

SUPPORTING NEURODIVERSE STUDENTS IN THE EFL CLASSROOM: THE INTEGRATION OF MUSIC INTO THE PRACTICES FOR EDUCATING STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

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Received: January 26, 2024

Accepted: April 17, 2024

Published: April 30, 2024

Suggested Citation:

Kahveci, K., Mercan Bozok, N., & Özüorçun, F. (2024). Supporting neurodiverse students in the EFL classroom: The integration of music into the practices for educating students with special needs. *International Journal of New Trends in Arts, Sports & Science Education (IJTASE)*, 13(2), 143-152.



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Abstract

Typically, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers around the globe encounter a diverse array of students, each with unique learning challenges and needs. Despite the growing prevalence of students with neurological differences, neurodivergent or students with special needs in English language classrooms, many EFL teachers still lack the specialized training and guidance necessary to effectively accommodate these students' needs. Accordingly this study will investigate these questions: What are the attitudes of ELT pre-service teachers regarding the integration of music into the practices for educating students with special needs? What are the existing resources for integrating music into the practices of ELT pre-service teachers in the education of students with special needs? 42 third-year pre-service ELT teachers participated in the study. A mixed-method approach was employed. It has been determined that while there is a tendency to incorporate music into English teaching environments, participants feel limited confidence in this area, yet they are open to improving themselves. They possess beginner-level knowledge about music but need more detailed information and training on how to teach effectively to teach students with special needs.

Keywords: neurodiversity, EFL inclusion, pre-service teacher training, special education.

INTRODUCTION

Educators generally recognize the importance of music education in a child's life. Traditionally, music has been integrated into school curricula to enhance sensory perception, offer avenues for creative self-expression, and develop skills in musical performance. It also serves to educate students about the fundamental elements and historical context of music as an art form. These facets of musical engagement help foster aesthetic sensitivity and improve the overall quality of life (Kocabaş & Özeke, 2012). Beyond boosting aesthetic appreciation, music also plays a role in the physical, social, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual growth of individuals (Özgül, 2014). Musical engagement, when designed and implemented with specific objectives in mind, serve as an effective tool for imparting various skills and knowledge to students with special needs. These skills include establishing eye contact, developing listening to abilities, learning to help and share with others, harmonizing in team activities, building confidence, enhancing, and effectively using language, using the voice properly, coordinating the body, improving focus, developing expression skills, and teaching various concepts

(Eren, Deniz & Düzkanar, 2013). A growing consensus among music therapists and educators suggests that musical activities offer the same educational benefits to children with special needs.

When there is a shortage of music staff, it typically falls upon classroom teachers or special education teachers to take on the role of providing music education to their students. As special needs children are more frequently integrated into mainstream classrooms, classroom teachers who conduct music lessons are expected to incorporate these students into musical activities, provided they are present during those scheduled times. Additionally, teachers in self-contained special education classrooms or in special education clinics are encouraged to incorporate music into their curriculum, especially in the absence of a dedicated music teacher in the school (Eren, 2012).

Music often serves as a popular subject for integration, leading many music teachers to work with special needs students for the first time, a novel experience for both parties. Previously, we noted the insufficient training in music education for regular classroom teachers. This shortfall in preparation also extends to special education teachers, whose training typically mirrors that of their general education counterparts, with the addition of specialized courses in special education. Adding complexity to the situation, it is unlikely or very limited that any of the teachers—whether they are in general, special education, or music—have received training through a course specifically focused on music education for special needs children, which would include specialized teaching techniques for handicapped students (Kocabaş & Özeke, 2012). The curriculum of a music methods course for special education would naturally have to incorporate aspects of special education.

Typically, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers around the globe encounter a diverse array of students, each with unique learning challenges and needs. In recent times, there has been a notable increase in students identified with special needs. This rise can be attributed to enhanced recognition and improved diagnostic techniques (Rogers & Dawson, 2010). Despite the growing prevalence of students with neurological differences in English language classrooms, many EFL teachers still lack the specialized training and guidance necessary to effectively accommodate these students' needs (Lowe, 2016).

