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Foreign language trainee teachers' concerns and preparedness to implement inclusive instructional practices with learners with special educational needs: training induced changes

Abstract

The study was conducted in a group of second year university students – pre-service teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL). The aim of the study was to investigate how the trainee teachers' participation in a compulsory SEN-dedicated course delivered online impacted their self-reported *concerns* and *preparedness* to implement inclusive teaching practices with foreign language (FL) learners with special educational needs (SEN). A semester-long course was designed and conducted as part of emergency remote instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic. Data was collected online via before and after course questionnaires. Principal component analysis of the *preparedness* and *concerns* scales led to a two-factor (F1 – *self-efficacy beliefs and knowledge* and F2 – *attitudes*) and a single factor solution (*concerns*) respectively. The pre- ($N=113$) and post-course ($N=86$) online survey responses were compared with regard to all the factors. The analysis showed that the participants' post-course attitudes were more positive than at the beginning of the course, but the difference was not statistically significant. We observed a statistically significant increase in the trainee teachers' post-course self-efficacy beliefs and knowledge of inclusion and SEN, with a large effect size. This change was paired with a statistically significant increase in their post-course concerns, with medium effect size for the change. A series of one-way MANOVAs showed that the effect

of demographic variables (gender, teaching experience other than during practicum, experience with learners with SEN) on all factors across the two datasets was not statistically significant.

Keywords: special educational needs, foreign language teacher education, inclusive teaching practices, teacher preparedness, teacher concerns

Słowa kluczowe: specjalne potrzeby edukacyjne, kształcenie nauczycieli języków obcych, włączające praktyki w nauczaniu, przygotowanie nauczycieli, obawy nauczycieli

1. Introduction

Welcoming diversity in the classrooms, ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all remain a goal and a challenge worldwide (United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals - goal 4 of Global Education 2030 Agenda). All forms of exclusion and marginalization in education should be addressed in teacher education. This includes inequalities related to presence, accessibility, participation, and achievement in education that many students, some of whom have traditionally been excluded from educational opportunities, still suffer from (UNESCO, 2017). Learners with special educational needs (SEN), including learning disabilities, physical impairments and disorders related to mental health, are among them (OECD, 2020). Valuing and respecting diverse student needs, abilities, and unique characteristics as well as providing high-quality support for vulnerable learners may pose challenges to teachers.

Teachers' self-efficacy beliefs are linked to their perceptions and evaluations of how well they can perform to maximise accessibility, participation, and the learning success of all students, including learners with SEN (Bandura, 1977; Tschannen-Moran, Woolfolk Hoy, 2001, 2007). More self-efficacious and less concerned teachers with positive attitudes towards inclusion are more eager, committed, successful and flexible in handling challenges related to implementing equitable and inclusive instructional practices with learners with SEN (Sharma, Sokal, 2016). Teachers' concerns about implementing inclusive classroom practices may be student-related (e.g., learners with SEN will not be accepted by other students in the language classroom; learners without SEN may get less attention, and therefore lose interest and motivation), teacher-related (e.g., increased workload, preparation time and stress level) and environment-related (e.g., insufficient understanding and institutional/school support in implementing inclusive instructional practices with

FL learners with SEN; poor training opportunities). Increase in self-efficacy beliefs, attitudes, knowledge and skills linked to inclusion has proved effective in diminishing teachers' concerns (Sharma, Forlin, Loreman, 2008; Sharma et al., 2006). The availability of classroom and school support services (e.g., materials, resources, equipment, specialist help) can mitigate teachers' concerns regarding their ability to implement inclusive teaching (Avramidis, Norwich, 2002).

Teachers who are knowledgeable about inclusive practices and SEN, and well-trained in applying them, can secure and support participation of all learners in inclusive classrooms. Therefore, appropriate teacher training is crucial in preparing teachers for inclusion (Coady, Harper, de Jong, 2016; European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 2012; Robinson, 2017). A consistent finding across studies in general education and special education context confirms the effectiveness of teacher training (mostly with relation to face-to-face courses) in raising self-efficacy beliefs and attitudes toward inclusion and lessening teachers' concerns (e.g., Sharma, Nuttal, 2016; Sharma, Sokal, 2015). Similarly, research in the FL teaching context shows that FL teachers' self-efficacy beliefs and attitudes to inclusion can be modified, developed, boosted, and sustained, and their concerns reduced by different modes of training (face-to-face, interactive online and self-study online) (Kormos, Nijakowska, 2017; Nijakowska, Kormos, 2016).

