Educational policy: Inclusive Pedagogy and Disability in initial Teacher Training for English as a Foreign Language.

Política educativa: Pedagogía Inclusiva y Discapacidad en la Formación Inicial de Profesores de Inglés como Lengua Extranjera

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Resumen

El ámbito de la enseñanza del inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL, por sus siglas en inglés) está creciendo rápidamente, reflejando la demanda global de competencia en inglés. Con este crecimiento surge un énfasis creciente en la inclusividad en la educación, particularmente en relación con las discapacidades de los estudiantes. Este artículo explora cómo se abordan la discapacidad y la pedagogía inclusiva en los programas de formación inicial de los profesores (ITT, por su sigla en inglés) para docentes de EFL, con un enfoque particular del contexto colombiano. Destaca las brechas y oportunidades de mejora en la formación de docentes. Los hallazgos de una síntesis de evidencia sistemática revelan que muchos programas ITT carecen de cánones comprensivos sobre educación inclusiva, dejando a los nuevos docentes poco preparados para abordar las diversas necesidades de sus estudiantes. El artículo discute la importancia de mejorar las políticas y programas ITT y preparar mejor a los futuros docentes para la educación inclusiva.

Palabras clave:

Pedagogía inclusiva, inglés como lengua extranjera, política educativa, sensibilidad cultural, discapacidad.

Abstract

The domain of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Teaching is expanding rapidly, reflecting the global demand for English proficiency. With this growth, there is an increasing emphasis on inclusivity in education, particularly regarding students' disabilities. This article explores how disability and inclusive pedagogy are addressed in initial teacher training (ITT) programs for EFL teachers, with a particular focus on the Colombian context. It highlights the gaps and opportunities for improvement in teacher education. The findings from a systematic evidence synthesis reveal that ITT programs lack comprehensive modules on inclusive education, leaving new teachers underprepared to address the varied needs of students. The article discusses the importance of integrating inclusive practices into EFL classrooms and provides recommendations for enhancing ITT policies and programs to better prepare EFL pre-service teachers for inclusive education.

Keywords:

Inclusive Pedagogy, English as a Foreign Language, Educational policy, Cultural responsiveness, Disability



Introduction

The teaching of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) has seen significant growth globally, driven by the increasing demand for English proficiency nowadays. As the field expands, there is a growing recognition of the need for inclusive education practices that bear in mind all learners, including those with disabilities and culturally diverse. Inclusive pedagogy, which concerns adapting teaching methods and learning materials to converge the needs and expectations of diverse members in the educational environment. In a few words, it is crucial to guarantee equality in these equitable educational opportunities in different social contexts.

In the context of English Language Teaching (ELT) and EFL policies, inclusive pedagogy means modifying traditional teaching approaches to create a learning environment that supports all students, regardless of their physical, sensory, cognitive, or emotional conditions, as well as, cultural diversity (Rodriguez et al.). This article examines how inclusive pedagogy is incorporated into initial teacher training (ITT) programs for EFL teachers, with a specific focus on Colombia. As a result of the growing attention to development of understanding inclusion and the challenges it brings, obstacles remain in effectively training teachers to have the competencies to support the learning processes of students with diverse abilities within the same classroom (Rueda et al., 2023).

The need for inclusive EFL teaching is particularly marked in Colombia, where efforts to promote bilingualism are met with significant social gaps. Many teacher training programs in the country still lack comprehensive modules on inclusive education, leading the gap between policy and practice. This gap leaves new teachers underprepared to focus the diverse needs of their students, highlighting the urgent need for enhanced training and resources.

This article addresses the gap by synthesizing systematic evidence on diverse and inclusive pedagogy within EFL ITT programs. It explores the current state of inclusive pedagogy in Colombia, identifies the barriers to effective implementation, and offers recommendations for improving ITT programs to equip future EFL teachers with contextualized tools for inclusive education. The challenge goes beyond the cliché of teaching limited tools for an unlimited world, moving past rigid dogmatic consistency towards more flexible, mutable, and adaptive ecosystems tailored to learners. This development transcends tools as mere ends, recognizing them as skills for lifelong learning. By addressing these issues, the article contributes to the broader goal of creating equitable and inclusive learning environments for students in EFL education.

Understanding Inclusive Pedagogy

Inclusive Pedagogy refers to teaching strategies that are adaptable to diverse students, ensuring that students with varied abilities have equitable educational opportunities. In the context of EFL, this involves creating flexible teaching methods and educational materials that meet the needs of different educational stakeholders, recognizing those with diverse physical abilities and unconditionally validating their worth.

