

## **INCLUSIVITY: CREATING AND SUSTAINING ‘LEARNING PARTNERSHIP’ CLIMATE IN AN ELT CLASSROOM**

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**ABSTRACT:** *Inclusivity has often been associated with disability and our commitment to inclusivity and its pedagogy means we recognize and value the diversity of our students. As individuals, and as part of a learning community, students are expected to benefit from learning in an environment where they feel included in ways that recognize and support their needs. However, this study, in its attempt to redefine inclusivity beyond its established concept and practice, as stated earlier, concludes that inclusivity in an ELT classroom, is not merely a concept associated with disability; but this phenomenon should be exploited for creating and sustaining a safe, supported, and encouraged ‘learning partnership’ climate to attain students’ intellectual growth and skill development. A review has also been done to assess the ‘convention’ that students and faculty ‘engage’, in terms of a ‘learning and teaching experience’, to enjoy their privileges: from a student perspective, to ‘participate’, and from a faculty perspective, to ‘impart’. At the end, suggestions and recommendations are offered how we as teachers, through inclusive teaching-learning strategies, can create and sustain a ‘learning partnership’ environment in which students are ‘partnered’ meaningfully to facilitate deeper learning and the best educational and professional outcomes.*

**KEYWORDS:** Inclusivity, Learning Partnership Climate, ELT Classroom, Teaching, Learning Experience, Inclusive Teaching-Learning Strategies

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Inclusivity is concerned, in particular, with meeting the learning needs of students with “a specific focus on those who are vulnerable to marginalization and exclusion” (UNESCO, 1994, cited in Aniftos & McLuskey, 2003, p1). In this context, four video interviews by O’Mahony, J., Thomas, L. and Payens, J. (eds) in 2013 with experts on inclusion in the classroom were conducted. Rowena Arshad, Vicky Gunn, Ann-Marie Houghton, and Bob Matthew answered to the questions on **inclusivity**:

- **What is ‘inclusivity’ and why do we need it in the classroom?**

**Below are the transcripts of part of the answer:**

*“What is inclusivity? That’s a very good question. I think it is about being aware of the norms that we operate in and working to reflect on whose voices are excluded, whose views are not being heard, is there a dominant view that we need to disrupt and in fact in not treating our student body as though they were homogenous.”*

Rowena Arshad, University of Edinburgh

*“..... For me, inclusivity means not just toleration within the classroom but actually fostering an environment in which students and staff can explore issues without feeling that*

*things that they say are going to be regarded as unacceptable by other members of the classroom. Now, that doesn't mean that I think it's alright to say anything. What I think I'm trying to say is that inclusivity generates an environment where folk can explore things reasonably safely without feeling that they are actually going to be discriminated against in terms of race, sexual orientation, religion, age, gender, all of the protected characteristics."*

Vicky Gunn, Glasgow University

*"Inclusivity has often been associated with disability; certainly from a school perspective, it is special educational needs, inclusion, inclusivity. However, for me, inclusivity is much more than just disability. Inclusivity is about how all students, and staff actually, are enabled to be able to participate in terms of a teaching and learning experience. It's about enabling students and staff to access their entitlement: from a student perspective, to engage in the learning, and from a staff perspective, to be able to impart the learning and facilitate the learning of their students."*

Ann-Marie Houghton, Lancaster University

*"It's a kind of a given, I think, that in the classroom we're trying to make the learning appropriate to everybody that's present. And therefore that's inclusion. And whether it's covered by the recent legislation or whatever, we want everybody in the classroom to feel that they're part of the learning community that's going on in that particular classroom."*

Bob Matthew, University of Stirling

However, this study, in its attempt to redefine inclusivity beyond its established concept and practice, as stated earlier, takes a viewpoint that inclusivity in an ELT classroom is not merely a concept associated with disability. Rather this phenomenon should be exploited for creating and sustaining a safe, supported, and encouraged 'learning partnership' climate. This should attain students' intellectual growth and skill development.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Drawing from the literature on inclusive teaching in higher education, the current section reviews literature on inclusivity. When teaching a foreign language, it is not enough to know learners' learning styles and individual preferences. Teachers should also take learners' psychological and physical difficulties into account, be understanding, supportive, sympathetic and very patient (Savic, 2007). What counts is their positive outlook and willingness for further professional development during the teaching practice (Kershner, 2006). Thus, already before the first English lesson conducted in an inclusive classroom, the EFL teacher should talk to the class teacher and classroom assistant in order to get some guidance and become acquainted with students' different learning needs. Moreover, in Rose's view (1999 in Groom and Rose, 2004), inclusive classroom teachers should embody a range of teaching styles and should know how to manipulate between various techniques, as particular situations require. Actually, inclusive education is not a specific program that can be implemented; it is a philosophy and an ongoing process that should be adopted by the educational system (McLaughlin, 2005). From this point of view, responsive teachers are expected to embrace all students, as if saying: "Welcome, I'm glad you're here. My job is to take you from wherever you are as a learner as

far as I possibly can” (Friend and Thrasher Shamberger, 2008: p2). Inclusion, in this research perspective, is a way of thinking, integral to everything that occurs in the academia. Unless teachers are deeply convinced that this multidimensional practice is the best approach to educating students, inclusion is unlikely to be effectual (Friend and Thrasher Shamberger, 2008). Apart from teaching the language, according to Cole (2003 in Groom and Rose, 2004), teachers should perform a pastoral role as supporters in whom learners in their charge may have confidence.