As research into the education of students with special needs progresses, educators consistently highlight the necessity for more professional development in this field. They often search for meaningful learning experiences to enhance their teaching practices, as noted by Cassidy (1991), Frisque, Niebur, & Humphreys (1994), and Hammel (2001). Regrettably, training courses tailored to prepare teachers for working with special needs students are largely missing from the central curricula of many music teacher training programs. Despite the availability of some quality resources, there is a continued call from teachers for additional support and materials (Hammel, & Gerrity, 2012).

In their research, Salvador and Pasiali (2017) emphasized the adoption of a student-centered educational approach and the development of effective strategies to enhance the music education process for students with special needs. Creating an inclusive classroom environment is crucial for neurodiverse students to feel respected and appreciated for their unique selves. When these students experience a sense of inclusion, they tend to be more involved and enthusiastic about their studies. It's important to help students form supportive relationships and to establish a consistent and orderly setting with well-defined routines and guidelines. This helps neurodiverse students thrive academically.

Additionally, in English language classrooms, the utilization of music often extends only to activities involving song lyrics, yet the profound similarities between music and language suggest that music could serve as a powerful tool for language acquisition. Engaging in musical activities can enhance learners' ability to remember vocabulary and grammatical structures, thereby allowing their working memories to handle more complex cognitive tasks. Music's intrinsic elements like rhythm, pitch, dynamics, and tempo can also improve phonological awareness beyond mere phonemes, improving students' abilities to understand and produce spoken English more effectively. Furthermore, incorporating musical activities not only boosts motivation and positive feelings but also helps manage classroom energy levels, aiding students in focusing and completing tasks more efficiently.

not only for neurotypical students but also neurodivergent students as well. Collaborative musical activities contribute to better group cohesion, fostering an inclusive learning atmosphere where all students feel valued and can contribute uniquely. This music incorporated approach is essential for fostering truly inclusive practices within the language learning environment (Smith, 2019).

Enriching the training content for pre-service teachers is crucial for promoting truly inclusive practices within the language learning environment. Teachers who are aware that there are many neurodivergent students in classrooms take this into account when training future educators. For example, in the course "Materials Design in ELT" (ELTE339), the curriculum can be designed to also address the needs of neurodivergent or special needs students. This approach ensures that all students are considered and included in educational strategies, preparing pre-service teachers to create a more inclusive classroom. The students take this course in their third years. Generally, the aim of this course is to design and develop principles of materials to be used in teaching English as a foreign language, identifying material requirements, and designing three-dimensional teaching materials. With the importance of the efforts put on raising attention towards special education and inclusion, for the first time, I have decided to include this issue in my Materials Design in ELT lecture with a project. At the beginning, the students were presented with the requirements of the project. They were supposed to select a disability of their choice (dyslexia, dyspraxia, autism, ADHD, visual impairment, etc.), learn about the disability briefly, and then design a 3D modal for teaching English to children. They were also supposed to design three activities for children related to the same 3D modal. The teacher asked the students to form pairs and then gave them topics which they had to consider when designing their modals. There were 26 pairs and each had different topics. The teacher also asked them to prepare slides for their presentations because they were supposed to present their 3D modal, activities and the relation of these materials to their selected disability regarding language teaching including vocabulary. With this project, towards the end of the semester the students became more aware of the importance for considering and including special needs when designing activities for language teaching classes especially in this era when there are inclusion students in almost every class.

To address the training requirements of teachers, the authors plan to create a course drawing on their own teaching experiences and the available resources and literature from the domains of music education, music therapy, and special education.

The purpose of this research is to identify the views of preservice ELT teachers regarding the integration of music education into special education processes. It aims to conduct a detailed examination of the attitudes and competencies of participants concerning music education integration from the perspective of pre-service ELT teachers, as well as the existing educational conditions. Additionally, the study seeks to enhance understanding in this area and create awareness about the procedures for integrating music education into special education processes.

The study will investigate these questions:

1. What are the attitudes of ELT pre-service teachers regarding the integration of music into the practices for educating students with special needs?
2. What are the existing resources for integrating music into the practices of ELT pre-service teachers in the education of students with special needs?

METHOD

Model of the Research

In this study, a mixed-methods research method was employed to examine pre-teachers' perspectives on integrating music education into special education processes. This mixed-methods research allows for detailed and in-depth data collection while providing the opportunity to directly learn about participants' individual perceptions, experiences, and viewpoints (Büyüköztürk, Çakmak, Akgün, Karadeniz, & Demirel, 2009).

