

## **Its Greatest Benefit of Inclusion Is Its Challenge”: EFL Teachers’ Attitudes towards Inclusion of Learners with Disabilities<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

Inclusion has long been a hotbed for debate in many educational fields but TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language). To the best knowledge of the research, no study has been conducted on the issue of inclusion in Iran, especially considering EFL learners with special needs. Considering teachers as the central pillar of the inclusive education, the present study sought to investigate EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teachers' attitudes towards the inclusion of physically-impaired EFL learners in English language classes. To this end, a comprehensive survey was conducted using the 25-item Opinions Relative to Mainstreaming (ORM) scale (Antonak & Larrivee, 1995) to collect data from 254 Iranian EFL teachers, of whom 30 teachers were subsequently interviewed to guarantee the triangulation of the findings. The data were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively, with the SPSS Software version 20 being used for the quantitative analysis. Findings indicating the Iranian EFL teachers' neutral-to-positive attitudes are thoroughly discussed in this paper. The paper also contains some information about the perceived benefits/challenges of inclusion, its pedagogical implications and recommendations for further research.

*Keywords:* Inclusion, EFL learners with disabilities, attitude, perception, inclusive class

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## Introduction

Rapid advances in this information era have dramatically transformed the world during the past decades and the basic requirements of education for the future have changed. In a similar vein, more individuals around the world than ever before are studying and learning English language due to its status as an international language of education and business. The role of English language teachers is more highlighted than ever before in supporting EFL learners to pursue their dreams of higher education or find an appropriate job in English-speaking environments worldwide. Students with disabilities, however, face some barriers in their education including "lack of role models and mentors, appropriate instruction, low expectations and lack of encouragement from influential adults" (Green, 2014, p. 1) and social isolation. On the other hand, there are poor teacher preparation programs for EFL teachers to be equipped in this regard.

Within the context of Iran, the majority of children with any sort of severe impairment are included in regular English classes at language institutes. Concerning the educational and economic policies in the language institutes, EFL teachers cannot refuse to accept the learners who have disabilities in their mainstream classes. This makes the field a rich one for research. Whilst there is an abundance of empirical research literature on special education (L'ecuyer, 2014; May & Stone, 2010; Skidmore, 1996; Lee & Recchia, 2016; to name a few), the corresponding body of empirical literature on inclusion in the EFL context is not at all as extensive. From another perspective, language learners with disabilities are not receiving as much attention as their normal peers in EFL educational settings. The English textbooks, materials, and teaching skills and techniques are not tailored to their individual needs and their disability mostly hinders the process of learning a language in these learners without anyone being concerned. Since teachers' positive attitudes are considered as the main determinants of success in implementing inclusive education and since there is no rich

literature on this issue in EFL contexts, this study aimed to bridge the gap and contribute to the relevant literature.

## **Literature Review**

The main orientation on which this study is established is that of the social constructivism. Social constructivism as a theoretical framework to support education for all students is primarily evolved from the works of Lev Vygotsky (1990). According to the social constructivism, human development is socially situated and knowledge is constructed through interaction with others. It has been the basis for the assumptions developed in the special education. Revealed in his earliest works, Vygotsky, as the leading figure of social constructivism, was fond of the psychology of children with disabilities and believed that "an understanding of how children with disabilities learn was an indispensable aspect of the general theory of human development" (Kozulin, 1990, p. 195). Social constructivism builds upon three main assumptions in terms of reality, learning, and knowledge. Theorists believe that reality is not preplanned and it is not to be discovered. Reality is constructed through human activities and members of the society are the ones who invent the properties of the world (Kukla, 2000). Given the great contribution of Vygotskian theories in teaching, it can be claimed that learning is embedded in social interaction and this further paves the way for the inclusion of learners with special needs. As Whitaker (2011) put forth, the range of skills mastered with the guidance and collaboration of adults and peers exceed what the child can develop individually.

Although the right to be included is widely accepted, Palot (2011) theoretically investigated the relationships between inclusion in education and social justice and claimed that numerous barriers exist against inclusion at national, community, and school levels. Likewise, L'ecuyer (2014) and May and Stone (2010) claimed that students with disabilities

may experience many academic difficulties including anxiety, nervousness, memory organization, prioritization, helplessness, frustration, reading/reading comprehension, spelling, writing, math/math computation, study skills, meeting deadlines, following directions, receptive and expressive oral language, additional time for reading and assignments, problems with interpersonal relationships, and tendency to devalue their own achievements. They also reported the same problems in foreign languages, social sciences, and humanities.