This land is grounded in the imperative that education must be accessible to all students regardless of their individual differences. This approach promotes the use of varied instructional strategies to support the diverse learning needs of students. According to Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) "Inclusive pedagogy is not about differentiating the same content for different learners but rather creating learning opportunities that are sufficiently made available to all children so that all are able to participate in classroom life" (p. 815).

In the EFL context, inclusive pedagogy involves structurally adapting teaching methods and materials to ensure all students can engage effectively with language learning (Barón, 2017). This may include

visual mediation, assistive technologies, differentiated instruction, and flexible grouping based on interoperability protocols that facilitate communication and expanded learning (Román, Alarcón, y Rodriguez, 2023).

The simultaneous and interdependent use of technological mediations, visual aids, artificial intelligence, and educational robotics enables differentiated instruction and flexible grouping. In line with this, it is important to acknowledge Tomlinso's (2024) distinction on the concept of differentiating instruction "Differentiation is simply attending to the learning needs of a particular student or small group of students rather than assuming all students of a given age or grade are essentially alike" (p. 2).

Considering the physical and sensory disabilities, inclusive pedagogy might involve ensuring that classrooms are physically accessible and that materials are available in formats that accommodate their needs. For students with sensory disabilities, such as hearing or vision impairments, teachers might use visual aids, sign language, braille, or auditory materials to facilitate learning. As stated by Loreman et al. (2010), "Teachers must be equipped with strategies to modify the learning environment and provide accommodations that ensure full participation for students with physical and sensory disabilities" (p. 75). On the other hand, students with cognitive disabilities may require additional support, such as simplified instructions, additional time for tasks, and the use of scaffolding techniques to build their understanding. For students with emotional or behavioral disabilities, inclusive pedagogy can involve creating a supportive and predictable classroom environment that reduces anxiety and promotes positive behavior. As noted by Smith et al. (2008), "Effective inclusive education for students with cognitive and emotional disabilities requires a multifaceted approach that includes academic, social, and emotional support" (p. 112).

A study by Correa and Wagner (2011) found that "many teacher training programs in Colombia still lack comprehensive modules on inclusive education, leaving new teachers underprepared to address the diverse needs of their students" (p.205). In Colombia, the integration of inclusive pedagogy in EFL ITT programs is gaining attention. However, challenges remain in ensuring that teacher training adequately prepares educators for inclusive classrooms. This highlights the need for enhanced training and resources to support inclusive practices in EFL education.

The Need for inclusive EFL Teaching

EFL classrooms are often diverse, with students from various linguistic, cultural, and educational backgrounds. Including students with disabilities in this mix requires teachers to be well-prepared to oversee a wide range of learning needs. This preparation begins with ITT programs, which perform a crucial role in preparing future teachers with the knowledge and skills required for inclusive education.

There is no doubt that EFL classrooms are naturally diverse environments. They bring together students from different linguistic, cultural, and educational backgrounds, which enriches the learning experiences but also presents unique challenges. When students with disabilities are included in this combination, the need for inclusive teaching practices becomes even more critical. According to Florian and Linklater (2010) "Inclusive education is about responding positively to pupil diversity and seeing individual differences not as a problem to be fixed, but as opportunities for enriching learning" (p. 370).

To effectively teach in diverse and inclusive EFL classrooms; teachers need specific strategies and approaches:

1. Differentiated instruction: Adapting lessons to meet the varying abilities and interests of the students. This can involve modifying tasks, providing alternative assignments, and using a variety of instructional methods.

- 2. Assistive Technologies: Utilizing tools that support students with disabilities, such as text-tospeech software, audio books, and visual aids.
- 3. Culturally responsive Teaching: Recognizing and respecting the cultural environments of all students and incorporating these in the teaching and learning process. According to Gay (2010), this approach describes "using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively" (p.31).

If the EFL programs incorporate comprehensive training on inclusive pedagogy, they will tend to produce teachers who are more confident and capable of creating inclusive EFL classrooms. This training positively impacts teachers' attitudes and practices regarding disability. As maintained by Florian and Spratt (2013), "teachers who had received training in inclusive practices were more likely to demonstrate a positive attitude towards inclusion and use a wider range of teaching strategies to meet the needs of all students" (p. 123).

