali (2018) conducted a mixed methods study. The hurdles to inclusion cited by the EFL teachers who were interviewed included a lack of training in inclusive education, high-class sizes, unfavourable attitudes, time constraints, a severe workload, and unfamiliarity with essential practices. Participants also ranked as important the detection of linguistic abnormalities, instructional strategies, curriculum adaptation, individualised educational plans, and behavioural issue control. Aside from weekday morning seminars, teachers favoured in-person workshops, project-based learning, and mentor-supported learning.

El-Koumy (2016) observed that the Egyptian educational system does not provide any particular courses for pupils with language learning impairments, and these students are completely disregarded. They are enrolled in regular schools, which are unprepared to handle their particular challenges. Therefore, the goal of his work was to give teachers models of numerous ways to teach these children English language proficiency at the intermediate level and above. Its purpose was to assist pre-service and in-service teachers in Egypt and the Arab world in the following areas: (1) identifying efficient methods for acquiring and applying language skills; (2) utilising multiple-strategies models for language skill instruction; (3) incorporating language learning and usage strategies into routine language activities; and (4) enhancing the processes, procedures and products of language learning of students with learning disabilities.

Research on how to deal with dyslexia and reading comprehension issues in EFL teacher preparation was also conducted in Egypt. For instance, Al-Hadidy (2006) sought to determine the primary challenges faced by dyslexic children in Egypt and to assess the literacy instruction knowledge of EFL primary education pre-service teachers in order to develop a programme centred on literacy instruction that incorporates appropriate reading strategies to address the dyslexia of the target students. The study suggests performing a survey to determine the precise number of students at Egyptian Primary Schools who have learning difficulties so that prompt remedial interventions can be given to them. Furthermore, significant measures must be taken to guarantee that Egyptian education colleges provide curricula that provide pre-service teachers with the knowledge and pedagogical skills they need to support struggling readers throughout their academic careers.

AL-Hudaib et al. (2017) set out to ascertain the training requirements for transitional services for teachers of secondary learning-disabled girls in Saudi Arabia. They also sought to ascertain the variations in these needs based on factors such as years of experience, educational level, and training programmes. Hussain (2010) also made an effort to evaluate King Saud University's undergraduate special education teacher preparation course in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. The final sample of 160 LD teachers supplied the analysis's data. A survey with five subscales—coursework, internship quality, classroom applications, professors' teaching abilities, and personal learning experience—was used to gather data for the study. Additionally, LD teachers talked about a variety of areas in which they believed there were gaps. Since many students are labelled with several disabilities, they requested improved translations into Arabic, English textbooks and English lessons, and more information on other disabilities. Lessons were to be more creative, use case studies, allow for more hands-on applied projects or presentations, and involve fewer tests. More knowledge on creating an IEP, working with middle school children, creating lesson plans, and improving classroom supplies was needed by LD teachers. It was the desire of LD instructors to have access to workshops and training both before and after graduation, as well as to further study through advanced degrees.

Teachers of learning disabilities believed that the programme's lack of classroom experience, particularly in classes on teaching techniques, was a shortcoming. If methods classes allow students to apply what they learn in the classroom to real-world situations, they will be more beneficial. It is important to promote collaboration between special education departments and districts so that students can visit schools and apply their university knowledge. Teachers with special education backgrounds felt that the most crucial component of a programme for preparing future special education teachers is training time—both internship and classroom experience. These experiences need to be emphasised in all special

education teacher preparation programmes. These kinds of encounters ought to start early in the course and continue through the practicum and internship. The internship must last for a full year. Finally, in order for students to become better teachers, they need to routinely obtain feedback from their professors.

Aladwani and Al Shaye (2012) looked at the knowledge and understanding of early dyslexia symptoms in Kuwaiti pupils held by primary language school teachers in that country. In order to accomplish this, a survey was created to gather information at random from over 700 participants in each of Kuwait's six school districts. The findings demonstrated that most educators are not prepared, knowledgeable, or skilled enough to identify dyslexic children in their classes. With dyslexia and other learning disorders being major concerns for students, instructors, and specialists, the findings get us closer to considering the practical implications for practitioners, course designers, and Ministry of Education policymakers.