Over decades of research, the favorable outcomes of inclusion have been continuously confirmed for both learners with disabilities and teachers (Odom, et al., 1999; Layton & Lock, 2002; Sáenz, Fuchs & Fuchs, 2005; Shyyan, Thurlow & Liu, 2008). Recognition of positive effects of inclusion has led the research to define the necessary contexts, instructional practices, and curricular efforts which result in improved learner outcomes. Some of these studies are well-documented (Layton & Lock, 2002; Sáenz, Fuchs & Fuchs, 2005). In a study conducted by Ritter, Michael, and Irby (1999), it was claimed that middle-level students with mild disabilities in a general education classroom enjoyed increased self-confidence, fellowship, practitioners' support as well as higher expectations and self-esteem. Almost similarly, Salend (2008) enumerated improved attitudes towards others, improved academic skills, and greater recognition of social justice as the benefits of inclusive educational settings. Other benefits reported for inclusive education by other researchers are as follows:

- Greater fulfillment of academic and social goals and promoting positive attitudes through putting an everlasting emphasis on valuing individual differences (Alban-Metcalfe & Alban-Metcalfe, 2001);
- Better health, greater social interaction and development, normalized functioning and independence (Burnette, 1996);

- Reducing disabled special-need learners' fear of individual differences as well as improvements in self-concept and personal principles, and increased self-awareness, comfort, and caring attitudes towards others (Lipsky & Gartner, 1997);
- Increased acceptance and appreciation of diversity, better development in moral and ethical principles as well as increased self-esteem (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1997).

In spite of attempts made to promote inclusive education, situations generating inequality have still remained. To achieve a just and fair inclusion education, the factors impeding equality in education should be unfolded in order for the benefits of inclusion to be communicated. On the other hand, to gain valuable insights into inclusive classroom dynamics and practice, the attitudes of those involved in this dynamic system; namely, the teachers, has been extensively researched over the recent years. Reviewing the literature in this area, it was found that the need for professional development of teachers to encourage positive attitudes and efficacy towards inclusion has been highlighted (for example Barnett & Monda-Amaya, 1998; Cornoldi, Terreni, & Scruggs, 1998; Avramidis, Bayliss, & Burden, 2000; Praisner, 2003; Kalyva & Avramidis, 2007; Kosko & Wilkins, 2009; Whitaker, 2011; Schmidt & Ksenija, 2015; to name a few). According to Gourneau (2005), "effective attitudes and actions employed by teachers ultimately can make a positive difference on the lives of their students" (P. 1). Teachers' attitudes influence what and what does not occur in their classroom.

As Stewart (2001) pointed, teachers' abilities to meet the needs of students with disabilities are reflected in their attitudes towards inclusive education. Teachers who draw positive attitudes towards their profession, classes, and learners can promote educational achievement in their classroom, establish STRONG TEACHER-STUDENT rapport, and encourage learning. Evidently, such teachers are more knowledgeable, receive more training,

and have a history of working with learners with special needs. Previous studies have accentuated the role of some factor including training (Avramidis et al., 2000), intensive in-service training (Larrivee, 1981), personal or professional experience of working with disabled learners (Minke, Bear, Deemer & Griffin, 1996; Chowdhury, 2015), child-related variables and environment-related variables, such as the availability of physical and human support (Avramidis & Norwich 2002), higher levels of education (Praisner, 2003), support (Cagran & Schmidt, 2011), types of disability (De Boer, Pijl, & Minnaert, 2011), age in favor of younger teachers (Behpazoooh & Torabi, 2008), and gender in favor of female in promoting positive attitudes and adopting adjusted practices toward the inclusion of special need learners. In order for inclusive education programs to be implemented, in-service and professional teacher training courses are thus necessary to improve their attitudes and enhance regular teachers' awareness.

In Iran, Behpajoooh and Torabi (2008) compared special and regular teachers' attitudes toward the inclusion of visually impaired students in regular classrooms. They used a researcher-made questionnaire to collect data from 148 teachers (74 special teachers and 74 regular teachers). In their study, they considered the variables including social contact, gender, age, passing in-service teacher training courses (TTC), grade level of teaching, awareness about blindness etiology, level of education, experience of teaching, and attitude scores. They found out that special teachers hold significantly more positive attitudes towards placing visually-impaired learners in inclusive classrooms. Furthermore, they claimed that teachers would hold more positive attitudes towards inclusiveness if they had higher level of social contact with such learners, were more informed, passed prolonged periods of in-service TTC, and were more educated and younger.

On the contrary, Behpazhooh, Kakabraei, Shokouhi Yekta, and Lavasani (2008) in another study examining special and regular teachers' attitudes toward the inclusion of

hearing-impaired students in mainstream classes found that there was a significant difference between these teachers in terms of attitudes held toward inclusive education programs. Furthermore, variables such as gender, age, education, teaching experience, grade level of teaching, employment status and the number of hearing-loss students present in their classes did not predict teachers' attitudes variation. In general, they put forth that regular teachers have negative attitudes towards inclusion. Therefore, in order for such programs to be implemented, in-service teacher training courses are necessary to modify their attitude and enhance regular teachers' awareness.