FL teacher training has great potential for equipping pre- and in-service teachers with values and strategies that will help them challenge non-inclusive, discriminatory, and inequitable educational practices (e.g., inaccessible teaching materials; undifferentiated instruction; a one-size-fits-all approach in teaching) and effectively teach all of their students (Nijakowska, Kormos, 2016). In this way the risk of underachievement and marginalization can be reduced and barriers limiting progress removed, which, in turn, can enable each student to learn as well as possible. FL teacher preparedness for inclusion is powerful in that it can influence the quality of FL provision to learners with SEN, however, this concept has not been extensively researched to date. Not much is known about the effectiveness of FL teacher education programmes (delivered in different modes) in terms of raising teacher trainees' preparedness to include learners with SEN (Kormos, Nijakowska, 2017).

Against the background presented above, the present study investigated how EFL trainee teachers' self-efficacy beliefs, their knowledge of inclusion and SEN, and attitudes regarding inclusive teaching practices with FL learners with SEN can be enhanced and their concerns alleviated because of active participation in an online course dedicated to inclusive language teaching for learners with SEN.

The novelty of this study is that it took place in the previously under-researched context of initial FL teacher education concerning inclusion and

SEN conducted entirely online, with synchronous and asynchronous modules. Importantly, the online learning investigated in this study was part of the emergency remote instruction induced by the COVID-19 pandemic, during which all university courses were conducted online. This means that opportunities for teaching practice (practicum) for pre-service teachers (a compulsory part of their training linked to courses on teaching methodology, including the SEN course) were limited to observation of classes conducted online, or partly substituted with other activities (e.g., design of teaching materials). Consequently, most of the study participants lacked direct contact and teaching experience with learners with SEN. They did not have mastery experiences related to learners with SEN (personal teaching experiences and performances) (Bandura, 1977) which are viewed as most influential in the formation of teacher self-efficacy beliefs (Tschannen-Moran, Woolfolk Hoy, 2007). Emergency online instruction caused additional challenges such as dealing with social distance, demotivation, poor student well-being, and poor concentration caused by many hours spent in front of a computer.

The reported study addressed the following research questions:

- RQ1: What is the factorial structure of the preparedness and concerns scales? (What are the factors that make up the constructs of EFL pre-service teachers' concerns and preparedness to implement inclusive instructional practices with FL learners with SEN?)
- RQ2: How do preparedness and concerns regarding inclusive FL teaching of learners with SEN differ before and after participation in the SEN-dedicated course conducted online?
- RQ3: How are demographic variables (such as gender, teaching experience other than during the practicum and teaching experience with learners with SEN) related to pre- and post-course preparedness and concerns about implementing inclusive instructional practices with learners with SEN?

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The participants of the study were second year university students in the EFL teacher training programme, who attended a compulsory online course on teaching EFL to learners with SEN. 128 students, divided into five groups, were enrolled in the course. All five groups were taught by the same teacher. 126 (98.4%) of all the enrolled students were active course participants, meaning that they engaged with the course materials and instructional process. 120

(95.2%) students completed the course with success, getting positive marks that ranged from 3 to 5¹; 6 (4.8%) students did not get credit for the course and got a failing grade ($M_{\text{grade}}=3.79$, $Md=4$; $Mode=4$, $SD=0.7$).

Participation in the study was voluntary and anonymous. Participants completing the pre- and post-course surveys could not be matched due to issues of confidentiality and anonymity. Therefore, the pre- and post-course survey participants are treated as separate groups and their characteristics are also reported separately.

