

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING: WHAT IS THE FIRST STEP TO MAKE IT WORK?

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Abstract

With the international call and legal requirements for inclusive education an increasing number of students with special educational needs are enrolled in mainstream schools. While lack of training and feeling of unpreparedness is often some teachers' legitimate reason for reluctance to teach learners with disabilities, it is the teachers' own awareness of the right of all individuals to quality and inclusive education that builds the foundation for inclusive education to take place. The paper reviews the principles and policy of inclusion, the way inclusive education is introduced in Bulgaria, and presents a survey among twenty-six teachers of English and four teachers of other foreign languages living in Bulgaria about their attitude to teaching students with disabilities. The findings show a relatively reserved attitude and lack of initiative in some teachers to look for specialized assistance or additional guidelines. Unarguably, teaching learners with special educational needs is a challenging task. The author claims that in these difficult conditions, raising awareness of inclusive education

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Foreign language teaching requires a dedicated catering for the needs of a diverse classroom comprised of individuals with a wide variety of skills, interests, intelligences, level of command of the language, attitudes to learning, family and ethnic background, culture, etc. Efficient foreign languages teachers have the necessary knowledge, tools and motivation to differentiate their teaching in accordance with such a mixed-ability and multiple intelligence classroom. With the international call and legal requirements for inclusive education, however, an increasing number of students with special educational needs (SEN) are enrolled in mainstream schools. This is a relatively new phenomenon as until the late 20th century a large number of differently-abled students were mostly educated in segregated settings by special educational teachers. Today, as Lewis and Bagree (2013) emphasize, ‘there is a global shortage of teachers, particularly of teachers who are sufficiently trained and motivated to include children with disabilities (and children from other marginalised groups) in regular schools’. While lack of training is often teachers’ legitimate reason for their frequently expressed reluctance to teach learners with disabilities, it is the teachers’ own awareness of the right of all individuals to quality inclusive education that builds the foundation for

inclusive education to take place. The paper looks at the principles and policy of inclusion, of how inclusive education is being introduced in Bulgaria, and presents a survey among thirty foreign language teachers living in Bulgaria about their attitude to teaching students with disabilities.

Education and Inclusion

Education is not a goal in itself but a means to achieving well-being through the development of one's personal capabilities to bring one to "as full realization as possible of what it is to be a human being" (Foshay, 1991, p. 277). Thus, education has a major role to play in empowering all people, including those with disabilities, to secure a financially stable and a socially and personally fulfilling life. Moreover, education is a basic human right. As early as 1948 article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) (UN, 1948) established that "Everyone has the right to education" and formulated the fundamental goal of education towards "the full development of the human personality and [to] the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms."

Though the UDHR affirmed the right of education to everyone a few decades ago, the term 'inclusive education' started being gradually introduced in the legislative systems worldwide at different speed and degrees in the last twenty years. According to UNESCO (2009, p. 8-9) *inclusive education* is:

a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all children, youth and adults, through increasing participation in learning, cultures and communities, and reducing and eliminating exclusion within and from education.

In this broad definition inclusive education calls for providing opportunities for learning and participation in the learning process to *all* children – gifted or non-gifted, with or without disabilities, nationals of the country or immigrants, children from the minorities or the majority group, rich or poor. Inclusion implies an ethos of not only tolerating difference but accepting it as a natural phenomenon of life. In a broader sense it amounts to having equal opportunities to enjoy and benefit from what we hold valuable in life – learning, social interactions, economic and political independence, autonomy, etc. – independently of our race, ethnicity, mother tongue, sex, religious or political views, disability, or social background.

As Demsey (2016) points out 'True inclusion means equity; every individual getting what they need in order to be happy and successful.' Inclusion is different from

the principle of equality where every person is treated in an equal or the same way. It is founded on equity, i.e. equal opportunities rather than equal treatment. For example, a staircase to a school's entrance would provide equal treatment but unequal opportunities. In order to be able to attend school, a child with a wheelchair will need the architectural barriers to the school to be removed. A ramp and an elevator are part of the necessary conditions ensuring equal opportunities. Unfortunately, these physical barriers are only a fraction of the obstacles to inclusion that need to be surmounted. Also, access to education for children with disabilities is only one aspect of inclusive education, chosen for the focus of this paper as well.