Findings from Systematic Evidence Synthesis

The systematic evidence synthesis reviewed a broad range of studies on disability and inclusive pedagogy within EFL ITT programs. Key findings include:

1. Limited Focus on Disability in ITT Curricula: Many ITT programs lack comprehensive coverage of disability and inclusive teaching practices. This gap leaves future EFL teachers underprepared to support students with disabilities effectively. In accordance with McLeskey and Waldron (2021), "Teacher preparation programs play a crucial role in developing the competencies of prospective teachers to deliver effective instruction to students with disabilities in inclusive settings" (p.50).

The foundation for effective inclusive EFL teaching is placed during the initial teacher training (ITT) programs. These programs are essential for preparing pre-service teachers to address the diverse needs of their students.

Despite the recognized importance, the synthesis found disability is often marginalized in ITT curricula, which results in teachers entering the profession without the necessary skills to accommodate diverse learners.

- 2. Inconsistent Implementation of Inclusive Practices: There is significant variation in how inclusive pedagogy is implemented across ITT programs. Some programs incorporate inclusive teaching strategies, while others barely address the topic, leading to inconsistent preparation among teachers. The inconsistency in implementation means that while some teachers are well-equipped to create inclusive classrooms, others struggle due to lack of adequate preparedness.
- 3. Need for Specialized Training: The synthesis highlights the necessity for specialized training modules focused on inclusive education. These modules should provide practical strategies for adapting EFL teaching to overcome the needs of students with disabilities. Specialized training can link the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application, enabling teachers to implement effective inclusive practices in their classrooms.
- 4. Positive Impact of Inclusive Training: Programs that include comprehensive training on inclusive pedagogy tend to produce teachers who are more confident and capable of creating inclusive EFL classrooms. This training positively impacts teacher's attitudes and practices regarding disability.

Challenges in Implementing Inclusive Pedagogy

Implementing inclusive pedagogy within English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Initial Teacher Training programs presents several significant challenges. These barriers can hinder the development and delivery of effective inclusive education, which is crucial for preparing future educators to meet the diverse needs of all students.

One of the main challenges is the lack of resources available to teacher training institutions. This scarcity can manifest in various modes, such as inadequate funding, insufficient access to teaching materials, and an absence of specialized training programs. Without the necessary resources, institutions struggle to offer comprehensive training that addresses the diverse needs of learners, including those with disabilities. Subsequently, future teachers may not receive the practical and theoretical knowledge required to implement inclusive practices effectively. According to Smith (2020) "Resource limitations in teacher training institutions often impede the development and delivery of specialized training on inclusive education, thereby affecting the preparedness of future teachers" (p. 223).

Another critical challenge is the shortage of faculty members with proficiency in disability and inclusive pedagogy. In agreement with Jones & Brown (2019), "The shortage of faculty members with expertise in inclusive pedagogy limits the quality of training provided to future teachers, highlighting a significant gap in teacher education programs" (p. 105). This gap in knowledge and experience can significantly impact the quality of training provided to the future teachers. Educators who lack sufficient understanding of inclusive practices may be unable to effectively train their students, leading to a perpetuation of inadequate educational practices. This shortage underscores the need for professional development opportunities that can enhance faculty expertise in this area.

Furthermore, cultural attitudes towards disability can also have a significant barrier to the implementation of inclusive pedagogy. As Garcia & Li (2021), "Cultural attitudes towards disability can significantly influence the acceptance and implementation of inclusive practices in educational settings, often posing a barrier to effectives inclusive education" (p. 350). In some contexts, negative perceptions and stigmas associated with disability can influence the extend to which inclusive practices are embraced and implemented. These cultural barriers can hinder the prioritization of inclusive education, thereby complicating efforts to cultivate an inclusive mindset among teacher trainees. Addressing these cultural attitudes requires a concerted effort to promote awareness and acceptance of diversity within the educational community.

Another challenge that can hinder the implementation of inclusive pedagogy is the institutional resistance to change. "Institutional resistance to change can significantly impede the implementation of inclusive pedagogy, necessitating strong leadership and a commitment to fostering and inclusive culture" (Nguyen & Harris, 2022, p.60). This can occur at various levels within educational institutions, from administrative policies to individual attitudes among faculty and staff. This resistance can slow the adoption of inclusive practices and limit opportunities for teacher trainees to learn and apply effective inclusive teaching methods. Overcoming this resistance requires robust leadership and dedicated effort to cultivate an inclusive culture throughout all levels of educational institutions. This initiative-taking approach is essential for accelerating the adoption of inclusive practices and expanding opportunities for teacher trainees to acquire and implement these methodologies efficiently.