From among the active course participants, 113 (88.3%) responded to the pre-course questionnaire and 86 (67.2%) answered the post-course questionnaire. All responses in the pre- and post-course questionnaires were complete, there was no missing data. 108 (96%) pre-course and 81 (94%) post-course survey respondents were from Poland, five participants were Erasmus+ students from Spain, Germany and Italy. The age of the study participants ranged from 20 to 29, with most of them being between 20 and 23, both before (107; 94.6%) and after (80; 93%) the course. The mean age of participants in both the pre- ($M_{\text{age}}=21.19$, $Md=21$; $Mode=21$, $SD=1.58$) and post-course ($M_{\text{age}}=21.52$, $Md=21$; $Mode=21$, $SD=1.56$) survey was slightly above 21. In the pre-course survey, 91 (80.5%) of the respondents were female, 22 (19.5%) were male and in the post-course survey 69 (80.2%) were female, 17 (19.8%) were male. Most of the study participants were female, which was expected as the teacher training programme was dominated by women. In the pre-course questionnaire 50 (44.2%) participants confirmed that they had some teaching experience other than the compulsory teaching practice (practicum) required as part of their training at university. In the post-course questionnaire, the number of respondents who had some teaching experience other than during the practicum was 45 (52.3%). Most of the pre-course (92; 81.4%) and post-course (64; 74.4%) survey respondents had no experience teaching learners with SEN.

2.2. Measures

The questionnaire which was used to collect data in both the pre- and post-course surveys contained 36 items, divided into parts A and B.

Part A included seven demographic questions that asked about biographical information, teaching experience other than the compulsory teaching practice (practicum) required as part of pre-service teacher training at university and experience in teaching students with SEN.

¹ On a scale from 2 to 5, where 3, 4, and 5 are passing grades and 2 is a failing grade. Grades 4 and 5 denote greater achievement.

The next 28 six-point Likert scale items constituted part B and aimed at assessing participants' preparedness (21 items) and concerns (7 items) relating to inclusive teaching of a FL to learners with SEN. The final question in the questionnaire had an open format and asked participants to share their comments and thoughts about the course.

Out of 21 items which constituted the preparedness scale 18 were selected and adapted from the Teacher of English Preparedness to Include Dyslexics Scale (TEPID) (Nijakowska, Tsagari, Spanoudis, 2018, 2020). TEPID scale was originally designed to measure pre- and in-service teachers' self-reported preparedness to implement inclusive instructional practices with EFL learners with dyslexia and covered teachers' knowledge, self-efficacy beliefs and attitudes. Three new items were designed and added to the scale (items 5, 8, 10) (see Table 1 for the preparedness scale items).

The concerns scale referring to trainee teachers' worries about implementing inclusive teaching practices comprised seven items. Three of them (items 1, 2, and 3) were adapted from the Sentiments, Attitudes, and Concerns about Inclusive Education Revised (SACIER) scale (Forlin et al., 2011), which was originally designed for measuring pre-service teachers' perceptions relating to their sentiments or comfort levels when engaging with people with disabilities, acceptance of learners with different needs, and concerns about implementing inclusion. Two items (items 4 and 5) were adapted from the scale measuring language teachers' self-confidence, self-efficacy and attitudes to using inclusive educational practices with dyslexic students before and after participation in a massive open online course (MOOC) (Kormos, Nijakowska, 2017). Finally, two new items were designed and added to the scale (items 6 and 7). The wording of the adapted items was changed so that they referred to FL learners with SEN (see Table 2 for the concerns scale items).

The survey participants were asked to indicate to what extent the statements in part B of the questionnaire were true for them on a scale of 1 to 6. In the preparedness scale 1=*completely untrue of me* and 6=*completely true of me*, meaning that the higher the overall score the greater the pre-service teacher's preparedness. In the concerns scale 1=*completely true of me* and 6=*completely untrue of me*, meaning that the higher the overall score the lower the trainee teacher's concerns.

2.3. Procedure

The study took place within the context of emergency remote instruction during COVID-19-induced school closure. Data was collected from university students – second-year trainee teachers attending a semester-long compulsory course on inclusive FL teaching of students with SEN.

The course design followed the pedagogical model that views a FL teacher as a reflective practitioner (Tanner, Green, 1998; Wallace, 1991) and used a task-based approach to teacher development and training (Samuda, Bygate, 2008) within the constraints of the instructional design features of the university Moodle platform and Zoom platform. Its goals were for students to get a better understanding of inclusive education and SEN, to get familiar with inclusive FL instructional practices, and to learn new approaches that can assist and enhance the learning processes of FL learners with SEN. The course intended to raise trainee teachers' awareness of the nature of SEN, with a particular focus on neurodiverse learners, including learners with specific learning difficulties such as dyslexia, ADHD, dyspraxia, and Asperger's syndrome. The aim of the course was to enable students to make their own teaching more inclusive by employing learner-centred teaching methodologies, creatively adapting, and differentiating teaching methods, tasks, materials, and techniques to the individual needs of their students, and to reflect on their own teaching practices and strategies. The course goal was to boost trainee teachers' preparedness in terms of knowledge, skills, and attitudes, as well as to diminish their concerns about teaching FL learners with SEN.