According to Sadeghi and Richards (2016), English at the time of Islamic revolution was given the official status of 'alien' language and was known as a foreign language, indicating the Iranian's attitudes towards the language spoken by their enemies, especially America. As they added, Imam Khomeini's (PBUH), Iran's late leader, emphasis on the need to learn this international foreign language changed the status of English and it was viewed differently. Since then, English has been featured prominently in school curriculums and even so in the private education sector.

Regarding the private education sector, different language institutes are providing a variety of learning services for EFL learners in order for them to develop their practical skills. English institutes vary in size, ranging from the ones with 30 students to those with more than three thousands (with the highest frequency of enrollment being related to summer semesters). Some language institutes offer localized textbooks; however, others use non localized textbooks such as Headway, Interchange, Four Corners, Top Notch, etc. In terms of instructors at these institutes, they are undergraduates or graduates majored in English or non-English fields.

Although the number of studies exploring teachers' perception towards inclusion of learners with disabilities is increasing, the studies have mostly focused on general educators at

primary and secondary levels and, a few cases on university teachers. To the best knowledge of the researcher, no study has been conducted in Iran or others countries exploring EFL/ESL teachers' attitudes towards the inclusion of learners with disabilities. This forgotten field of study requires urgent attention due to growing number of learners with difficulties in mainstream classes.

## **Methodology**

### **Participants**

In this study, 254 Iranian male (44.88%, n=114) and female (55.12%, n=140) EFL teachers from different language institutes located in different cities of Iran (namely Arak, Tehran, Mashhad, Neyshabour, Shiraz, Isfahan, Shar-e-Kord, Hamedan, Kerman, Birjand, Ahvaz, and Yazd) were surveyed. The participants who were teaching elementary levels received no specific training about inclusion and inclusive education. The mean age of teaching experience was equal to 9.8 years for the teacher participants. Of these teachers, 169 were holding postgraduate degrees (115 MA holders and 54 BA holders), 30 aged below 25 years, 197 aged 25-45 years, and 27 teachers aged above 45 years. Ninety teachers (35.4%) had experienced working with special-need EFL learners in their inclusive classes and 64.6% of participants had not experienced teaching inclusive classes (Table 1). The respondents were also asked to approximate the number of special-need students enrolled in their classrooms throughout their careers. They totally reported teaching about 200 learners with disabilities.

Table 1

*Iranian EFL Teachers' Demographics*

Variable		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Gender	Female	140	55.1	55.1	55.1
	Male	114	44.9	44.9	100.0
	Total	254	100.0	100.0	
Previous inclusive experience	Yes	90	35.4	35.4	35.4
	No	164	64.6	64.6	100.0
	Total	254	100.0	100.0	
Level of education	Postgraduate	169	66.5	66.5	66.5
	Undergraduate	85	33.5	33.5	100.0
	Total	254	100.0	100.0	
Age range	Below 25	30	11.8	11.8	11.8
	25-45	197	77.6	77.6	89.4
	Above 45	27	10.6	10.6	100.0
	Total	254	100.0	100.0	

In order to further delve into EFL teachers' practices and attitudes used for learners with special needs, 30 EFL teachers who had experienced teaching learners with physical disabilities were also selected randomly and interviewed. Since teachers may forget their teaching methodologies used for learners with disabilities in the long run and with regard to the retrospective nature of the interview questions, an inclusion criterion set for these teachers was teaching physically disabled learners within the last six months. The demographics of these 30 interviewees are also tabulated below (Table 2).

Table 2

*Demographics of Interviewed EFL Teachers Teaching Learners with Physical Disabilities*

	N	Male	Female	Mean years of experience	Level of Education		Age (Years)		
					Undergraduate	Postgraduate	<25	25-45	>45
EFL Teachers	30	15	15	12.3	12	18	5	19	6

As it can be seen in Table 3.5, thirty randomly-selected teachers (15 male and 15 female) who had experienced teaching students with physical disabilities were interviewed, among whom there were five teachers aged below 25 years, 19 teachers of 25-45 years, and six teachers aged above 45 years. In order for the sample to be representative of Iranian EFL teachers, the participants were randomly selected from four metropolitan cities (10 teachers from Arak, 5 teachers from Mashhad, 10 teachers from Tehran, and 5 teachers from Shiraz) since individuals from different rural and urban areas have migrated these cities, especially Tehran.