Study Group

Participants in the research were identified through purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling is a non-probabilistic sampling method used in qualitative research to enhance external validity. This method involves the researcher making a deliberate choice about the individuals to be selected as participants, aiming to choose those most suitable for the research objectives (Şimşek & Yıldırım, 2013). The participants of this study were pre-service ELT teachers in University during the 2023-2024 spring academic year.

Before the survey began, participants were given preliminary information about the research, and written form of interviews were conducted with 42 participants. Efforts were made to ensure that participation was not only voluntary but also that participants were well-informed about the research.

Data Collection

Data collections were performed via the attitude survey “Pre-service “ELT” teacher attitudes towards including music related intervention for students with special needs” and 7 matching questions related to rhythm tools, 10 matching questions associated with the explanations of diagnoses of students with special needs, and 9 questions about how to educate while working with children that have special needs.

Before the data collections began, a pilot written form was conducted with one participant to identify potential issues that might arise during the sessions. After the pilot written form, the attitude survey, and related questions with matching questions; this protocol was reviewed and necessary corrections in grammar and expression were made. The forms were held in suitable classes in the university.

Participant attitude survey

1. A special education teacher should utilize music in the educational environments of children with special needs (in teaching academic and behavioral skills). 1Never 2Occasionally 3Weekly 4Every few days 5Daily
2. Teachers outside of special education should utilize music in the education of students with special needs. 1Daily 2Every few days 3Weekly 4Occasionally 5Never
3. I am confident in teaching music to children with special needs. 1Not at all confident 2Unconfident 3Moderately confident 4Confident 5Very confident
4. I plan to teach music to students with special needs in my teaching practices or plan music-inclusive learning activities to develop related academic and behavioral skills. 1Daily 2Every few days 3Weekly 4Occasionally 5Never
5. I am confident in learning a musical note, a new rhythm activity, or a new song to use in my education. 1Not at all confident 2Unconfident 3Moderately confident 4Confident 5Very confident
6. I believe I need professional support for my music-related practices in special education. 1Definitely yes 2Slightly interested 3Moderately interested 4Interested 5Definitely no
7. I feel this way about accompanying a simple song with a simple instrument/rhythm instruments. 1Very insecure 2Slightly secure 3Moderately secure 4Secure 5Very secure
8. I think the following about my ability to lead rhythm activities/body percussion for children with special needs: 1Very adequate 2Adequate 3Moderately adequate 4Inadequate 5Very inadequate
9. I understand the basic terms and concepts in music: 1Very adequate 2Adequate 3Moderately adequate 4Inadequate 5Very inadequate

10. I think the following about the necessity of integrating music with other subjects in a program for a child with special needs: 1Very adequate 2Adequate 3Moderately adequate 4Inadequate 5Very inadequate
11. I understand the basic terms and concepts in special education: 1Definitely understand 2Understand 3Somewhat understand 4Do not understand 5Do not understand at all
12. I am confident in playing instruments such as bells, tambourines, and drums. 1Not at all confident 2Unconfident 3Moderately confident 4Confident 5Very confident
13. I think the following about understanding the educational and emotional needs of children with special needs: 1Definitely understand 2Understand 3Somewhat understand 4Do not understand 5Do not understand at all
14. I generally think the following about children with special needs: 1Very positive 2Positive 3Neutral 4Negative 5Very negative
15. I think the following about the creativity abilities in children with special needs: 1None at all 2None 3Neutral 4Noticeable 5Very noticeable
16. I think the following about sharing my views on children with special needs and music with other teachers: 1Very reluctant 2Reluctant 3Neutral 4Eager 5Very eager
17. The amount of creative ability I possess in music: 1Very large 2Large 3Moderate 4Small 5Very small

A. Matching -- Place the correct letter from the right column next to each item in the left column.

1. Steel triangle
2. Rhythm sticks
3. Maracas
4. Wooden agogo
5. Bell
6. Frog Guiro
7. Boomwhackers

B. Matching -- Place the correct letter from the right column next to each item in the left column.

Diagnosis

1. Multiple Disabilities
2. Severe Disability
3. Visual Impairment
4. Hearing Impairment
5. CP
6. Physical Disability
7. ASD
8. ADHD
9. Learning Disability

C. Questions and Answers (Note: Questions without answers have been shared with the participants).

1. Q.Name four types of music activities conducted in the classroom: A. Listening, singing, playing instruments, and speech communities, rhythmic activities (clapping), dance/movement, composing, conducting.
2. Q.Name four elements of music: A. Loudness (amplitude), time (duration), pitch (frequency), timbre (tonal quality).
3. Q.Briefly describe a teaching process for teaching a song: A. Step-by-step instruction (Sing the song to the students; sing line by line, let children mimic; say the words line by line, let children repeat; add the 1st and 2nd lines, then 1, 2, and 3, etc.)