The course was 15 weeks long and was conducted entirely online. The course was worth 2.5 ECTS points, requiring about 65–75 hours of work, including both contact hours and self-study. It comprised fifteen modules, seven of which were synchronous (taught in real time) online classes delivered via the Zoom platform (video conferencing), together with Moodle platform (repository of the materials and instructions to the tasks conducted during real time online classes). The synchronous classes took place every second week and lasted 1.5 hours. The remaining eight modules were designed as online asynchronous classes and were available to students via the university Moodle platform in the timeframe between the synchronous classes. Each module consisted of several instructional steps and included both compulsory and optional materials (e.g., input – readings, videos, podcasts, resources, discussion questions, reflection prompts) and tasks (e.g., forum discussions, quizzes, workshops, games, designing pedagogical tasks, giving feedback). The completion of one module was expected to take 4–5 hours. Participants could complete the asynchronous modules at their own pace.

Communication in the course took place in real time online meetings as well as via the multiple channels offered by Moodle, which included news and announcements board, calendar, social forum, dialogue, but also feedback files, online commentaries (notes and comments), and emails. Tools offered by Zoom and Moodle that allow for group and pair work (e.g., breakout rooms, workshops, wikis, forums, group assignments etc.) were used to support student interaction.

The questionnaire was administered online using Google Forms – a survey administration software included as part of the web-based Google Docs Editors suite offered by Google. A link to the pre-course questionnaire was available to participants in the course on the Moodle platform. Information about the survey with a link was also sent via email as part of a welcome message including course information before the course started. The link to the pre-course questionnaire was available a week before the course started and stayed active until the end of the first week of the course. The link to the post-course questionnaire was provided to students during the last week of the course via email and on the Moodle platform and it remained active until one week after the end date of the course. Participation in the survey was voluntary and anonymous, and no identifying information was collected.

2.4. Results and discussion

2.4.1. Factor analysis

Our first research question asked about the factorial structure of the preparedness scale. To answer RQ1, principal component analysis (PCA) was performed on all the data (21 items) across the two samples (pre- and post-course responses) with orthogonal rotation (varimax). All 21 items correlated at least .3 with at least one other item, with most correlations being weak or moderate and with the highest correlation coefficient not greater than .70 and .81 in the pre- and post-course data respectively. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure verified the sampling adequacy. KMO equalled .855 for the pre- and .900 for the post-course dataset, which is well above the acceptable limit of .5 (Field, 2009). Most of the diagonals of the anti-image correlation matrix were well over .67 in the pre- and well over .85 in the post-course data, justifying the inclusion of all the items in factor analysis. Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant for both datasets (pre-course: $\chi^2(171) = 1176.87, p < .001$; post-course: $\chi^2(210) = 1423.93, p < .001$) and indicated that correlations between items were sufficiently large for PCA. The communalities were all above .3 in the post-course sample, indicating that each item shared some common variance with other items. In the pre-course sample, communality was lower than .3 for item 1 and equalled .02 (this item did not function as expected and was later removed from the scale).

Two-factor solutions were reached for both the pre- and post-course datasets. In the pre-course data, the eigenvalue for factor 1 was 7.98 and for factor 2 was 2.67. In the post-course data, the eigenvalue for factor 1 was 11.18 and for factor 2 was 1.94. For the pre-course sample, the initial eigenvalues showed

that the first factor explained 37.98% of the variance and the second factor 12.71% of the variance, while in the post-course dataset the first factor explained 53.25% of the variance and the second factor 9.23% of the variance. Overall, these two factors explained 50.69% of the variance in the pre-course sample and 62.48% in the post-course sample. The scree plot analysis showed that the scree flattened out and tailed downwards after the second factor. All the items had primary loadings over .33. In the pre-course dataset, all primary loadings but one, in both factors, exceeded .6, while in the post-course dataset, all primary loadings in factor 2, and all but one in factor 1 exceeded .6. Several items presented cross-loadings across both datasets. Table 1 shows the factor loadings after rotation along with item means and standard deviations for the pre- and post-course samples.