The rights of children with disabilities were first specifically addressed in an international treaty in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989). Its article 2 on non-discrimination firmly states that no child should be treated unfairly on any basis (religion, language, ethnicity, gender, disability, etc.). Article 23 ensures that “the disabled child has effective access to and receives education, training, [...] in a manner conducive to the child's achieving the fullest possible social integration and individual development”.

Until the 1950-60s, the predominant psycho-medical model of disability (see Troeva, 2014) determined an educational policy of placing students with disabilities in separate residential or educational institutions. It was thought that these segregated settings provided the best possible conditions for children with disabilities to learn, for there they were taught by special education teachers under the direct supervision of medical staff and in classes with peers sharing a similar level of intellectual development. A shift in the understanding of disability as a personal tragedy to a limitation conditioned by environmental, institutional and attitudinal barriers (Thomas, 2004) brought the discussion about disabilities into the context of the natural diversity of human beings, social integration, and human rights. In an effort to ensure that children with disabilities receive equal opportunities for learning and social interaction with learners of their own age, the 1994 World Conference on Special Education, with representatives of 92 governments and 25 international organisations, adopted a document since-known as the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994). This cornerstone document stated that mainstream schools should accommodate all children, regardless of their disabilities or difficulties, recognizing that ‘inclusion and participation are essential to human dignity and to the enjoyment and exercise of human rights’ (*ibid*).

Still, in 1999 B. Lindquist noted that there is a ‘dramatic difference in the educational opportunities provided for disabled children and those provided for non-disabled children’ (Rieser, 2012, p. 311). Inclusion in mainstream schools was furthermore advanced by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006). Its article 24 endorses *inclusive, quality and free* primary & secondary education, reasonable accommodations, and *support within the general education system*. Inclusive preschool education has also been endorsed, however, Gupta et al. show that “programs have a long way to go in fully including young children with disabilities” (2014, p. 36).

The Path to Inclusion in Bulgaria

The Bulgarian legislative system has adopted the policy of enhancing inclusive education as the norm for children with disabilities. Kindergartens and schools are bound to accept children with disabilities according to *the Preschool and School Education Act (PSEA)* (2015) and the 2002 amendments to its predecessor, the *Public Education Act* (1991). The *Anti-Discrimination Act* (2004, art. 42) also requires equalizing the opportunities for effective exercising of the right for education by persons with disabilities. It obliges persons providing training or education as well as compilers of textbooks and learning materials to design such as to overcome negative stereotypes, including those towards persons with disabilities (art. 35 (1) and (3)). Article 17 (2) of the *Act on the Integration of People with Disabilities 2004* (AIPD) postulates that the Ministry for Education and Science should provide ‘supportive environment for integrated education of children with disabilities’. The newly enforced *Preschool and School Education Act (PSEA)* (2015) discards the previously used term ‘integration’ to substitute it with ‘inclusion’ reflecting a major conceptual difference. Integration has been considered a step on the way to inclusion where students had to adjust to the learning process and regulations of mainstream schools. With inclusion, however, it is the schools and teachers who have to change and make sure they meet the individual needs of each learner.

Bulgaria still follows the two-track system where special schools continue to exist for students with sensory (visual and hearing) impairments, and for students under reform programs. Centres for the Support of Personal Development are established helping inclusion, education and learning (PSEA, 2015, art. 26 (1)) and offering ‘resource support’ (PSEA, 2015, art. 49 (4)) to students with SEN who are included in the general educational system. The Centres for Special Educational Support are the new form of the

old support schools – an establishment that allows for more specialized educational support for children with severe forms of disability and low-functioning children on the autistic spectrum (Damyanov, 2015). Children with learning difficulties such as dyslexia or dysgraphia, with neurodevelopmental disorders such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), or high-functioning children on the autistic spectrum can be expected to be enrolled in mainstream settings with some assistance from resource teachers as per an individual plan for student support (PSEA, 2015, art. 187). Damyanov (2015) quotes data of the Ministry of Education and Science stating that around 15,000 children and pupils with SEN are presently being taught within the general educational system. Even though some of these students will learn a foreign language following an individual plan and with the help of resource teachers or teaching assistants, in many cases children with SEN will attend foreign language classes together with their peers and be taught by a single unaided foreign language teacher.