3.2 Semi-structured Interviews

The interview aimed to support and reinforce data obtained through the systematic literature review reported above. Participants in the interview were 50 EFL student teachers' educators who were affiliated with 7 Faculties of Education in Egypt at 7 universities: Assiut University (10 participants), Minia University (8 participants), Ain-Shams University (9 participants), New Valley University (6 participants), Alexandria University (7 participants), South Valley University (7 participants) and Banha University (3 participants). All 50 participants were teaching staff members whose major is Curriculum & English Language Instruction (TESOL/TEFL). The interviews were conducted flexibly online using ZOOM based on each one's convenience. For the questions posed in the interview, see Table 1 below.

Table 1

<i>Semi-structured interview</i>	
Main aspects	Sample questions
Introduction	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Can you briefly describe your role as an EFL teacher educator and your experience in preparing student teachers in Egypt? 2. Have you had any experience or training in teaching English to students with special educational needs (SEN)?
Exploring the current state of EFL Student teacher education programmes	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. What is the current curriculum structure of EFL teacher education programs in your university? 4. In your experience, how are EFL student teachers currently prepared to address the needs of students with SEN in the classroom?

Main aspects	Sample questions
	<p>5. <i>Can you share any specific challenges or successes your students or colleagues have faced in teaching English to students with SEN?</i></p>
<p>Proposing a framework for action</p>	<p>6. <i>From your perspective, what are the main challenges and needs of EFL student teachers and their educators in teaching English to students with SEN in Egypt?</i></p> <p>7. <i>Are there specific policies or practices in place that support or hinder the implementation of inclusive education for EFL learners with SEN in Egypt?</i></p> <p>8. <i>What, in your opinion, should be the key components and principles of a framework for action to improve EFL student teacher education programs for teaching English to students with SEN?</i></p>
<p>General reflections</p>	<p>9. <i>How do you perceive the importance of inclusive education in the context of teaching English as a foreign language?</i></p> <p>10. <i>Can you share any success stories or positive experiences related to EFL student teachers successfully adapting their teaching methods for students with SEN?</i></p> <p><i>ICT Integration:</i></p> <p>11. <i>How do you currently incorporate information and communication technology (ICT) tools in preparing EFL student teachers to teach students with SEN?</i></p> <p>12. <i>What challenges, if any, do you foresee in integrating ICT tools into EFL teaching for SEN learners?</i></p>
<p>Implementation challenges and implications</p>	<p>13. <i>In your opinion, what challenges might be faced in implementing the proposed framework in the Arab context, particularly in Egypt?</i></p> <p>14. <i>Are there any cultural or institutional factors that may impact the effectiveness of the framework in EFL teacher education programs?</i></p> <p><i>Future Directions:</i></p> <p>15. <i>Based on your experience, what areas of research do you think are needed to further explore the intersection of EFL teacher education and</i></p>

Main aspects	Sample questions
	<i>inclusive education for students with SEN in Egypt?</i>
Conclusion	<i>16. Is there anything else you would like to add or share regarding the preparation of EFL student teachers for teaching English to students with SEN in Egypt?</i>

4. RESULTS & DISCUSSION

For the first research question, the main challenges and needs of EFL student teachers and their educators in relation to teaching English to students with SEN in Egypt based on experiences in other Arab-speaking countries are (see also Table 2):

- a) lack of training and knowledge of SEN: many ELTEPs in the Arab world do not pay sufficient focus on SEN learners within their programmes and the majority of teachers lack the training, knowledge, and skills to diagnose the dyslexic students in their classroom;
- b) lack of resources and support for IE: Arab countries including Egypt have not managed to materialise their policies in developing SEN’s status in their educational environments and the lack of resources especially ICT support is a common predicament facing Arab educational systems in mainstream education and IE; and
- c) lack of positive attitudes and self-efficacy for IE: the Saudi sample attitudes were below the midpoint and teachers prioritised their needs for identification of language disorders, teaching methods, individualised instruction through curriculum adaptation and individualized educational plans, and controlling behavioural problems.