Items	Pre-course factor loadings		Post-course factor loadings		Pre-course		Post-course	
	F1	F2	F1	F2	M	SD	M	SD
2. I can give feedback to learners with special educational needs in such a way that it boosts their self-esteem.	.577		.603		3.56	1.45	5.03	1.05
5. I am familiar with the principles of inclusive teaching.	.702		.608		3.23	1.43	5.10	1.06
6. I can provide differentiated instruction to cater for the individual needs of learners with special educational needs.	.818		.760		3.15	1.38	4.98	0.99
7. I can modify the way teaching materials are presented to accommodate individual learning needs of learners with special educational needs.	.741		.728		3.48	1.49	5.09	1.00
8. I am familiar with the principles of universal design for learning.	.602		.708		3.07	1.40	5.09	1.04
9. I can personalize assessment techniques to evaluate progress of language learners with special educational needs.	.803		.748		3.35	1.50	4.86	1.16
12. I can help foreign language learners with special educational needs to develop effective learning strategies.	.774		.694		3.60	1.53	5.00	0.95
14. I can foster autonomy in foreign language learners with special educational needs.	.775		.576		3.33	1.31	4.79	0.98
16. I know what to do if I think that one of my students has special educational needs.	.693		.636		3.04	1.30	4.95	1.04
18. I am familiar with the accommodations that learners with special educational needs are entitled to in taking foreign language proficiency exams.	.626		.644		3.28	1.48	4.74	1.12
19. I can manage the classroom environment to cater for individual learning needs of learners with special educational needs.	.765		.822		3.20	1.38	4.93	1.03
20. I am familiar with the educational legislation/policy in my country concerning learners with special educational needs.	.674		.694		2.49	1.34	4.31	1.31

21. I can differentiate tasks and assignments to cater for individual learning needs of learners with special educational needs.	.821	.783	3.29	1.38	4.94	0.99
1. I am familiar with the difficulties learners with special educational needs may experience in foreign language learning. *	.438	.706	3.89	1.45	5.21	1.03
10. I am familiar with the possible causes of (conditions that may cause) special educational needs. *	.693	.721	3.78	1.31	5.12	1.05
3. I believe foreign language learners with special educational needs may need adjustments in the mainstream language classroom.	.651	.784	4.93	1.01	5.30	0.93
4. I believe teacher behaviour in a language classroom influences self-esteem of learners with special educational needs.	.744	.678	5.53	0.70	5.62	0.75
11. I believe developing self-determination in foreign language learners with special educational needs is important.	.749	.753	5.04	1.05	5.41	0.90
13. I believe foreign language teachers should be able to differentiate their approach to all learners, including those with special educational needs.	.730	.777	5.12	1.00	5.40	0.80
15. I believe it is important for foreign language teachers to collaborate with parents/families of the learners with special educational needs.	.737	.696	5.27	0.97	5.41	0.80
17. I believe collaborative teamwork with a range of educational professionals is important for teachers of foreign language learners with special educational needs.	.479	.782	4.73	1.18	5.36	0.80

Note. Factor loadings < .3; cross-loadings are suppressed

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.

*Note: Items 1 and 10 were removed from the scale and from further analysis

Table 1: Factor loadings after rotation for 21 items of the preparedness scale, means and standard deviations for the pre- ($N=113$) and post-course ($N=86$) samples.

Items 1 and 10 proved problematic because they loaded on both factors, and they had their primary loadings on the first factor in the pre-course and on the second factor in the post-course sample. All other items had their primary loadings onto the same factors across both datasets. We decided to remove items 1 and 10 from further analysis. The two-factor solution derived for the preparedness dataset was then identical for the pre- and post-course items and involved the following factors underlying the construct of preparedness: factor 1 (F1): self-efficacy beliefs and knowledge about implementing inclusive instructional practices with learners with SEN (13 variables included; cut-off point: pre-course .577 and post-course .576) and factor 2 (F2): attitudes towards inclusion of learners with SEN in mainstream FL classes (6 variables included; cut-off point: pre-course .479 and post-course .678).

The reliability of the preparedness subscales ranged from reliable to very highly reliable. Self-efficacy beliefs and knowledge scale had a very high

internal consistency both in the pre-course ($\alpha = .926$) and post-course ($\alpha = .939$) datasets. The attitude scale was reliable for the pre-course ($\alpha = .770$) and highly reliable for the post-course ($\alpha = .883$) (Cohen, Manion, Morrison, 2011).