4. Q.State four reasons for using music in the education of children with special needs: A. Socialization, energy and emotional release, self-image, self-confidence, stimulation of speech, speech rhythm, language concepts, motor development, perceptual and cognitive skills, aesthetic sensitivity, environmental awareness, potential career option, discovering talents.
5. Q.Specify five specific pre-academic or academic skills assisted by music experiences A. Auditory discrimination, auditory memory, visual memory, motor sequencing, body image, laterality, directionality, motor coordination and control, verbal expression, visual discrimination, time perception, reinforcement of academic concepts.
6. Q.Write five rules for teaching music to special children: A. Be prepared, teach in small steps, teach slowly, prepare children for the next step, provide variety, use simple orchestrations, adapt materials, be consistent in routine and discipline, avoid overstimulating children, use their names, use repetitive songs, give clear instructions.
7. Q.Give three examples of using music to control inappropriate behaviors: A. Conditional music listening linked to an academic behavior, music reward for following instructions, points, reinforcers, music party with favorite records as a reward for adherence to behavior rules, stopping background music continuously when a child breaks the rules (Type 2 punishment), child follows the rules to keep the music playing.
8. Q.List four considerations for selecting music material for children with special needs: A. Should be at their comprehension levels, very repetitive, relevant, include pieces that can serve as echoes, use short songs, easy choruses, avoid foreign songs or unrelated songs or those with abstract vocabulary, and avoid those with long, large melodic jumps and little repetition.
9. Q.How do you see the place of music and other arts in the education of special children?

In this mixed-methods research, individual responses to each question on the attitude survey were presented and additionally shown with bar graphs. The knowledge of pre-service ELT teachers about rhythm instruments was included in the data as the most commonly known instruments and correct answers to 7 questions. Similarly, the average correct answers for 10 questions related to the definitions of students with special needs were included. The responses to ten questions related to teaching students with special needs were evaluated using a general rubric measurement tool.

Through the MAXQDA program, qualitative data such as texts, interviews, focus group studies, reports, tables, photographs, videos, portable document formats (PDFs), social media data, websites, and audio files, as well as quantitative survey data, can be analyzed. It is also possible to perform data analysis using mixed methods through the MAXQDA program (Dereli, 2023). In this research, MAXQDA-11 version, a professional software, was used for the analysis of qualitative data. The MAXQDA program, which features a user-friendly and practical interface, consists of four main windows. These windows are the document system area, the code system area, the document browser, and the data analysis area. MAXQDA stands out from other software by enabling researchers working with qualitative data to create, code, and visualize themes, categories, and codes while also allowing the analysis of quantitative data (Dereli, 2023).

Efforts to Ensure Validity and Reliability

In this research, the validity of the data was ensured through prolonged engagement, purposeful sampling, in-depth focused data collection, participant confirmation, detailed description, and expert reviews. Prolonged engagement is described as "the researcher interacting with data sources such as participants and settings to create a mutual trust atmosphere during data collection process and to minimize the potential influence of the researcher on the subjects" (Şimşek & Yıldırım, 2013).

In mixed-methods research, another important aspect regarding validity and reliability is the role of the researcher. As Şimşek and Yıldırım (2013) noted, the researcher's perspective, biases, norms, and other characteristics can influence the research process. In addition to impartiality, researchers are also expected to have a certain level of competence regarding the subject they are studying. Therefore,

the role of the researcher must be clearly defined and demonstrated in terms of the validity and reliability of a scientific investigation. In this case study aimed at examining the views of ELT pre-service teachers on integrating music education into special education processes, efforts were made by the researcher to interpret the data as impartially as possible, and direct quotes have been used to demonstrate the validity of the interpretations.