Based on the interviewees’ accounts (see Table 2), the main challenges and needs of EFL student teachers and their educators in relation to teaching English to SEN students in Egypt, based on experiences in other Arab-speaking countries, can be categorised into several key areas:

1. *Lack of specialised training*: One of the primary challenges is the absence of adequate training programmes that focus on the intersection of EFL teaching and special education. EFL teachers often lack the specialised knowledge and skills required to address the diverse needs of SEN students.
2. *Insufficient resources*: There is a reported deficiency of resources, including teaching materials and assistive technologies, tailored to the needs of SEN students in EFL classrooms. This scarcity makes it difficult for teachers to provide an inclusive learning environment.
3. *Inadequate support structures*: The lack of a robust support system for teachers, such as access to special education experts and ongoing professional

development, hinders the ability of EFL teachers to effectively teach SEN students.

4. *Cultural and societal attitudes*: Cultural perceptions and societal attitudes towards individuals with disabilities can impact the implementation of inclusive education. There may be resistance or lack of understanding about the benefits of inclusive education among educators, parents, and policymakers.
5. *Policy and legislative framework*: The absence of a clear and supportive policy framework for inclusive education in some Arab-speaking countries, including Egypt, can be a barrier to the effective teaching of SEN students in EFL settings.
6. *Teacher self-efficacy*: EFL teachers may lack confidence in their ability to meet the needs of SEN students, which can affect their teaching effectiveness. Enhancing teachers' self-efficacy beliefs is crucial for successful inclusive education.
7. *Curriculum and assessment*: The EFL curriculum and assessment methods may not be adequately adapted for SEN students, making it challenging for teachers to measure progress and tailor instruction to individual needs.
8. *Practical experience*: There is a need for more emphasis on practical, hands-on experience in teacher training programmes. Exposure to real classroom settings with SEN students is essential for developing effective teaching strategies.
9. *Collaboration and communication*: Effective communication and collaboration between EFL teachers, special education specialists, parents, and other stakeholders are often lacking, which is essential for addressing the needs of SEN students.
10. *Research and best practices*: There is a need for more research on best practices in teaching EFL to SEN students in the Arab context to inform teacher education programs and classroom practices.

Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach that includes policy reform, teacher training, resource allocation/collection, and a shift in the cultural attitudes towards disability and inclusion. By learning from the experiences of other Arab-speaking countries and adapting successful strategies to the Egyptian context, it is possible to enhance the preparation of EFL student teachers to effectively teach English to SEN students. More specifically, the similar social and demographic realities commonly found in Arab countries make it imperative to share the interventional practices adopted in these countries. This sounds better than starting from scratch and reinventing the wheel. Therefore, Arab countries should create a reference knowledge-base that includes practical solutions for SEN-related problems, with specific reference to TEFL. Examples of the items to be included are:

1. methods and ways of teaching the basic language skills (i.e. listening, speaking, reading and writing) to SEN student (e.g. autistic learners, ADHD learners, dyslexic learners, etc.);
2. methods and ways of teaching main language aspects (i.e. vocabulary and grammar) to SEN students;
3. methods and ways of inclusion in language classes;
4. methods and ways of dealing with language learning difficulties experienced by SEN students;
5. methods and ways of providing individual support to SEN students during language classes;
6. methods and ways of addressing individual differences and varying learning styles of SEN students while learning English as a foreign language;
7. methods and ways of implementing metacognitive language learning strategies (e.g. self-regulated learning, cooperative learning, reflective learning, meditation, self-correction, self-questioning, mnemonics, concept-maps, and visual organisers) while dealing with SEN students.
8. methods and ways of supporting and reinforcing vocabulary retention of SEN students;
9. methods and ways of teaching grammar explicitly to SEN students; and
10. methods and ways of teaching reading to SEN students.

As for the second research question, the existing policies and practices that support or hinder the implementation of inclusive education for EFL learners with SEN in Arab-speaking countries in general and Egypt, in particular, are represented in (see Table 2):

- a) Inclusive education (IE) models vary across different countries and contexts, depending on the justification and implementation discourses that underpin them.
- b) Teacher education programmes play a crucial role in preparing teachers to teach foreign languages to students with SEN in inclusive settings, by developing their general and pedagogical knowledge, self-efficacy beliefs, and positive attitudes towards IE.
- c) Research on IE and foreign language teaching is very limited in Western countries and scarce in Arab-speaking countries, especially in relation to the specific needs and characteristics of different categories of students with SEN, such as dyslexia, ASD, or LD.
- d) Challenges and barriers to IE and foreign language teaching in Arab-speaking countries include lack of resources, support, training, awareness, and collaboration, as well as large class sizes, heavy workloads, negative attitudes, and rigid curricula and assessment systems.