Our first research question also asked about the factorial structure of the concerns scale. To answer RQ1, principal component analysis (PCA) was performed on all the data (7 items) across the two samples (pre- and post-course responses) with orthogonal rotation (varimax). The examination of the factorability of the concerns scale (7 items) for the pre- and post-course questionnaire data separately did not yield a satisfactory and consistent solution across datasets. The factor structure differed across datasets. Two factors were identified for the pre-course and three for the post-course sample. Some items loaded primarily on different factors across datasets, one factor in the pre-course sample and two factors in the post-course sample had primary loadings only from two items.

Cronbach's Alpha for the concerns scale (7 items) equalled .567 and .768 in pre- and post-course questionnaire respectively. Removing item 7 from the scale resulted in improvement in internal consistency for the pre-course dataset ($\alpha = .604$) and a slight decrease of reliability in the post-course sample ($\alpha = .732$). Reliability values for the concerns scale (6 items) were lower than for the two preparedness subscales but still within the acceptable range (Cohen, Manion, Morrison, 2011). A single factor solution for the 6-item concerns scale was retained. Overall, for the pre-course sample, the initial eigenvalue showed that a single factor explained 34.5% of the variance, while in the post-course dataset a single factor explained 43.7% of the variance (see Table 2 for factor loadings). Composite scores for the two preparedness subscales and the concerns scale were computed using regression factor scores and were used for further analyses (Field, 2009).

Concerns scale items	Pre-course	Post-course	Pre-course		Post-course	
	factor loadings*	factor loadings*	M	SD	M	SD
1. I am concerned that my workload will increase if I have students with special educational needs in my language classes.	.675	.608	4.39	1.39	4.15	1.44
2. I am concerned that students with special educational needs will not be accepted by other students in the language classroom.	.431	.531	4.46	1.22	3.77	1.48
3. I am concerned that I will be more stressed if I have students with special educational needs in my language classes.	.730	.732	4.67	1.27	3.85	1.55
4. You have to be a specially trained teacher to teach foreign languages to learners with special educational needs.	.354	.471	4.47	1.38	4.19	1.48
5. Other learners suffer because of having learners with special educational needs in their classes.	.636	.776	2.71	1.43	2.09	1.44

6. In inclusive classrooms students without special educational needs may get less attention, and therefore lose interest and motivation.	.604	.781	3.37	1.50	2.44	1.50
7. Differentiation might mean that students with special educational needs are given unjustifiable benefits (e.g., by using technological devices). **	-		2.87	1.52	2.60	1.74

*Extraction method: Principal Component Analysis; unrotated solution, 1 component extracted

**Note: Item 7 was removed from the scale and from further analysis

Table 2: Factor loadings for 7 items of the concerns scale, means and standard deviations for the pre- ($N=113$) and post-course ($N=86$) samples.

2.4.2. Differences between pre- and post-course preparedness and concerns

In our second research question we asked how self-reported preparedness and concerns regarding inclusive FL teaching to learners with SEN differ before and after a compulsory online course. All post-course item means of both preparedness subscales were higher in comparison to pre-course item means, indicating increase in self-efficacy beliefs and knowledge as well as more positive attitudes after the course (see Table 1). All post-course item means of the concerns scale were lower than before the course, which means that the concerns did not diminish but grew after the course (see Table 2).

To answer RQ2 and to see whether differences between pre- and post-course preparedness and concerns were statistically significant, a multiple analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted. Pre- and post-course answers along three scales were compared to discover the impact of participation in the course (pre-course versus post-course) on trainee teachers' self-efficacy beliefs and knowledge, attitudes, and concerns related to inclusive FL teaching to learners with SEN. A statistically significant MANOVA effect was obtained, there was a significant effect of course participation on perceptions of preparedness and concerns (Wilks' $\lambda = 0.54$, $F(6, 390) = 23.71$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .27$). The multivariate effect size is large and implies that 27% of the variance in the dependent variables was accounted for by course participation.