### **Instruments**

1) *ORI Scale*: The Opinion Relative to Integration of Students with Disabilities Scale was developed in 1995 by Antonak and Larrivee, (Appendix B). It is the revised version of the Opinions Relative to Mainstreaming (ORM) scale. It is a 25-item survey instrument routinely used by researchers to examine teachers' attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs toward the practice of inclusion (Jobe, Rust, & Brissie, 1996; Leyser & Tappendorf, 1999; Dupoux, Wolman, & Estrada, 2005; Dedrick, Marfo, & Harris, 2007; & Jung, 2007; to name a few). The questionnaire consists of three sections. First section contains items on the respondents' demographic information including age, gender, English certificates, teaching experience, level of education, experience about teaching students with disabilities in an inclusive setting, and special training courses. Demographic information was collected to present a description of participants. In the second section, teachers' attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs towards inclusion are evaluated based on 4 major areas:

1. Benefits of Inclusion (Items 3, 7, 11, 14, 17, 20, 21, 24)
2. Inclusive Classroom Management (Items 1, 4, 6, 9, 12, 15, 16, 18, 22, 25)
3. Perceived Ability to Teach Students with Disabilities (Items 2, 10, 19)

#### 4. Special Education Versus Inclusive General Education (Items 5, 8, 13, 23)

The ORI asks participants to express their agreement with each statement on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from “I disagree very much” to “I agree very much”. The possible responses were as follows: I disagree very much, I disagree pretty much, I disagree a little, I agree a little, I agree pretty much, or I agree very much.

This questionnaire contains 25 items, twelve items of which are negatively worded (i.e., disagree responses represented a favorable attitude). To score the responses and to prevent an acquiescent-response-style threat, the 12 items which were negatively worded were first positively scored by reversing the sign of these items. Then, the 25 item responses were summed and a constant of 75 was added to the total to eliminate negative scores (since there are 25 items and if each item is scored -3, then the sum will be -75). The maximum and minimum scores obtained for the scale are 0 and 150, respectively. The higher the scores in these aspects are, the more favorable the perceptions and attitudes are towards the inclusion of learners with physical disabilities in classroom. Furthermore, the questionnaires with omitted responses to 4 or more items were omitted and were not scored.

In the third section, in order to let the EFL teachers expand or clarify their responses with regard to EFL learners with physical disabilities and to add the points not addressed the second section, two open-ended items considering the greatest benefits and challenges of inclusion were also included in the questionnaire:

1. Please list what you consider to be the greatest benefits of including EFL learners with physical disabilities in English classes:
2. Please list what you consider to be the greatest challenges of including physical EFL learners with disabilities in English classes:

In the current study, the reliability of the questionnaire was calculated to be 0.78 using a split-half reliability estimate determined by the Spearman-Brown's reliability coefficient.

The face and content validity of the questionnaire was assessed by means of expert panel evaluation. The experts were selected based on their knowledge and familiarity with the subject under discussion. They were six university professors who were currently working in an inclusive setting. They confirmed the validity of the scale in terms of wording, appearance, clarity, and content appropriateness. To this end, they were presented with the full domain of the relevant content and commented on each individual item (I-CVI) and scale (S-CVI). They reviewed the items and scored them based on the relevance using a 4-point Likert scale (1=Irrelevant, 2=Slightly relevant, 3= Relevant, and 4=Strongly relevant). Then the number of experts scoring 1 or 2 (as irrelevant) and those scoring 3 or 4 (as relevant) were counted and proportions were calculated. Accordingly, the mean I-CVI and mean S-CVI were calculated to be 0.94 and 0.93, respectively. This guaranteed that the scale would measure what it is supposed to measure in the concerned context.

The mean ORI score for a pilot sample consisting of 50 EFL teachers was .79 with a standard deviation equal to 1.23. The value of Cronbach's coefficient was 0.92. Factor analysis were then performed to ensure the internal consistency of the 4-factor scale. The items were correctly loaded and no item was removed. Regarding the first factor *Benefits of Inclusion*, it counted for 4% of variance was loaded and all relevant items (No. 3, 7, 11, 14, 17, 20, 21, 24) were loaded positively. The computed internal consistency for this factor was 0.87. *Inclusive Classroom Management* was the second factor explaining 3% of variance and all items (No. 1, 4, 6, 9, 12, 15, 16, 18, 22, 25) loaded positively with factor loading values ranged from 0.60 to 0.65 and mean loading of 0.63. The internal consistency estimated for this factor was 0.86. The third factor *Perceived Ability to Teach Students with Disabilities* (Items 2, 10, 19) with an estimated internal consistency of 0.80 and fourth factor *Special Education Versus Inclusive General Education* (Items 5, 8, 13, 23) with an estimated internal consistency of 0.83 also loaded positively.

2) *Interviews*: In addition to the above questionnaire, there were semi-structured researcher-developed interviews to further delve into what this study was sought to achieve. Simon (2011) also claims that reliability as well as the efficiency, trustworthiness and representativeness of the collected data can be guaranteed by validation. In this regard, content validity is a concept reflecting the extent of relevance and representativeness (Lund Research Ltd, 2012) and is to confirm the significance of new instruments employed in research. In this multiple case study, interview questions were considered as an instrument to be used for data collection. Interview questions must be validated if they are to be considered credible and accepted into research. To this end, Simon's Survey/Interview Validation Rubric for Export Panel (VREP) was adopted.