Table 2

Summary of interview results

Theme	Subthemes/Key Findings
Current State of EFL Student Teacher Programmes	- Curriculum Structure: Limited modules specifically addressing SEN in EFL teacher education curriculum.
	- Preparation for SEN: EFL student teachers feel inadequately prepared to address diverse needs of students with SEN.
	- Challenges and Successes: Challenges include adapting materials, while successes include effective use of differentiated instruction.
Policies and Practices for Inclusive Education	- Existing Policies: Lack of clear policies supporting inclusive education for EFL learners with SEN in Egypt.
	- Institutional Practices: Varied practices, some institutions implement inclusive education more effectively than others.
Components of a Framework for Action	- Identified Challenges: Limited awareness of SEN issues, and a lack of practical training opportunities for EFL student teachers.
	- Framework Components: Proposed components include a dedicated SEN module, practical teaching experiences, and mentorship programs.
ICT Integration in EFL Teaching	- Current ICT Usage: Limited integration of ICT tools, desire for more training in this area.
	- Challenges in ICT Integration: Challenges include a lack of access to technology and concerns about its effectiveness for SEN learners.
Implementation Challenges and Implications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Challenges in Arab Context: Cultural stigmas associated with SEN, recommended awareness campaigns for successful implementation. - Lack of specialised training - insufficient resources - inadequate support structures - curriculum and assessment
	- Cultural and Institutional Factors: Cultural perceptions and institutional support critical for the framework's success.

Theme	Subthemes/Key Findings
General Reflections on Inclusive Education	- Perceived Importance: All participants acknowledge the importance of inclusive education, emphasizing the need for a more inclusive mindset in teacher preparation.
	- Success Stories: Positive experiences include successful adaptations in teaching methods and improved outcomes for SEN learners.
Future Directions and Areas of Research	- Suggested Research Areas: Recommendations include longitudinal studies on the impact of the proposed framework, cross-cultural comparisons, and exploration of technology's evolving role in inclusive education.

As for the third question about the framework for action, given the aforementioned overview of teaching English to SEN learners as depicted in the literature and more particularly in the Arab world along with the semi-structured interview results, a framework for action could be situated within three premises: (1) a plan for advancing an efficient English Language Teacher Education Programme (ELTEP) that emphasises the purposeful integration of pedagogical and general teaching abilities; (2) maintaining good national educational policies to promote the proper training and effective inclusion of SEN in pre-service and in-service teacher education; and (3) how to effectively integrate pertinent ICT tools into the teacher preparation programme to help student teachers to gain the knowledge and abilities they need to instruct SEN students.

The first premise (component) involves a suggested plan for advancing an efficient ELTEP that emphasises the purposeful integration of pedagogical and general teaching abilities, the bolstering of self-efficacy beliefs in the use of IE for learners with special education needs, and the development of positive attitudes towards IE and SEN. In the Arab world, a large number of ELTEPs fail to give SEN students enough attention in their curricula, both in terms of the lack of IE field experiences and the inclusion of pertinent SEN courses.

The belief that ELTEPs inadvertently integrate these three elements in some capacity into current curricula is seriously diminishing the significance of SEN in educational institutions and necessitates a radical re-examination from a philosophical, strategic, conceptual, dispositional, and practical standpoint. Pre-service and in-service training programmes should support language teaching strategies that are pertinent to special education needs (SENs), such as the Sheltered Instruction approach (Lopez-Reyna, 2002). These strategies give student teachers the necessary knowledge, skills, and dispositions to go beyond

prescribed discourse (such as textbooks and rigid top-down processes) and flexibly accommodate the variability of SENs of learners. Language teachers should incorporate their students' interests and motivation to learn, along with their pedagogical skills and strategies, in order to accommodate the variability of learning disabilities in language classrooms, according to Arries (1994). In mainstream language education, language teachers in many Arab contexts closely adhere to the textbook (Al-Issa & Al-Bulushi, 2010, 2011); this is also true when teaching students with special education needs. According to Mayer (2009), traditional ESL programme designs that prioritise conventional language learning may not meet the needs of deaf ESL learners if they do not have access to their first language. According to Uzum (2013), foreign language instructors—and we should also include teacher educators—should look for ways to draw students to professional activities that promote favourable attitudes towards IE because they are representatives of L2 culture. As a result, ELTEPs must instruct student teachers on the various forms of special education needs of their students not just via coursework but also by hands-on experience and interaction in a variety of pedagogical IE contexts.