Separate univariate analyses of variance (ANOVAs) for outcome variables were conducted as follow-up tests to the MANOVA and revealed statistically significant effect of course participation on trainee teachers' self-efficacy beliefs and knowledge ($F(1, 197) = 78.64$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .44$) as well as on concerns ($F(2, 197) = 11.76$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = .11$). The effect of course participation on attitudes was non-significant ($F(1, 197) = .31$, $p = .735$, $\eta^2 = .003$). The results for the individual scales showed that post-course self-efficacy beliefs and knowledge as well as concerns were significantly higher than at the beginning of the course, with the effect size of the change being large for self-efficacy beliefs and knowledge and medium for concerns. Attitudes were very positive

from the start of the course and increased even further after the course, but the difference was not statistically significant (see Table 3).

Scale	Sample	N	Mean	Mean factor score	SD	F	p	Partial eta squared η^2
Self-efficacy beliefs and knowledge	Pre-course	113	3.24	-.58	.86	78.64	.000*	.44
	Post-course	86	4.91	.76	.56			
Attitudes	Pre-course	113	5.10	-.04	1.03	.31	.735	.003
	Post-course	86	5.41	.06	.95			
Concerns	Pre-course	113	4.01	.28	.86	11.76	.000*	.11
	Post-course	86	3.41	-.37	1.05			

*Statistically significant result

Table 3: Differences between pre-course and post-course self-efficacy beliefs and knowledge, attitudes, and concerns.

Significant increase in post-course self-efficacy beliefs and knowledge, along with positive attitudes, was not powerful enough to alleviate sentiments and worries. All reported concerns significantly intensified after the course. This can be partially attributed to limited overall teaching experience and teaching experience with learners with SEN. Research findings show that direct and systematic contact as well as practical teaching tasks proved invaluable in reducing concerns and boosting teachers' confidence that they can successfully include learners with SEN (Campbell, Gilmore, Cuskelly, 2003; Sharma, Forlin, Loreman, 2008). In our study approximately 20% of respondents in both datasets reported having very limited teaching experience with learners with SEN, mostly in one-to-one teaching contexts. Insufficient teaching experience involving learners with SEN in regular FL classes as well as lack of structured fieldwork experiences and experiential learning during the practicum in the context of emergency online teaching during the pandemic, could have inflated the concerns of the course participants.

The analysis of means of all the items in the concerns scale across the datasets (see Table 3) showed that the lowest means (denoting the greatest worries) were linked to two student-related items. These items referred to the trainee teachers' concerns about the wellbeing of learners without SEN in FL classrooms where both students with and without SEN learn together. Participants were most concerned about the fact that other learners may suffer because of having learners with SEN in their classes (item 5, pre-course $M=2.71$, post course $M=2.09$) and that in inclusive classrooms students without SEN may get less attention, and therefore lose interest and motivation (item 6, pre-course $M=3.33$, post course $M=2.44$). Trainee teachers were much less concerned that students with SEN will not be accepted by other students in

the language classrooms (item 2, pre-course $M=4.46$, post course $M=3.77$). Moderate teacher-related concerns about possible increase in workload (item 1, pre-course $M=4.39$, post course $M=4.15$) and the level of stress related to having learners with SEN in their classes (item 3, pre-course $M=4.67$, post course $M=3.85$) were identified. Finally, participants were relatively worried that they may need special training to teach FL to learners with SEN (item 4, pre-course $M=4.47$, post course $M=4.19$).

The nature of participants' concerns may indicate that they understood that a one-size-fits-all approach in FL teaching is not effective and that an equity approach requires inclusive FL teachers to understand and remove existing barriers to learning and recognize that their learners may need varied support and differentiated teaching to share the advantages of FL study. However, it seems that participants may not have integrated the idea of a universal design for learning that promotes planning lessons with the widest range of learners and their needs in mind. Such a flexible and intentional design of learning environments and contexts, where barriers to learning are proactively reduced before they materialize in the classroom, is more time efficient and effective in meeting the needs of all learners, both those with and without SEN.

2.4.3. Effect of demographic variables on preparedness and concerns

Our third research question looked at how three demographic variables, namely gender, teaching experience other than during the practicum, and teaching experience with students with SEN, were related to pre- and post-course self-efficacy beliefs and knowledge, attitudes, and concerns about implementing inclusive instructional practices with FL learners with SEN. To answer RQ3, three separate one-way multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVAs) were conducted, with composite scores for the three scales across the two datasets as dependent variables and one of the three demographic variables as the independent variable in each analysis. A non-significant Box's M (in all analyses) indicated that the homogeneity of variance-covariance matrix assumption was not violated. The multivariate test statistic led us to conclude that the effects of all the examined demographic variables were non-significant for all the dependent variables (self-efficacy beliefs and knowledge, attitudes, and concerns) across the two datasets (pre- and post-course). This could be partially attributed to the fact that teaching experience other than during the practicum, even though reported by about half of the respondents, concerned mainly one-to-one teaching, rather than school-based mainstream classroom teaching experience. Also, both general teaching experience and teaching experience with FL learners with SEN reported by the respondents was limited.