Foreign language teaching and disabilities

Foreign language learning has acquired a new meaning in the modern unprecedentedly interconnected world. For people with disabilities, it provides invaluable opportunities for achieving greater social integrity by receiving better opportunities for personal development, education, access to information, employment, mobility, social interactions, cultural enrichment, developing cross-cultural awareness. Furthermore, it prepares them to participate in the global political and economic community. Besides these pragmatic and cultural gains, learning a foreign language brings in other significant, ‘metacognitive’ benefits, such as increased awareness of one’s own language and ‘improvement in critical thinking, mental discipline, flexibility, creativity, memory, executive functions, and improved cognitive functioning’ (Wight, 2015, p. 41).

Oftentimes, foreign language teachers express their frustration of not feeling prepared to teach students with SEN as they have usually not been trained how to prepare and conduct classes with such learners. It is not uncommon to hear voices of concern and even exasperation similar to those of the Spanish teacher in Hendry’s study (2009, p. 175-176) who shared that he had had only one class on teaching students with disabilities in college, that his present class with students with disabilities “put[s] [him] at [his] wits end”, and “when special kids are pulled out, this is a different class (*ibid*)”.

Teachers are usually willing to apply accommodations when it comes to assignments and assessment. In the authors’ experience with students with dyslexia, the

assessment accommodation have taken the form of: a) opportunities for a student to do a formal test on a computer rather than as a written test, b) waiving a student from a written examination and substituting it with an oral one, and c) giving a student additional time to complete a formal test. Differentiation in terms of assignment and assessment, however, is not enough. In her study Hendry (2009) found that a foreign language teacher she was observing did follow the recommended accommodations related to formal assignments and the assessment of students with language learning disability. However, the teacher did not design the necessary accommodations when introducing, presenting and practicing lesson content. The students were presented with a reduced content and number of questions, but they did not receive any assistance in grasping the meaning, structure and application of the language. It has been found necessary for schools that pursue and embrace inclusive practices to move away from the traditional didactic teacher-centred teaching and adopt a diverse and meaningful curriculum ensuring variety and personalized learning for each student (Fergusen, 2008).

There are cases, as well, where foreign language teachers try to circumvent the obligation of teaching students with SEN by referring them for exemption. Wight (2015) notes that the practice and policy of exemption from foreign language study are not well researched, but she recognizes that there have been two patterns of student exemption. It is often (1) based on personal beliefs and preferences rather than on the basis of a carefully considered consensus of inclusion, and (2) it occurs in the absence of actual data about the potential successes of students with special needs' (p. 41-42). Moreover, Wight brings forward Arries' (1999) acute observation that decisions of exemptions might be made by people whose own language learning experience has revolved around memorization and grammatical analysis, which are often unfit for the distinct way of learning of students with disabilities.

The belief that some individuals with disabilities are not capable of learning a foreign language often stands as a barrier to giving all learners an equal chance to receive full quality education. This belief is often not founded on evidence but on prejudice. For example, in her review of studies on foreign language learning by high school and university students with language learning disability, Hendry (2009) concludes that there is 'compelling evidence' that students with a language learning disability (LLD) do not necessarily display poor performance in foreign language

classes. The students with LLD in her study made progress, especially developing their writing skills, exceeding at times that of students without LLD in the same program.

Teachers' attitude towards students of foreign languages with disabilities – a survey

The author of this paper carried out a survey to learn more about the attitude of foreign language teachers towards learners with disabilities in Bulgaria. This small-scale qualitative piece of research, not claiming representativeness, may give an idea of some of the predominant attitudes in an area not very well researched in the country. The participants were 30 teachers of foreign languages living in Bulgaria. The sampling was a convenience one – they were found through the professional and personal networks of the author as well as through a social media group. The respondents were asked to answer 10 questions in an online survey. A high degree of anonymity was obtained as the survey tool reported only the IP address of the computer used by the respondent and no other identification. The questions were of mixed type – multiple choice, slider scale, and open-ended questions. The survey was piloted with two teachers, which helped the researcher modify and clarify some of the questions to avoid ambiguity.