As Simon explains, the VREP is designed to measure face validity, construct validity and content validity. The validation criteria concerned in this rubric are clarity, balance, wordiness, use of technical language, negative wording and others. Operational definition of these terms are also presented in order to facilitate the use of this rubric. For example, interview questions should not have addressed more than one topic. The wording and language of questions should be appropriate, with no ambiguous or confusing words being included. Hence, the interview questions were first pilot tested by interviewing five randomly selected teachers. Main themes were extracted and submitted to three PhD experts. With regard to the experts' comments, the most valuable interview questions addressing the main concerns of the research were kept. These questions were deemed to be sufficient and relevant to the topic of the study and to offer the participants a wide range in order to enable them verbally describe their experience. The preciseness of the questions to achieve the study objectives was also confirmed. To let the interviewees feel comfortable, the researcher showed them the interview questions and gave them a few minutes to review and reflect on the questions before deciding to participate in the interview. To empower them professionally,

they were then explained that they could choose not to answer the questions on their willingness. When the participants spontaneously described all that could be mentioned, the interviewer posed one or more follow-up questions (e.g., Taking the points you mentioned into account, can you elaborate more on such and such?). The follow-up questions as an interviewing technique were intended to let the interviewees elaborate more on the aspects of the account which was not fully presented.

### **Procedures**

In the quantitative part of the study, 400 male and female EFL teachers were asked to respond the ORI Questionnaire, of which 254 questionnaires were included in the study since the questionnaires containing more than 4 unanswered questions were excluded from the study. In order to further delve into EFL teachers' attitudes towards learners with disabilities, 30 EFL teachers who had experienced teaching learners with physical disabilities were selected and interviewed. Since teachers may forget their teaching methodologies used for learners with disabilities in a long term and with regard to the retrospective nature of the interview questions, one inclusion criterion set for these teachers was teaching disabled learners within the last six months. The interviewer initiated with some warm-up statements like greeting and some questions on the interviewees' demographic specifications. Interviews were conducted by the researcher and lasted about 25 minutes with each being audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim. Then the collected data went through the data analysis process.

### **Data analysis**

To find an answer to the research questions, the survey data was descriptively and inferentially analyzed. Univariate analyses of the survey data, including frequency distributions, percentages, measures of central tendency, and standard deviations were

employed to examine the distribution and the strength of participants' (dis)agreement with the items. In addition, after confirming the observation of the assumptions 'independence of observation' and 'normal distribution', one-sample t-test run in the SPSS Software version 20 to find out whether or not the findings are generalizable to the research population. Finally, the qualitative data obtained from interviews and was coded and analyzed based on axial and open coding methods by the researcher and two of her colleagues who were PhD candidates of TEFL.

The numerical data for the current study came from surveys conducted among 254 EFL teachers to explore EFL teachers' inclusion attitudes and perceptions. The qualitative data of this study were obtained from interviews to further elaborate on EFL teachers' attitudes. To understand what attitudes and perceptions EFL instructors hold towards the inclusion of learners with disabilities in inclusive English language classes, the ORI scale score was calculated for 254 EFL teachers. For this purpose, the 12 negatively worded items (namely 2, 4, 6, 8, 9, 11, 12, 14, 18, 20, 23, and 24) were first recoded into different variables and their scoring scale was reversed. Then a constant of 75 was added to the sum of the scores. As it is shown in Table below, the minimum and maximum scores for 254 EFL teachers were 46 and 128, with a mean value of 81.25 and standard deviation of 14.09.

Table 4.1

*Descriptive Statistics of ORI Scores for EFL Iranian Teachers' Perception and Attitudes Towards Inclusion of Learners with Physical Disabilities*

	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
Total	254	82.00	46.00	128.00	81.2559	14.09515	198.673
Valid N (listwise)	254						

Then the one-directional hypothesis indicating that the EFL teachers hold positive attitudes and perceptions towards inclusion of learners with disabilities in mainstream classes was tested. To this end, one-sample t-test with a test value of 75 was run and an examination of the data using One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test revealed no violation of the normality assumption.

Table 4.2

*One-Sample T-Test Comparing The Total Mean Score of ORI Scale with Test Value*

Test Value = 75						
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Total	7.074	253	.000	6.25591	4.5142	7.9976