2.5. Conclusion

In the present study we investigated how participation in the SEN-dedicated course conducted online impacted the pre-service teachers' preparedness and concerns about inclusion of learners with SEN. The levels of pre- and post-course preparedness and concerns were assessed based on the course participants' self-reported beliefs and perceptions, which were not validated by observation of their actual classroom practices. This was the case because during the pandemic students had limited opportunities to experience direct contact and face-to-face teaching with FL learners with SEN. Analysis of participants' perceptions carries the risk of an overestimation, or underestimation, of the respondents pre- and post-course self-efficacy and knowledge, attitudes, and concerns because teachers stated beliefs are not always compatible with their classroom practices (Basturkmen, 2012).

Our study identified the factorial structure of the preparedness and concerns scales (two-factor and single-factor solutions respectively) and confirmed their suitability for the pre- and post-course comparisons. Statistically significant differences between the pre- and post-course self-efficacy beliefs and knowledge, as well as concerns were shown. The study demonstrated the effectiveness of the compulsory online SEN-dedicated course on teaching EFL to learners with SEN in significantly increasing self-efficacy beliefs and knowledge of inclusive instructional practices for learners with SEN. This finding is especially comforting and promising because teachers' self-efficacy beliefs are not only powerful to trigger teacher classroom practices and actions, but they can also impact student self-efficacy beliefs, motivation to learn and academic achievement (Guo et al., 2012). Participation in the course triggered a slight increase in already very positive attitudes toward the inclusion of FL learners with SEN in FL classes.

However, the course, which constitutes an integral part of an initial FL teacher education program, failed to mitigate trainee teachers' concerns about including learners with SEN in FL classes. This finding is inconsistent with other research outcomes relating to the influence of training on teachers' concerns about implementing inclusive instructional practices (Kormos, Nijakowska, 2017; Sharma, Forlin, Loreman, 2008; Sharma et al., 2006). This could be partially explained by the very special context of the pandemic in which the course was conducted. Emergency online learning and teaching had considerable and multidimensional impact on initial FL teacher education, including organizational and quality issues related to compulsory teaching practice as well as student and teacher wellbeing and mental health (Chen, Lucock, 2022; Jelińska, Paradowski, 2021). In the context of forced online instruction at all levels of education, the benefits of direct contact and experiential learning through face-to-face interactions (Peebles, Mondaglio, 2014), as well as chances to deal on-site with the challenges brought by teaching FL to learners

with SEN, and to verify the skills and knowledge learned in the course during the practicum, were lost. Due to COVID-19 school closure, conducting compulsory teaching practice in face-to-face form was impossible. The practicum could take place online in real time (involving interaction with learners) or in an asynchronous online environment (via different online learning platforms), but it could also be postponed, or partly substituted with selected projects and tasks which did not require direct contact and teaching. This means that the second-year students' teaching experiences were diverse, with some of them having no real time teaching experience at the time when this study took place. The context of an online practicum, even when providing chances for real time teaching and interaction with students, failed to guarantee enough quality teaching experience involving working with whole classes where students with and without SEN learn together. Mitigating course participants' concerns under such circumstances proved difficult and ineffective. Direct contact, and greater experience in managing on-site teaching would have exposed the respondents to the demands of diversified educational contexts, give them the chance to verify their skills and get a better understanding of the needs of various learners. This, in turn, could have boosted their confidence and readiness to face challenges, which could then have been translated into fewer concerns and even more positive attitudes towards inclusion of FL learners with SEN.

In a follow-up qualitative study, we will collect data from observations, reflective journals and interviews with students who completed the compulsory online course with the aim to verify how their preparedness and concerns change over time, after they are back to COVID-free learning and teaching. We are especially interested in whether direct contact and face-to-face teaching context can successfully reduce the concerns they voiced in the course.

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