Findings

Most of the participants (24 out of 30) had a teaching practice of over 10 years. Twenty-six of them were teachers of English, and four were teachers of 4 other languages - German, French, Italian and Spanish. Most of the respondents teach at higher institutions, to a large extend determined by the convenience sampling, the author being a university teacher herself. One of the teachers works at a pre-school level, 8 at school, 20 at college/university, and 19 teach or have taught adults as well (the total number exceeds that of the participants as some teachers have had more than one workplace). 25 of the respondents were Bulgarians teaching a foreign language, 4 were natives of another country teaching a foreign language in Bulgaria, and 1 was native of another country teaching a foreign language in another country. 23 participants report to have had students with disability, 7 –to have not. The ratio between teachers who have had students with disabilities and those who have not is not representative of foreign language teachers' encounter with disability because of the unequal distribution of school/university level teachers, the relatively small sampling, and because those who have not had students with disability may have chosen not to take part in the online survey.

The disabilities reported can be roughly categorised in 9 groups. A few teachers answered that they have had more than one student with disability. Those specified were: dyslexia (10 times), hearing impairment (8 times, including deafness – 4 times), autism (5 times), visual impairment (3 times), physical impairment (4 times, including 2 times cerebral palsy), mental health disorders (3 times), ADHD (once), epilepsy (once), Krabbe disease (once).

The participants were asked the question ‘How positive do you feel about teaching students with disability?’ where they had to drag a slider to specify the extent. The average answer of the 28 responses received amounts to **65,39%** (with 29% being the lowest and 100% the highest rates given). 4 respondents gave a rating under 50%, 8 gave a rating of 50%, 7 gave a rating in the range of 51-75%, and 9 people gave a rating over 75% (3 of them giving 100%). One teacher, who has not had a student with disability, did not answer this question.

The average attitude of the teachers working at schools (vs. those working at a college/university) was slightly higher than the average (71.85 % positive). Interesting differences in the teachers’ attitude was observed along the variable of length of teaching experience (Fig. 1). The attitude of those who had less experience (under 10 years) was considerably higher (73.33%) than those who have taught the language for over 10 years (58.82%). However, the average attitudes of teachers who have had students with disabilities and who have not are almost identical (65.3% vs. 65.8% respectively). It is notable that while the percentages given by teachers who have worked with students with SEN are quite diverse (29%, 35%, 80%, etc.), those who have not had students with disability gave answers that tended to be neutral, positive, or did not answer (100%, 50%, 51%, 50%, 78%).

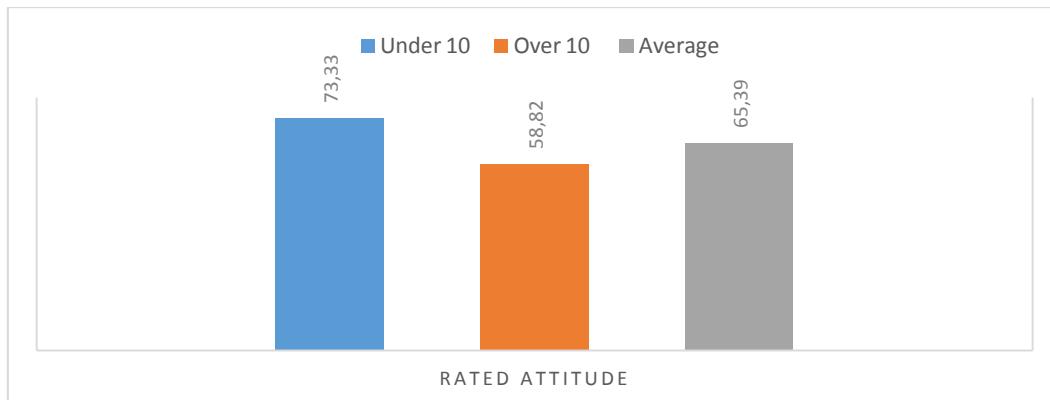


Figure 1 Foreign language teachers' attitude (extent of being positive) to teaching students with disabilities according to years of teaching experience