Study Limitations

This study aims to assess the attitudes of ELT pre-service teachers regarding the integration of music into the practices for educating students with special needs and existing resources for integrating music into the practices of ELT pre-service teachers in the education of students with special needs. It's important to note that certain learning outcomes, like acquiring integrating music in English teaching skills for students with special needs develop slowly and may not be fully apparent. This study is not longitudinal, so these slower-developing changes will not be tracked. Additionally, since the study's design is not controlled or experimental, its findings are not meant to be broadly applicable to other similar contexts. However, the study could serve as a reference for others developing similar researches, especially regarding measuring attitudes and knowledge. The outcomes might also inform potential updates to the course's goals, content, format, and evaluation methods.

RESULTS and DISCUSSION

Participant Survey Results

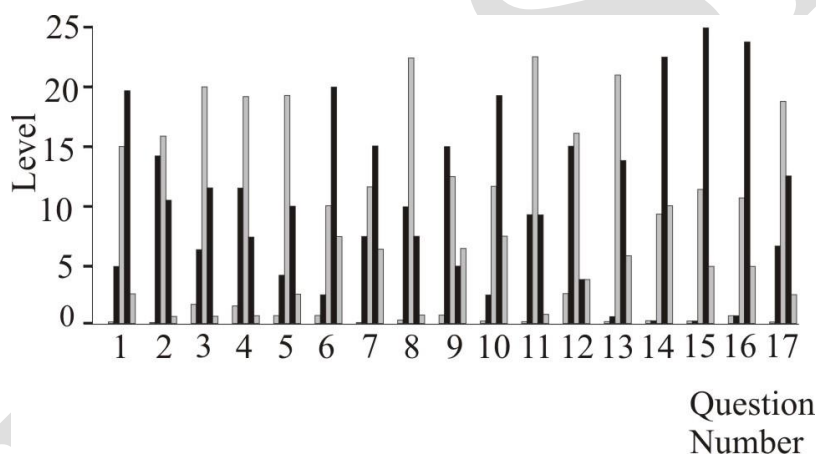


Figure 1. Participant Survey Results in bar graphic.

1. A special education teacher should utilize music in the educational environments of children with special needs (in teaching academic and behavioral skills). [Responses: 0-Never, 5-Occasionally, 15-Weekly, 19-Every few days, 3-Daily]. Out of 42 participants, 15 indicated they use music weekly, 19 every few days, and 3 daily. This also shows a positive outlook towards integrating music in education.

2. Teachers outside of special education should utilize music in the education of students with special needs. [Responses: 0-Daily, 5-Every few days, 15-Weekly, 19-Occasionally, 3-Never]. Participants, regardless of their specialization, have indicated that music should be used at least weekly or occasionally in the education provided.

3. I am confident in teaching music to children with special needs. [Responses: 2-Not at all confident, 7-Unconfident, 20-Moderately confident, 12-Confident, 1-Very confident]. Participants mostly shared that they are moderately to highly confident.

4. I plan to teach music to students with special needs in my teaching practices or plan music-inclusive learning activities to develop related academic and behavioral skills. [Responses: 2-Daily, 12-Every few days, 19-Weekly, 8-Occasionally, 1-Never]. Most participants shared that they consider using music while teaching English to students with special needs.

5. I am confident in learning a musical note, a new rhythm activity, or a new song to use in my education. [Responses: 1-Not at all confident, 4-Unconfident, 24-Moderately confident, 10-Confident, 3-Very confident]. Participants have declared that they feel moderately to highly confident in learning new rhythms, songs, and musical notes.

6. I believe I need professional support for my music-related practices in special education. [Responses: 1-Definitely yes, 3-Slightly interested, 10-Moderately interested, 20-Interested, 8-Definitely no]. Participants have expressed that they could use professional help in music-related activities while teaching English to children with special needs.

7. I feel this way about accompanying a simple song with a simple instrument/rhythm instruments. [Responses: 0-Very insecure, 8-Slightly secure, 12-Moderately secure, 15-Secure, 7-Very secure]. Participants shared that they feel moderately secure and secure in accompanying a simple song with a simple musical instrument.

8. I think the following about my ability to lead rhythm activities/body percussion for children with special needs: [Responses: 0-Very adequate, 10-Adequate, 23-Moderately adequate, 8-Inadequate, 1-Very inadequate]. Participants think they are moderately good at leading body percussion or rhythm activities.