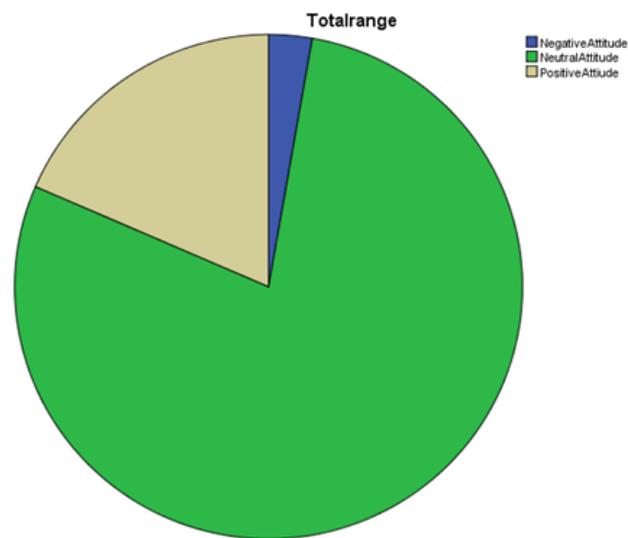
As shown in Table 4.2 the mean score of the ORI scale for the sample participants ( $X=81.25$ ,  $sd=14.09$ ) is significantly greater than the test value of 75 ( $p=0.000$ ). Hence, this hypothesis is accepted and suggested that the Iranian EFL teachers hold neutral-to-positive attitudes and perceptions towards the inclusion of physically impaired language learners in their classes.

In the next step, to make the interpretation of ‘neutral-to-positive attitudes’ more tangible and show the proximity of the teachers’ attitude and perceptions to the positive or neutral directions, the total scores were recoded into another different variable once more. In this case, the scores were classified based on three ranges of negative (0-50), positive (51-100), and neutral attitudes (101-150). The results of score ranges are shown in Table 4.3 and Figure 4.1.

Table 4.3

*Total Range of ORI Scores for EFL Teachers' Perception And Attitudes Towards Inclusion of Learners With Physical Disabilities*

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Negative Attitude	7	2.8	2.8
	Neutral Attitude	200	78.7	81.5
	Positive Attitude	47	18.5	100.0
	Total	254	100.0	100.0



**Figure 4.1.** Total range of ORI scores for EFL teachers' perception and attitudes towards inclusion of learners with physical disabilities

According to the table, the frequencies of the negative, neutral and positive attitudes were 7, 200, and 47, respectively. Figure 4.1 also confirms that EFL teachers' neutral-to-positive attitudes and perceptions are mostly inclined towards the neutral side and that a minority of EFL teachers have negative attitudes towards the inclusion of learners with disabilities.

In a similar vein, the interviews revealed that EFL teachers were not fully satisfied with inclusion of disabled learners in their inclusive classrooms and found the class management difficult and in some cases impossible. A large number of EFL teachers conceded on social and emotional benefits and challenges of integration for disabled and abled peers and assumed that group interactions would enhance accepting individual differences in classrooms, though, an approximately equal proportion of teachers disagreed. Some EFL teachers asserted some additional benefits of inclusion as follows, though, the benefits were not approved by all teachers:

### ***I. Communication and life skills***

Teachers claimed that the presence of special-need learners promotes disabled and non-disabled EFL learners' communication skills. When a disabled learner is present in English language classes, other students help him/her in accomplishing the challenging task of learning a foreign language. This leads to improved communication and interaction among disabled and non-disabled peers through getting the disabled learners involved in group discussions, adding them to social networks like Telegram to provide them with further resources and assistance, assigning tasks and sharing responsibilities for non-disabled learners by themselves to assist these learners in learning (e.g. each individual's being responsible for audio recording a lesson to help a visually-impaired classmate) and so on. On the other hand, disabled learners get used to interaction and communication. As EFL teachers claimed, they no longer feel alone after a while. Here is a sample statement remarked by the EFL Teacher No. 15:

**Example 1:** *I'm not saying that they should not be included. For example, when a visually-impaired learner attends a class and keeps up with others, his classmates cooperate with him.*

*That's even interesting for them to play a supporting role. For example, I had a blind student and our top student sitting close to him was always helping the blind.*

## ***II. Non-disabled EFL learners' academic growth***

Some teachers believed that academic growth of non-disabled learners is visible in cases when they make efforts to help their disabled peers through using some techniques such as discussions, recording files, providing explanations on some points, making notes, or repeating statements made by teachers or tapes. Teachers believed that adaptation of these techniques by non-disabled learners doubles their attention and concentration, and consequently their academic achievements. Here is a sample statement:

**Example 2:** *When recording the texts for their blind peers, my students' reading skills and speech intonation significantly improved over a semester. I think his inclusion was not without benefits.*

## ***III. Enhanced motivation and life expectancy***

One more benefit counted by teachers in favor of inclusion was that the special-need learners' motivation and life expectancy improved. EFL teachers' statements presented below are self-evident:

**Example 3:** *Learning a language may be of no use for such learners but to motivate them.*

**Example 4:** *I think it really depends on the instructor to convey the EFL learner the feeling that you are a normal person in the community. I do the same, I convey this feeling that you are a normal person, nothing is going to happen. Even though language is not a critical skill for people of your condition, you are here, sitting and learning a language. This enhances life expectancy for those who may never be treatable.*

#### ***IV. Conveying a sense of effectiveness to teachers***

In inclusive classes, EFL teachers may find themselves effective in changing one person's life positively and bringing him hope. One of the interviewees expressed his feeling in the following narration.