## **DISCUSSION/STUDY FINDINGS**

In this section inclusive EFL classroom, inclusive pedagogy, and the role of the teacher in an inclusive EFL classroom have been discussed. A review on the conventional practices has also been presented.

### **Inclusive EFL Classroom**

Shari Saunders and Diana Kardia (n.d.) observe that inclusive classrooms are classrooms in which instructors and students work together to create and sustain an environment in which everyone feels safe, supported, and encouraged to express her or his views and concerns. In these classrooms, the content is explicitly viewed from the multiple perspectives and varied experiences of a range of groups. Inclusive classrooms are places in which thoughtfulness, mutual respect, and academic excellence are valued and promoted. In an inclusive classroom, instructors attempt to be responsive to students on both an individual and a cultural level. Broadly speaking, the inclusiveness of a classroom will depend upon the kinds of interactions that occur between and among the teacher and the students in the classroom. Inclusive classrooms are ones in which students feel that their contributions and perspectives are equally valued and respected. Instructors must understand the needs and behaviors of a broad range of students and develop techniques for working effectively with them and preparing them for employment globally. The teacher’s role within this classroom is as a facilitator in a collaborative process which guides the student towards negotiated learning goals.

### **Inclusive Pedagogy**

“Inclusive Teaching Strategies” (n.d.) describes inclusive pedagogy to any number of teaching approaches/strategies that address the needs of students with a variety of backgrounds, learning styles, and abilities. These strategies contribute to an overall inclusive learning environment, in which students feel equally valued. “Inclusive Teaching Practices” (n.d.) illustrates that our classrooms are microcosms of the diverse society in which we live. The aim of inclusive pedagogy is not to dilute standards or change content, but to adopt a teaching style that accommodates a diversity of abilities, cultural backgrounds, and learning styles and needs. Inclusive practices encourage the use of multiple strategies for delivering information and providing multiple ways for students to demonstrate the knowledge they have acquired. “Inclusive Pedagogy” (n.d.) describes it is a method of teaching that incorporates dynamic practices and learning styles, multicultural content, and varied means of assessment, with the goal of promoting student academic success, as well as social, cultural, and physical well-being. In the same context, Hart et al (2004) observes that inclusive pedagogy rejects:

- the notion that learners’ have a fixed ‘ability’

- that a learner's current learning can be used to predict future 'potential'
- that intelligence can be defined in terms of tests based on logical / mathematical / reasoning skills.

Instead, inclusive pedagogy believes:

- that every learner's capacity to learn is changeable
- What teachers choose to do (or not to do) in the present can alter a learner's learning capacity for the future
- Nothing is neutral

### **The role of the teacher in an inclusive EFL classroom**

More often than not, English language teachers, unlike class teachers, enter the 'inclusive' classroom completely unprepared, since during their academic training they do not usually get adequate knowledge and skills to deal with it (Savic 2007). On the other hand, there are not only the years of teaching experience and special training that matter, but also teachers' attitudes and their ratings of self-efficacy towards inclusion. Because individual differences soon become evident in day-to-day contact with learners, EFL teachers are faced with the challenge of understanding the nature of their classroom in order to create a successful learning environment. Moreover, in Rose's view (1999 in Groom and Rose, 2004), inclusive classroom teachers should embody a range of teaching styles and should know how to manipulate between various techniques as particular situations require.

It is worthy to note that students' lack of competence in English and apparently slow progress cannot be directly attributed to general learning difficulties, although these factors must not be excluded. Students may say nothing and seem to be passive for some time, but it does not necessarily mean they are not learning. Apart from teaching the language, according to Cole (2003 in Groom and Rose, 2004), teachers should perform a pastoral role as supporters in whom learners' in their charge may have confidence. It is vital for students to learn in an atmosphere of mutual respect and understanding.

### **Conventional Practice**

This study reviews the conventional practice that students and faculty 'engage' in terms of a 'learning and teaching experience'. From a student perspective: to enjoy her/his privileges as 'participant', and from a faculty perspective: to 'impart'. This study conducted a number of interactions (informal meetings) with faculty members and students on the concept of their 'privileges'; that being a student, they have to attend classes, listen and follow the teachers' instructions, engage and participate in classroom assignments etc. That being a teacher, they have to be available in the classroom for teaching, ask students to listen and follow the instructions, ensure that students engage and participate in classroom assignments etc.

In the researcher's opinion, these mechanical drills certainly lack trust and confidence between students and teachers. As per the conventional practice, perhaps, students never go beyond 'engagement', and teachers never transform beyond 'instructions'. Therefore, this study urges teachers to change the attitude of considering students as mere 'participant', but rather as

‘partners’ in the learning environment. In order to ensure that this happens, it is vital for students to learn in an atmosphere of mutual respect and understanding.