9. I understand the basic terms and concepts in music: [Responses: 2-Very adequate, 15-Adequate, 13-Moderately adequate, 5-Inadequate, 7-Very inadequate]. Participants think they have a moderate understanding of musical terms and concepts.

10. I think the following about the necessity of integrating music with other subjects in a program for a child with special needs: [Responses: 0-Very adequate, 3-Adequate, 12-Moderately adequate, 19-Inadequate, 8-Very inadequate]. Participants shared that integrating music into the curriculum for students with special needs is moderately appropriate or inappropriate.

11. I understand the basic terms and concepts in special education: [Responses: 0-Definitely understand, 9-Understand, 23-Somewhat understand, 9-Do not understand, 1-Do not understand at all]. Participants have shared that they understand the basic terms and concepts in special education.

12. I am confident in playing instruments such as bells, tambourines, and drums. [Responses: 3-Not at all confident, 15-Unconfident, 16-Moderately confident, 4-Confident, 4-Very confident]. Participants have shared that they do not see themselves as very proficient in playing Orff instruments.

13. I think the following about understanding the educational and emotional needs of children with special needs: [Responses: 0-Definitely understand, 1-Understand, 21-Somewhat understand, 14-Do not understand, 6-Do not understand at all]. Participants shared that they could be somewhat successful in understanding the educational and emotional needs of children with special needs.

14. I generally think the following about children with special needs: [Responses: 0-Very positive, 0-Positive, 9-Neutral, 23-Negative, 10-Very negative]. Participants have shared that they have a negative view of students with special needs.

15. I think the following about the creative abilities in children with special needs: [Responses: 0-None at all, 0-None, 12-Neutral, 25-Noticeable, 5-Very noticeable]. Participants have shared that they believe children with special needs can be creative.

16. I think the following about sharing my views on children with special needs and music with other teachers: [Responses: 1-Very reluctant, 1-Reluctant, 11-Neutral, 24-Eager, 5-Very eager]. Participants have shared that they are willing to share their views on children with special needs and music with other teachers.

17. The amount of creative ability I possess in music: [Responses: 0-Very large, 7-Large, 19-Moderate, 13-Small, 3-Very small]. Participants have shared that their creative abilities in music are moderate to low.

- ✓ The average score based on 7 matching questions related to Orff musical instruments is determined to be 4.82/10. This result indicates that the participants need to familiarize themselves more with Orff instruments.
- ✓ The average score based on 10 matching questions related to the diagnostic descriptions of students with special needs is determined to be 10/10. These results show that the participants are knowledgeable about the basic diagnoses and characteristics of students with special needs. This is due to the "Materials Design in ELT" (ELTE339) course given during the term.
- ✓ Rubric results of 8 questions: Rubric evaluation is based on three basic levels of success: low, medium, and high. The number of respondents who did not answer any questions in this section is 8, the number of respondents who generally scored 1 is 22, the number of respondents who mostly scored 2 is 12, and the number of respondents who mostly scored 3 is 0. These evaluation results prove that participants need more examples, educational strategies, and extensive practice when working with students with special needs in their classes. The negative attitudes towards students with special needs are thought to be due to uncertainty and lack of information. In parallel with this finding, a study has shown that EFL teachers may lack the specialized training and guidance necessary to effectively accommodate these students' needs (Lowe, 2016).

Conclusions

In this study, it was found that third-year pre-service ELT teachers are generally aware of the diagnoses of students with special needs and have a rough understanding of their strengths and weaknesses. They possess beginner-level knowledge about music but need more detailed information and training on how to teach effectively. Additionally, there is a need for them to engage in micro-teaching, drama, and body percussion activities. These teaching methods are thought to boost the confidence of pre-service teachers through extensive classroom practice, helping them become more creative and fluent in their teaching. According to the brain-based teaching approach, teaching another person is known to be one of the best ways to learn; therefore, it is believed that applying materials developed for students with special needs in special education practice schools will support pre-service ELT teachers in gaining experience. Future studies focusing on diagnosis-specific teaching methods, material development, and program adaptations are believed to enrich the literature and provide guidance to many teachers working with students that have special needs.

Ethics and Conflict of Interest

As the authors of this study, we declare that we collected data in accordance with ethical rules during the research process and acted in accordance with all ethical rules. We also declare that there is no conflict among the authors.

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