The survey obtained very significant answers to the question 'Do think your student(s) with disability would have learned better if taught individually/separately?'. 11 teachers answered with 'yes', 16 with 'maybe' and only 2 with 'no' (Figure 2). That means that a striking majority of the participants were not sure that the classroom instruction of students with disabilities is the most adequate one. When these results are juxtaposed with the teachers' attitude to teaching students with disabilities, we surprisingly see no overlapping between the belief that students with SEN will learn better separately with a negative attitude towards inclusion. The teachers answering 'maybe' had an average attitude of 69.18%, and understandably, those answering 'yes' had a slightly lower average attitude of 57.5%; one participant skipped the question.

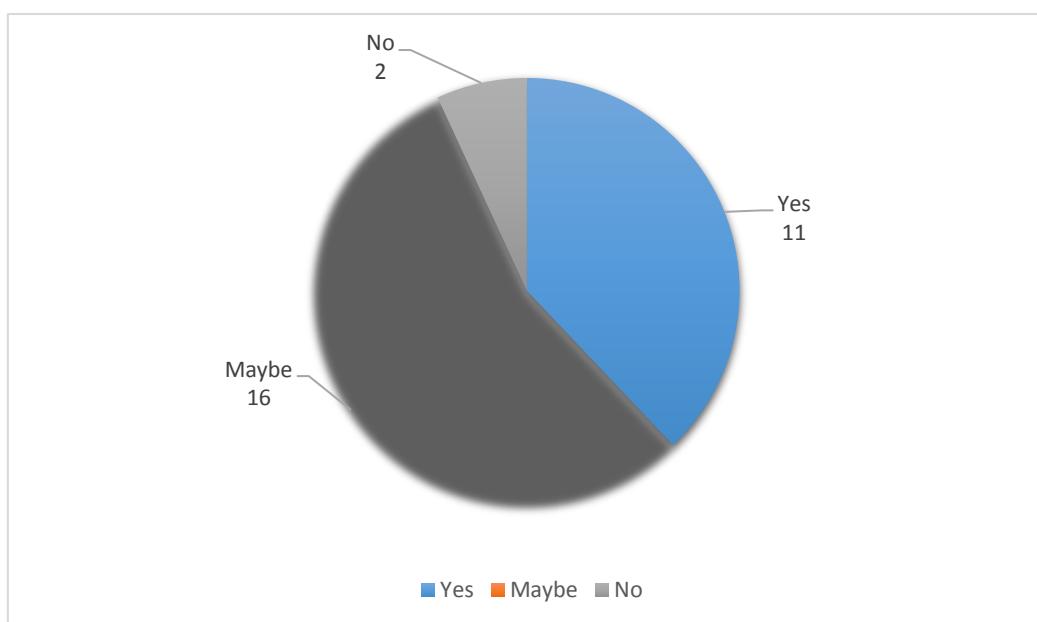


Figure 2 Answers to the question 'Do think your student(s) with disability would have learned better if taught individually/separately?'

When facing the task to teach a student with disability, only 4 of the teachers said they consulted a special educational expert, 13 looked for additional information, 1 answered s/he did both (although the same teacher said s/he had not had students with disabilities but it is possible that s/he has shown interest in the subject regardless of the fact), and 9 did neither. 3 skipped the question. It is noticeable that many of the teachers who had students with disabilities tried neither to get advice from a special education teacher, nor to look for information from other sources. Also, those who did not look for support in teaching students with disabilities had a more negative attitude to it than the total number of participants and those who did (Figure 3).