Overcoming obstacles: Implementing Inclusive Pedagogy in EFL ITT programs

Implementing inclusive pedagogy within English as Foreign Language (EFL) Initial Teacher Training (ITT) programs in Colombia faces a myriad of challenges. Among the most pressing are resource limitations, lack of expertise, and cultural toward disability. These obstacles inhibit the development and delivery of specialized training necessary for equipping EFL future teachers with the skills to assist diverse learners.

At the outset, resource limitations are a significant barrier. Many teacher training institutions in Colombia lack the financial and material resources necessary to develop comprehensive training programs on inclusive education. According to the Ministry of National Education (Ministerio de Educación Nacional, MEN), funding for education in Colombia has seen improvements, but disparities remain, particularly in rural and underserved urban areas (MEN,2020). These resource limitations mean that institutions often cannot afford the specialized materials, assistive technologies, or training modules required to adequately prepare pre-service teachers for inclusive classrooms, especially in an era characterized by impermanence within interlearning ecosystems (Caldeiro-Pedreira & Castro-Zubarrieta, 2020)

To continue, there is a notable shortage of faculty members with expertise in disability and inclusive pedagogy. This deficiency directly affects the quality of training provided to pre-service teachers. Cosentino and Sridharan (2017) emphasize the importance of faculty expertise in delivering effective inclusive education. Without knowledgeable instructors, teacher trainees may not receive the necessary skills and understanding to implement meaningful inclusive practices in their classrooms. In Colombia, this issue is compounded by a scarcity of specialized training programs.

Alternatively, many institutions lack necessary financial and material resources to provide specialized training on inclusive education. According to UNESCO (2019), effective teacher training requires substantial investment in continuous professional development (CPD), including inclusive education practices. Financial limitations often limit the ability of teacher training institutions to offer comprehensive programs which address the diverse needs of students, remarkably those disabilities.

Otherwise, cultural attitudes towards disability significantly impact the implementation of inclusive pedagogy. Nowadays in some Colombian contexts, negative perceptions and stigmatization of disabilities can hinder the adoption of inclusive practices in English Language Teaching (ELT). Hackman (2005) discusses how cultural attitudes and societal norms play a key role in shaping educational guidelines and practices. In Colombia, efforts to promote inclusive education must address these cultural barriers to ensure a more accepting and encouraging environment for all students.

Colombia has made strides in developing policies to support inclusive education. The Colombian Ministry of National Education has established guidelines to promote it, focusing on ensuring equal education chances for students with disabilities. The "Inclusive Education Policy" aims to integrate students with disabilities into mainstream classrooms, granting support and resources (Ministerio de Educación Nacional de Colombia, 2017).

Nevertheless, the implementation of those policies faces significant challenges not only for the educational system but also for ELT programs. As said by the International Journal of Inclusive Education, there is a gap between policy and practice in many Colombian institutions (Florian, 2008). Ensuring that these policies are translated into classroom practices requires addressing the issues of resource limitations, lack of expertise, and cultural attitudes.

ELT Challenges in Colombia

The context of English Language Teaching in Colombia is intricately shaped by a complex interaction of sociopolitical, educational, and cultural factors. Over the past few decades, there has been a significant impulse towards bilingual education, driven by both government policy and societal demand. This context is well-documented and analyzed by several authors who highlight the various dimensions influencing ELT in Colombia.

Sociopolitical Context

The Colombian government's National Bilingualism Program (NBP), launched in 2004, has been a cornerstone in promoting English proficiency across the country. The policy aims to enhance the English language skills of Colombian students to make them more competitive in a globalized world (Cely, 2007). This initiative has led to an increased emphasis on English in the national curriculum, mandating its inclusion from primary through secondary education. Despite this, the implementation of this policy faces significant challenges, particularly in rural and underserved areas where resources and trained teachers are scarce (Usma, 2009).

The educational landscape in Colombia is marked by inequalities between urban and rural areas often struggling with limited infrastructure, fewer qualified teachers, and less exposure to English. This gap is underscored by Hamid and Baldauf (2008), who contend that effective language policy implementation requires addressing these systemic inequalities.

Teacher training is another critical issue in the Colombian ELT context. According to González (2009), there is a need for more comprehensive professional development programs that equip teachers with both linguistic competence and pedagogical skills. Many teachers currently teaching English in Colombia have insufficient proficiency and limited access to ongoing proficiency and limited access to ongoing professional development. This gap in teacher training directly influences the quality of English instruction students receive.