**Example 5:** *Teaching this blind student was one of my greatest experiences during many years of teaching. .... He told me that he had never experienced a score above 5 in school English courses. Fascinating...I loved my class. Yes, THIS IS ME. I am a good teacher. I can make many changes in this world, in the world of a boy, a blind boy.*

#### ***V. Enhanced teaching knowledge***

EFL teachers also indicated that inclusion provided them with an opportunity to learn about diverse learning needs and to evaluate their current practices and consequently to improve their teaching knowledge in order to meet these needs. An interviewee indicated:

**Example 6:** *His presence in my class made me aware of different abilities. He made me take all learners' needs and abilities into account while preparing lesson plans....sometimes I had to search for new ways of teaching, new strategies, new techniques.*

#### ***VI. Nurturing good behaviors***

Inclusion of EFL learners in English language classes is nurturing favored behaviors like patience, tolerance, generosity, empathy, respect, and so on for teachers, disabled learners and non-disabled learners. Inclusive classes convey a sense of cooperation. Individuals' strengths are valued in inclusive classes. The EFL teachers' statements can best represent the points:

**Example 7.** *We always tell ourselves that yes, that's true, but it's okay. It's no matter how this particular learner handles learning a foreign language or fails accomplishing it or*

*whatever... He still should be respected and considered as a person... I think this makes us all better people.*

Teachers who did not support the benefits of inclusion also raised the following concerns. One challenge posed in the inclusive EFL classes is lack of appropriate social skills. Stigmatization is one of the consequences of inappropriate social skills. Learners of special needs included in regular classes fail to properly communicate with their peers due to lack of willingness shown by both parties. This fact is represented in following statements of EFL teachers:

**Example 8:** *In our country, I think, language learners are not good at establishing social relations. They fail to communicate with each other.*

This is the case not only for the disabled learners but also for their non-disabled peers:

**Example 9:** *... I myself observed in my institute a disabled learner having no friends after 6 terms coming there. I think there was no sense of belonging...*

However, types of disability may also have some impacts on the presence of students in inclusive classes and impose a sense of discrimination. Mental retardation and learning difficulties force teachers view inclusion with some apprehension.

**Example 10:** *Here in our country, a blind person is worth more than someone who suffers from mental retardation... He is more respected... There is even disability discrimination... Other students make fun of them so they cannot benefit from inclusion... NO.*

One more challenge, as remarked in the above statements, is that inclusive classes are stressful and make disabled learners stressed-out.

**Example 11.** *I had also a student competent in English language. His only problem was his vision. He was always stress out because of his problem...He had to take the book close to his eyes to be able to read. I was hard so he used to read texts prior to the class and there was no*

*need to read a text in class. He minimized reading inside the class and was always sitting in the first row.*

According to interviews and open questions included in the questionnaire, EFL teachers in inclusive English language classes revealed low level of self-confidence concerning the required teaching skills to work with learners having special needs. As they stated:

**Example 12.** *There might be some ways to solve the issue. I think that was beyond me. It never happened to me before to uselessly spend my energy for a student. Perhaps, my teaching method was a problem. Sure, it was. I mean I was not ready to teach these students. When I met him in the first, second and third sessions, I failed to teach him appropriately from the fourth session on. He was like a small kid trying to say something and you let him utter them while not valuing his speech. That was me.*

A feeling of stress and confusion was also experienced by teachers in some rare cases. For example, an EFL teacher narrated that one of his worst ever teaching experiences was observing a scene that one her students' sudden falling from a standing position, having a sudden rapid shaking in arms and hands. She said that she was panic and confused since she did not know what was happening. Her colleagues who were afraid of her other student' yelling and crying ran to her class and called an emergency ambulance. Later on, her parents told the teacher about a disease called epilepsy. Furthermore, this teacher and some others also added that one of common problems of inclusive classes is posed by parents having children suffering from any type of disabilities. A majority of these parents try to deny and hide their children's difficulties and do not make teachers aware of their difficulties since they would rather not represent their children as disabled or as an exception. In addition, learners feel nervous and are also unwilling to disclose some personal information including their health status to an instructor. The challenges exposed to the teacher, then, are to diagnose the

type of disability as well as their symptoms. In some cases, teachers are also required to have medical information, as they asserted.

### **Discussion**

Based on a broad consensus, the most critical component affecting the successful implementation of inclusion is teacher attitudes and perceptions towards inclusion. Different investigations have been carried out in this regard and some relevant factors have been introduced. This study further contributes to the accumulation of knowledge unpacking the complicated pattern of EFL teachers' perception and attitudes as well as their concerns in order to promote positive attitudes towards the inclusion of learners suffering from disabilities, especially physical disabilities.