The second premise of the framework is represented in maintaining good national educational policies to promote the proper training and effective inclusion of SEN in pre-service and in-service teacher education. When it came to SEN in ELT, Lowe (2016) advocated a framework for Continuing Professional Development (CPD) because mainstream education offered nothing in the way of SEN training or support. Students confer with teachers about their learning difficulties, teachers coach and mentor SEN students, teachers participate in CPD opportunities, and finally, training cascades to reuse information in a four-step sequential structure. Despite the fact that many nations created and implemented such regulations, Arab nations have not yet been able to make their policies a reality in terms of elevating SEN's standing in their educational settings. In their 2019 study, Alnahdi, Saloviita, and Elhadi examined pre-service teachers' attitudes about IE in Finland and Saudi Arabia. They discovered that while the opinions of the Finnish sample were below the neutral midpoint, those of the Saudi sample were closer to it. They came to the conclusion that understanding how to capitalise on fostering good attitudes towards inclusive education is crucial for teacher preparation programmes.

National or regional policies that teacher education programmes in relevant contexts can draw on such as the European Commission Report about the position of the teaching of foreign languages among SENs (cited in: Stevens & Marsh, 2005) could inform ELTEPs to develop their programmes and equip their candidates with the required IE knowledge, skills, and dispositions to train pre-service language student teachers. When such policies tackle the most crucial elements that could facilitate the development of IE (e.g. roles of stakeholders,

teacher preparation programs, community service institutions, ICT, and support agencies), it becomes easier to align ELTEPs with such policies and dedicate efforts to follow up alignments between the two.

Therefore, it becomes imperative for teacher education programmes to not just align with national and regional policies, but also to actively engage in the policy-making process. By participating in such aspects, ELTEPs can ensure that the unique challenges and requirements of teaching English to SEN students are adequately addressed in the policies. Furthermore, ELTEPs should also consider establishing partnerships with the local community service institutions and support agencies. These collaborations can provide practical insights (and useful resources) that can further enhance the training of pre-service language student teachers. In addition, the role of ICT in facilitating inclusive education cannot be exaggerated. Accordingly, ELTEPs should also focus on integrating ICT in their curricula to equip their candidates with the necessary digital competencies for teaching in the 21st century. This holistic approach will ensure that the proposed framework is not only theoretically sound, but also practically effective in preparing EFL student teachers to teach English to SEN students in Egypt.

The framework's third component is about how to effectively integrate pertinent ICT tools into the teacher preparation programme in order to help student teachers to gain the knowledge and abilities they need to instruct SEN students. Teacher educators are expected to stay up to date on the latest ICT tools and incorporate them into their courses to meet the diverse educational needs of both normal and SEN language learners. Any consideration of higher levels of inclusion, with classrooms comprising a more diverse learning group, can probably only be managed by harnessing technological support (Stevens & Marsh, 2005). Attempting to investigate whether language teachers' self-confidence, self-efficacy and attitudes to IE with dyslexic students defer prior to or after taking part in a MOOC, Kormos and Nijakowska (2017) found that their attitudes were more positive, their self-efficacy beliefs higher and that their concerns were lower than at the outset.

Initial teacher training, in-service teachers, and CPD organisers should not only focus on the language pedagogy component in their programmes, but should pay equal attention to SEN in planning, implementation and evaluation in order to deliver success effectively to all learners (Stevens & Marsh, 2005). Although the lack of resources - especially ICT support - is a common predicament facing Arab educational systems in mainstream education and IE, teacher education programmes and more particularly ELTEPs should train their candidates on using effective ICT tools to diagnose, plan, deliver, and assess SEN learners in various education contexts. The lack of time to prepare and teach lessons in inclusive classrooms, particularly when behavioural issues arise in heterogeneous classes,

is a common concern among pre- and in-service teachers (Forlin & Chambers, 2011; Forlin & Cooper, 2013; Horne & Timmons, 2009). Accordingly, teacher education programmes and their employers should make the necessary investments to create the educational infrastructure that special education (SEN) learners need in order to succeed pedagogically alongside their peers.