Cultural attitudes for English also play a significant role in forming let in Colombia. English is often perceived as a gateway to better economic opportunities and global connectivity. Despite that, there is also resistance, particularly among Indigenous and rural communities, who see the emphasis on English as a threat to their cultural identity and local languages (Guerrero, 2008). This strain underscores the demand for a better inclusive approach to language policy that respects and integrates local linguistic and cultural contexts.

Adding to the above, it is necessary to highlight that the understanding of learning transcends the human and applies to all living organisms capable of self-production, as Maturana and Varela (1973) stated. In this sense, organizations and institutions are called to be learning organisms, to transform and adapt permanently by adopting more plastic, networked structures that allow them to inhabit and cohabit different cultural contexts temporally and spatially (Roman-Acosta & Barón, 2023).

One major challenge is the curriculum design of ELT ITT programs, which often overlooks comprehensive coverage of disability and inclusive teaching strategies. This gap means that prospective EFL teachers may graduate without adequate preparation to address the varied needs of students, including those with disabilities, in their classrooms. Moreover, the scarcity of faculty members with the expertise in disability and inclusive pedagogy further exacerbates this issue, timing the quality of training provided to future teachers.

Adopting these challenges requires a concerted effort to integrate specialized training modules on disability and inclusive pedagogy into ITT curricula. These modules should equip teachers with practical strategies for adapting EFL instruction to meet the needs of diverse learners effectively. Additionally, fostering positive attitudes towards disability and promoting inclusivity among teacher candidates are essential steps in creating a supportive education.

Recommendations for improving ITT Programs

To address these challenges and improve the inclusivity of EFL ITT programs, the synthesis offers some recommendations. First, to integrate comprehensive disability training, ITT curricula should include dedicated modules on disability and inclusive pedagogy, providing future teachers with practical strategies and theoretical knowledge.

Second, enhance faculty expertise. Institutions should invest in professional development for faculty members, ensuring they are well-equipped to teach inclusive practices. On one hand, programs should foster positive attitudes towards disability and inclusivity among teacher candidates, emphasizing the value of diversity in the classroom and promoting inclusive attitudes. On the other hand, partnerships with disability organizations, educational experts, and policymakers can help develop and implement effective inclusive training programs.

Conclusions

Inclusive pedagogy is essential for creating equitable educational chances for all students, particularly in the diverse and growing field of EFL education. By modifying teaching methods and materials to meet the demands of students with disabilities and differences, educators can foster an inclusive learning environment that benefits everyone. The research of scholars such as Florian, Tomlinson, Loreman and others underscores the importance of developing and implementing inclusive strategies in teacher training programs to ensure that all students could succeed.

The need for inclusive EFL teaching is undeniable in today's diverse educational landscape. By integrating specialized training modules on inclusive pedagogy and disability into ITT programs, we can better prepare future teachers to deal with the diverse needs of their students. This preparation is essential for creating supportive, effective, and inclusive learning environments where all students, regardless of their abilities, can flourish.

The findings from systematic evidence synthesis emphasize the critical for ITT programs to prioritize disability and inclusive pedagogy. Addressing the gaps and implementing specialized training modules can better prepare future EFL teachers to support diverse learners effectively. As the demand for EFL education continues to increase, it is essential to guarantee that inclusivity remains a core component of teacher training, ultimately leading to more equitable and supportive learning environments for all students.

The effective implementation of inclusive pedagogy in EFL ITT programs faces several challenges, including resource limitations, a lack of expertise, cultural attitudes, and institutional resistance. Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach that includes increased funding, professional development for faculty, cultural awareness initiatives, and strong institutional leadership. By overcoming these obstacles, teacher training programs can better prepare future educators to intermediate the diverse needs of their students and promote inclusive education for all.

While Colombia has made commendable efforts to promote inclusive education through policy development, several challenges hinder the effective implementation of inclusive pedagogy in EFL ITT programs. Addressing source limitations, enhancing faculty expertise, and shifting cultural attitudes are essential stages towards creating a more inclusive educational environment. By focusing on these areas, Colombia can also better prepare its EFL pre-service teachers to support all students, nonetheless of their abilities, fostering a more equitable and inclusive education system.

The ELT scenery in Colombia is shaped by a convergence of policy initiatives, educational inequalities, and cultural dynamics. While government programs like the National Bilingualism Program have set ambitious goals, their success hinges on addressing systemic challenges in teacher training, resource allocation, and cultural inclusivity. Scholars underscore the importance of contextualized and critical approaches to ELT that recognize the diverse linguistic and cultural realities of Colombian students. By referring to these multifaceted changes, Colombia can move towards a more equitable and effective system of English language education.

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