### **Learning Partnership**

The notion ‘learning partnership’ aims at creating and sustaining a climate of the highest ethical and professional academic standards. These standards have never been more important than in today’s competitive and rapidly changing global knowledge climate.

This concept, ‘learning partnership’, is similar to that ‘recently’ employed by the corporate world; that the clients– consumers who consume or use something, or customers who have purchased something or engaged in some form of exchange transaction– are no more the people who consume or purchase the products. Rather their ‘opinion’ is required in the product’s formulation, process, marketing etc. In the past, it was not necessary for the corporate world to take into consideration (any) comment/feedback, but in today’s IT oriented world, it is very important to take account of clients’ points of view. At times, corporate houses do conduct surveys through various means to elicit clients’ feedback and opinion for the improvement of services and sustainable growth. Likewise, in a ‘learning partnership’ environment, students in the classroom are not merely attendees who are ‘engaged’ in the activities and assignments, but they are ‘partnered’ in the learning process and express their views and concerns freely. Ben Johnson (2014) rightly opines that:

- *“I often reflect on what we call “teaching” and have come to the brilliant conclusion that it is less about what the teacher does and all about what students learn. How you approach teaching all comes down to what you believe about students and what methods you believe are the best ways to get them to learn.”*

### **Creating and Sustaining Learning Partnership Climate**

Werona, K. (2012) observed that one of the reasons for creating and sustaining a learning partnership climate starting from the early days is the recognition of the importance of preventing or, at least, minimizing learning issues encountered by learners. Of course, timely intervention is not possible without early detection. The sooner a particular learning issue is detected, the greater the chance of reducing potential academic losses. This means that it may help in remediating existing developmental problems as well as in preventing the occurrence of additional ones in the future. It is widely known that early days of learning have a significant impact on students’ later growth. Learners’ in the inclusive setting establish larger friendship networks and are better able to adapt socially. Thus, learners should be provided with optimal learning conditions from the very start.

“Fostering Inclusion” (n. d.) describes that a teacher should communicate clearly about expectations in the classroom, including the ways in which the teacher would like students to interact, ask questions, and participate. In addition, the teacher should set and enforce ground-rules for respectful interaction in the classroom, such as guidelines for contributing ideas and questions and for responding respectfully to the ideas and questions of others. If a student’s conduct could be silencing or denigrating others (intentionally or not), remind the entire class of the ground-rules, then talk with the student individually outside of class about the potential effects of the conduct on the ability of all to learn and contribute. Remember that your silence is often read as endorsement. Therefore, it is important to take action to try to improve the learning environment for all. Communicate high standards for student learning and

achievement (in your course) and express confidence that every student can achieve these standards. Include structured support within your course that is designed to help all students achieve those standards. Show respect for all questions and comments. Use verbal and non-verbal cues to encourage participation and to challenge all students to think deeply and critically. Encourage students to “think out loud,” to ask questions, and to actively consider perspectives that are different from their own. If you are teaching about topics that are likely to generate disagreement or controversy, identify clear objectives and design a structure informed by those objectives. Communicate the objectives and the structure to the students, so that they know what to expect.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

“Inclusivity in English” (n.d.) describes that educational institutes are agents for social and cultural change and can play a major role in building inclusive communities and societies. This study views inclusive English classrooms as responsive to student needs, offer a flexible, relevant and challenging curriculum, and a broad range of teaching- learning strategies and assessment practices. The teacher’s role within this classroom is as a facilitator in a collaborative process which guides the student towards negotiated learning goals. This study concludes that we as teachers, through inclusive teaching-learning strategies and practices, can create and sustain a ‘learning partnership’ environment in which students are ‘partnered’ meaningfully to facilitate deeper learning and achieve the best educational and professional outcomes.

By way of application, the following inclusive teaching and learning strategies that address the needs of students of various backgrounds, learning styles and abilities, as suggested by Karten, T. (2010) are recommended for practice in an ELT (EFL/ESL) classroom:

- Establish prior knowledge.
- Pre-plan lessons with structured objectives, but also allow for inter/post planning.
- Proceed from the simple to the complex by using discrete task analysis, which breaks up the learning into its parts.
- Use a step-by-step approach, teaching in small bites, with much practice and repetition.
- Reinforce abstract concepts with concrete examples, such as looking at a map while learning compass directions or walking around a neighborhood to read street signs.
- Think about possible accommodations and modifications that might be needed such as using a digital recorder for notes, reducing the amount of spelling words, and having enrichment activities prepared.
- Concentrate on the individual learner, not syndromes.
- Provide opportunities for success to build self-esteem.
- Give positives before negatives.

- Use modeling with both teachers and peers.
- Vary types of instruction and assessment, with multiple intelligences and cooperative learning.
- Relate learning to learner's lives using interest inventories.
- Establish a pleasant classroom environment that encourages students to ask questions and become actively involved in their learning.
- Increase students' self-awareness of levels and progress.

In summary, this study suggests (and hopes) to have an environment where:

*student, student, in every class, and NOT TO ATTEND!*

*and*

*teacher, teacher, everywhere, and NOT TO TEACH!*

**BUT (both) to LEARN AND PARTNER!!!**

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