In summary, if implemented in cooperation with all relevant stakeholders, this triadic framework for ELT to SEN learners in Egypt and the Arab world, which incorporates skills and dispositions, effective educational policies, and pertinent ICT tools, would offer promising opportunities for language teachers and SEN learners to develop their linguistic and social abilities. Having said that, it would be difficult to materialise such a framework in the absence of the necessary educational infrastructure and two-way support (i.e., top-down and bottom-up). As a result, maintaining an ongoing, transparent communication channel between ELTEP and national policymakers is essential to the success of pre-sentence and in-service language training.

The suggested framework is crucially needed to equip EFL student teachers in Egypt to effectively teach English to SEN students. As a triadic framework that emerged from data, it revamped ELTEP that prioritizes integrating pedagogical and general teaching skills, fostering self-efficacy and positive attitudes towards IE, providing hands-on experience with SEN students. It has become evident that learner-centred approaches that cater to diverse needs should be in focus. Effective national educational policies are also crucial, promoting proper SEN training and inclusion in teacher education, aligning with ELTEPs to equip student teachers, and fostering partnerships with community service institutions and support agencies. Finally, integrating pertinent ICT tools is essential, requiring ELTEPs to not only incorporate them into the curriculum but also train student teachers on their use in the diagnosis, planning, delivery, and assessment of SEN learners. Investing in the necessary educational infrastructure further promotes efficiency and success.

While promising for both teachers and SEN learners, the framework's success relies heavily on two key elements: (1) building the necessary educational infrastructure that requires investments in resources and facilities; and (2) maintaining transparent communication between ELTEPs and policymakers, which is essential for continuous improvement and adaptation. By implementing this holistic framework and fostering collaborative efforts, both teachers and SEN learners are likely to flourish in an inclusive language learning environment.

5. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

This research study investigated the main challenges and needs of EFL student teachers and their educators in relation to teaching English to students with SEN

in Egypt based on experiences in other Arab-speaking countries as well as the existing policies and practices that support or hinder the implementation of inclusive education for EFL learners with SEN in Arab-speaking countries in general and Egypt, in particular. The main goal was to propose a framework for action to enhance the quality and effectiveness of EFL student teachers' education programmes in addressing the needs of students with SEN in Egypt and other Arab-speaking countries. The framework was based on a systematic literature review and semi-structured interviews with 50 EFL teacher educators from seven Egyptian universities. The framework identified three main components: (1) developing general and pedagogical knowledge and skills of EFL teachers to cater for the diverse needs of SEN learners, (2) enhancing self-efficacy beliefs and positive attitudes of EFL teachers towards IE and SEN learners, and (3) incorporating relevant ICT tools to support EFL teaching and learning for SEN learners. The study also discussed the challenges and implications of implementing the framework in the Arab context and suggested directions for future research. The study contributed to the scarce literature on IE and foreign language teaching for SEN learners in Arab-speaking countries and provided practical recommendations for EFL teacher education programmes and policymakers.

Finally, the study comes out with some recommendations which include:

1. **Enhancing Teacher Training Programmes:** specialized training modules focusing on inclusive education and SEN need to be developed and practical, hands-on experiences to better prepare teachers for real classroom settings should be incorporated.
2. **Increasing Resource Allocation:** adequate teaching materials and assistive technologies tailored to the needs of SEN students should be provided, ensuring that schools have the necessary resources to support inclusive education.
3. **Promoting Positive Attitudes and Self-Efficacy:** professional development programmes that enhance teachers' self-efficacy and foster positive attitudes towards inclusive education need to be implemented, while encouraging a supportive and inclusive school culture.
4. **Integrating ICT Tools:** information and communication technology (ICT) should be utilised to support EFL teaching and learning for SEN students, while providing training for teachers on how to effectively integrate these tools into their teaching practices.
5. **Policy and Legislative Support:** This involves advocating for clear and supportive policies that promote inclusive education, while ensuring that

these policies are effectively implemented and monitored to support the needs of SEN students.

6. Fostering Collaboration: collaboration between EFL teachers, special education specialists, parents, and other stakeholders should be encouraged, while promoting effective communication and teamwork, which are essential for addressing the diverse needs of SEN students.
7. Ongoing Research and Development: This involves conducting further research on best practices in teaching EFL to SEN students, while continuously updating teacher education programmes based on the latest research findings and successful strategies from other contexts.

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