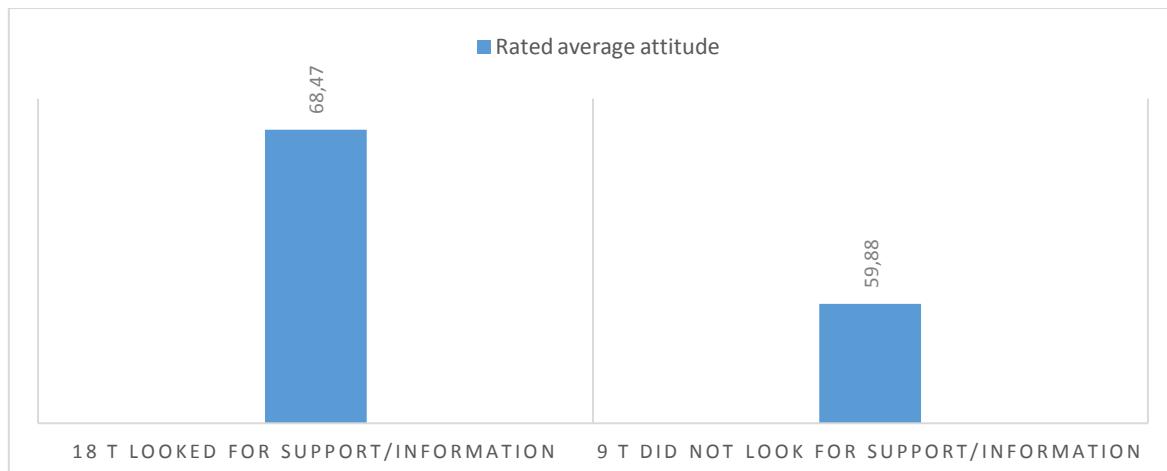


Figure 3 Attitude to teaching students with SEN of teachers who looked for specialist support/additional information and who did not look for it

It is interesting to notice that the teacher who gave the lowest rate about his/her attitude to teaching students with SEN (29%), answered s/he did not consult a special education expert and did not look for additional information through other sources. His/her own experience with teaching a student with SEN was teaching a blind student.

The researcher also asked the respondents an optional open-ended question about whether their attitude towards teaching students with disability changed as they were teaching them during the school/academic year, and if it did – how. Out of the 21 participants who answered the question, 11 replied in the affirmative, 10 in the negative. It is notable that 5 of the respondents started their answers with 'I realised' and one with 'I found'. It seems that the experience of teaching students with disability has led to **growing awareness** in terms of:

1) the extent of the teachers' own skills and knowledge and the need of proper training:

e.g. *'I found I lack the skills and expertise to teach special students.'*
'I definitely need some special training to help me feel more comfortable with students with disabilities...'

2) the necessity to be more observant and responsive to the students' needs:

e.g. *'I have become more observant.'*
'After more and more research and experimentation with different techniques and approaches, I became more sensitive to their individual needs.'

The experience of teaching students with SEN has led to a positive attitude to inclusion in some:

e.g. *'It changed from neutral to positive.'*

and a negative one in others:

e.g. '*I realised that one deaf student in the class causes a lot of trouble for the other students without any great benefit for that student.*'

In other cases these attitudes seem to fluctuate and reflect the complexities of trying to find the right approach to teaching students with SEN and the uncertainty of success:

e.g. '*I realised it was a challenge and I had mixed feelings of frustration at students' failure and happiness when they achieved some progress.*'

A very important point made by some of the teachers is the necessity of an individual approach to meeting the needs of students with SEN:

e.g. '*Students with disabilities have capacity for foreign language learning but they do better if an individual approach is applied in their teaching and the educator is well aware of their deficiencies and special requirements.*'

'I realised that they need special, tailor-made lessons.'

It was said earlier though that the majority of the teachers think that out-of-class teaching sessions either would or might benefit the students more. This is highlighted by one of the teachers in the answer to the last question:

e.g. '*... the focus was on individual teaching, which led to very good results.*'

Another interesting observation made by three teachers is the role of the students' classmates:

e.g. '*I've realised they need support and understanding as well as the appreciation of both their teachers and peers.*'

'The attitude ... is not only coming from the teacher but also from the other students in the group... If there is a negative attitude, in order for it to be changed, teachers needs to work on it with the group and not only make efforts by themselves'.

'I realized what immense influence positive peer attitude had on the student with hearing disability. Contrary to my worst fears, they didn't show impatience or exasperation with her slower pace but in fact helped her in every way to keep up with the rest of them. This somehow helped me open towards the idea of inclusive education.'