This study examined EFL teachers' attitudes and perception and found that EFL teachers in Iran's language institutes hold neutral-to-positive attitudes and perceptions towards the inclusion of special-need learners in their English language classes. In other words, some teachers neutrally viewed inclusion and some others reported it positively, though, a large proportion of these teachers were more inclined toward the neutral side. These inconsistencies are in line with voluminous studies suggesting that teachers are typically positive towards integration of disabled learners (Avramidis, Bayliss, & Burden, 2000; Kuester, 2000) and other studies reporting negative attitudes of teachers (e.g. Buljevac et al., 2012).

Teachers positively reported some benefits for the inclusion of disabled learners in English language classes. The greatest benefits were the promoted understanding of individual differences through group interaction, social and emotional development, promoted communication and social life skills, enhanced motivation and life expectancy, improved teaching knowledge, conveyed sense of effectiveness for teachers, and nurtured good

behavior among those involved. Interestingly, EFL teachers did not perceive academic growth to be achieved for the disabled learners in inclusive English language classes; however, they reported the academic growth for non-disabled EFL learners as one of the greatest benefits of such an integration.

Furthermore, negative or even neutral perceptions were rooted in EFL teachers' low level of self-confidence in inclusive classes, lack of appropriate social skills and disability discrimination as well as a feeling of stress and confusion conveyed to teachers and disabled learners and teachers' little awareness of disabilities. Similarly, Sigafos and Elkonis (1994) concluded that lack of confidence for the mainstream teachers teaching inclusive classes. The view was also supported by Avramidis et al. (2000) and Briggs et al. (2002). EFL teachers echoed the necessity of extensive retraining for teachers with regard to their insufficient ability to teach disabled EFL learners, as they themselves claimed.

The findings of the current study are consistent with previous research indicating that the inclusion of special need learners is accompanied with educational discrimination and teachers' lack of confidence in their competence (Buljevac et al., 2012). The findings confirm the claim by Reis, McGuire, and Neu (2000) who reported different strategies used by disabled learners in their efforts to overcome their disability. Hartman-Hall and Haaga (2002) explained the adverse effects of negative stereotypes and stigmatization on the special-need learners' success, internal stress, and social/emotional issues. Many researchers including Avramidis, Bayliss and Burden (2000), Barnett and Monda-Amaya (1998), Kalyva and Avramidis (2007), Praisner (2003), Schmidt and Ksenija (2015), and Whitaker (2011) necessitated professional development of teachers to promote positive attitudes towards inclusion. The same can also be highlighted for the EFL teachers, particularly Iranian EFL teachers. In their own perspectives, they are not equipped with sufficient knowledge and skills to teach language to learners with special needs. Their lack of ability is mirrored in their

attitudes and their lack of confidence in terms of teaching disabled learners is associated with their controversial attitudes (Avramidis, Bayliss, & Burden, 2000).

The finding of this study revealed academic growth as one of the benefits of inclusion for non-disabled learners. On the contrary, Dixon (1999) found no visible influence of inclusion on learning opportunities for general education students. The difference can be attributed to the nature of the course content in the present study, i.e. English language, which requires different learning strategies and teaching practices. Furthermore, this inconsistency may also originate from the difference between perspectives expressed by teachers and those expressed by a researcher. According to the findings obtained in this study, some actions such as extra training are required to reach a fruitful integration of EFL learners with difficulties in English language institutes.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

The findings of this study documented EFL teachers' neutral-to-positive attitudes towards the inclusion of learners with special needs. From the results of the present study, it can be specifically concluded that Iranian EFL teachers indeed hold neutral attitudes towards inclusion and that they have the potentials to make the inclusion work.

Despite the above conclusions which imply the critical role of support in inclusive EFL classes, it should be born in mind that it might work through different pedagogical, social, affective, and cognitive approaches since the factors which have the greatest impact on this variable stem from different aspects. Although the findings of the current study cannot be definitely generalizable to all situations, it seems that at least more attention should be paid to the influence of the aforementioned variables on successful implementation of inclusive EFL teaching, and if possible, more and more research should be conducted in this area to come up with more definite results.

The findings can assist pre-service and in-service teacher educators as well as decision-makers and authorities in the field of inclusive language education with the development of effective and relevant programs. The findings of this study would also serve as a research forum for a diverse group of EFL educators and practitioners. The study of EFL teachers' perceptions and attitudes in inclusive classes was of importance since it not only addressed the paucity of research on inclusive English language education but also considered the challenges of EFL learners with special needs. The participants of the present study were limited to the Iranian EFL teachers. Further confirmatory studies could incorporate a larger variety of teachers. The present study focused on the Iran's EFL setting. Exploratory studies are suggested to the finding of this study with the studies carried out in other ESL settings to gain deeper insight into how teachers may influence the social and pedagogical achievements of disabled learners and those of non-disabled learners attending inclusive classes.

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