Thus, the both interactions between the teacher and student with SEN and the peers and the student with SEN play an important role in creating an inclusive learning environment. Furthermore, the positive interaction between the students with their classmate with SEN has the potential to alter a teacher's doubtful or reserved attitude to inclusive education.

Discussion

The average rate of the attitude towards teaching foreign language to students with disabilities of the thirty participating teachers is higher than 50% but is still quite low. The fact that the attitudes of those who have encountered students with SEN in their teaching practice and those who have not reach similar average numbers is an interesting finding as it might mean that this attitude is not determined by teachers' personal failure or success in inclusive foreign language teaching.

On the other hand, it was found that teachers with longer teaching practice had a more negative attitude than those with shorter. One explanation could be that longer years of teaching have led to a greater number of unsuccessful interaction with students with SEN, and consequently the formation of a more negative attitude. Such an interpretation, however, turns out less probable if we consider the previously discussed finding that the average attitude of those who have had students with a disability is not essentially different from those who have not. Besides, the integration of such students with SEN, especially those with more serious learning difficulties, started only a few years ago in Bulgaria.

Quite a reserved attitude towards inclusive foreign language education is visible in the teachers' opinion that *out-of-class* instruction of the student with SEN is or may be more effective. This question serves as a means of triangulation to the question how positive the teachers' attitude is. In addition, the survey shows that the majority of the participants have reservations towards in-class instruction independently of their overall attitude to teaching students with disabilities. That might mean that although many participants support the noble idea of welcoming all students in the classroom, its practical realisation still seems to them unattainable, possibly for lack of preparation.

Some authors raise doubts about the possibility of non-special education teachers to become sufficiently confident and skilled in meeting the needs of learners with disabilities. For example, J. MacBeath et al. (2005) contest that 'In the present circumstances it is not clear how teachers can build up their expertise on special needs... Much training is developed 'in-house' or 'on the job' and so is often inadequate and inadequately grounded in theory, emerging knowledge and breakthrough practice.' Similarly, when studying the differentiation applied when teaching students with dyslexia in English language classes, Rontou (2012) found that teachers faced

considerable difficulties due to lack of knowledge and training, unclear policies, inadequate guidelines and tools.

One answer to this predicament can be Florian and Linklater's (2010) argument that the question is not if teachers have the necessary knowledge to teach students with disabilities but how they can employ their knowledge and experience in the best possible way to meet all learner's needs. In their discussion about the inclusive pedagogical approach developed as part of the Inclusive Practice Project at the University of Aberdeen they identify 'a shift in thinking from ideas of "most" and "some" learners to everyone' (p. 369) – i.e. instead of devising ways to offer something different to learners with difficulties, to create a rich learning environment in which all children are able to take part in the learning process.

Another approach states that inclusive education is "an issue that *all staff* working in education policy and teacher training need to engage with, even if they do not become 'experts' in it" (Lewis & Bagree, 2013, p. 10). Lewis and Bagree's (2013) policy paper funded by Sightsavers on behalf of the International Disability and Development Consortium strongly suggests that not only should teachers make use of various techniques to make the system more flexible to suit a wider variety of learners, but they also have to take into account those specific characteristics that need more specialist attention. Raising teachers' awareness is an essential prerequisite to inclusive education. The policy paper affirms that 'Every teacher needs to learn about inclusive education, from day one of their training. This should be achieved by embedded inclusion, rights and equality throughout all training and not simply covering these issues through stand-alone courses' (*ibid*).

The participants in this survey identified one more factor in achieving an inclusive foreign language classroom – the support of all foreign language class members for the student with disability. While the teacher is often seen as the main stakeholder in the learning process, work with the whole class is deemed necessary to raise awareness of inclusive values among peers. The presence of a classmate with a disability is actually found to be beneficial to all students, developing their understanding of the natural diversity of life, abilities for co-operation, mutual assistance and teamwork and decision-making abilities based on fairness and equity (Gupta et al., 2014).

With training rarely available, seeking additional help from professionals or other sources is essential when teaching students with SEN. The fact that in the present