Developing EFL Learning for Kurdish Youth with Special Needs in the Kurdistan Region: Challenges and Modern Educational Practices

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ABSTRACT

The concept of inclusive education is being increasingly promoted as a legal right and an imperative; its realization, however, is inconsistent particularly in contexts of conflict, resource scarcity and system capacity challenges. Within KRI, Kurdish learners with Special Education Needs have specific challenges within the EFL context: a lack of specialist provision, lack of in-service training for inclusive education, inconsistent availability of assistive technology and systemic and ongoing barriers related to policy, stigma, infrastructure and the digital divide. This study, drawing exclusively on available sources of information (human rights instruments, global monitoring reports and contemporary research on Iraqi/KRI and EFL/SEN technology contexts) collates what is known about the inclusive education needs of Iraq and the KRI and translates these into an EFL specific set of modern educational practices. It is argued that effective provision in EFL for Kurdish learners with SEN involves: (1) a system based on rights and aligned with inclusive education principles; (2) in-service training for teachers on inclusive teaching methods and differentiated instruction for EFL learners with SEN; and (3) a systematic adoption of Universal Design for Learning principles, assistive technology and ethical and appropriate use of AI-assisted supports. Finally, the paper outlines a concrete implementation framework and staged suggestions for schools and authorities in the KRI on how to enhance inclusive EFL provision.

KEY WORDS: Kurdistan region of Iraq, EFL, special education need, assistive technology, Artificial Intelligence, teacher training.

1. INTRODUCTION

Globally, the education policy trend has been moving from 'integration' to 'inclusion', signifying that learners with disabilities and Special Educational Needs must receive teaching effectively in mainstream schools, enabled by adjustments in the system, instead of 'fitting in' with existing provisions. This transition is not simply pedagogical but it is rooted in human-rights conventions, especially the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and the interpretative claim for inclusion as a right rather than an optional service (United Nations, 2006; Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2016). Inclusion, at the international level, is understood as a core element for quality and equity in education through monitoring and policy advice that demonstrates the possibilities for schooling systems to reproduce exclusion unless barriers are actively dismantled (UNESCO, 2020).

There is a distinct feature of EFL learning within this discourse. English is positioned in relation to the future-study, travel and work-and an academic

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subject requiring high-level performance in communication, literacy and endurance which can add complexity for learners with SEN if not delivered in an accessible way. Teaching of English at the national level in Iraq and regional level in the KRI has been mapped as a complex ecology where challenges range from teacher development needs to uneven resources and disparity between regions and sectors (Borg & Capstick, 2024). As such, for Kurdish learners with SEN in the KRI, learning of EFL is occurring at the juncture of two demanding agendas: to raise quality of EFL provision and to develop an inclusive system.

In Kurdish/Iraqi research, recent studies consistently identify challenges that hinder the development of an inclusive education system, indicating that teachers' perceptions and experiences are marked by a need for system-level changes such as increased training and resources as well as the removal of local barriers that impact day-to-day teaching (Abas & Abbas, 2023). Research also suggests that teachers play a vital role in inclusive education, and in the KRI this is demonstrated through evidence on teacher capabilities in inclusive settings and how teachers with inadequate training and weakened supporting structures are challenged (Gorani and Mahmoud, 2024). Directly related to teaching English for learners with SEN, research highlights barriers experienced in EFL delivery such as materials, pedagogy, classroom management and services provided, while exploring how teachers and students themselves perceive barriers and opportunities for improved access and learning (Hamasaeed & Abdulrahman, 2023).

At the same time, the past decade has also seen enormous progress in technology-supported learning for students with disabilities with evidence on the use of assistive and adaptive technology and accessible tools in particular (Cheng & Lai, 2020; Klimova and Zamborova, 2023). The growing literature on assistive/adaptive technology supports learning for learners with SEN primarily through new ways to provide input/output and encourage independent learning. The discourse is nevertheless tempered by an understanding of equity within technology access, with recent international discussions of the potential of digital transformation to create wider equity gaps unless designing for inclusion (OECD, 2023).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Rights-based and policy foundations for inclusive EFL learning

It is important to ground the strategy in a rights-based definition of what inclusive teaching and learning will demand at a minimum. At the base of this are the obligations laid out in the CRPD to provide non-discrimination and access to education for persons with disabilities (United Nations, 2006). As noted in CRPD General Comment No. 4, inclusive education is not about including learners with disabilities into the existing system without alteration. Rather it demands removing barriers, providing reasonable accommodation, and offering supports that facilitate access and progress for participation and learning (Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2016). These rights-based commitments match with the "all means all" global vision for inclusive education put forward by UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring Report, where inclusion is treated as a systems property that requires redesigned learning environments to include all learners (UNESCO, 2020).For EFL this means that accessibility is not an 'extra' to be added onto the course design for a small number of learners, but it is central to the planned instruction and that language teaching can be taught to facilitate multiple means of accessing content, demonstrating learning and communicating an approach in direct alignment with UDL and inclusive pedagogy. Unfortunately, rights-based commitments rarely translate seamlessly into practice. Work on the challenges and needs of inclusive education in Iraq

and the Kurdistan Region highlights disparities between inclusion ideals and the reality for teachers working in ordinary schools, in part due to the existence of systemic barriers such as teacher training and resources (Abas & Abbas, 2023) and the critical (yet limited) role of the teacher in basic schools that warrant support and capacity-building for inclusion. This is where the importance of a rights-based approach can become visible: it offers clarification about what needs to be provided (accommodations, support, and access) to SEN learners and the political lever to insist upon that provision through teacher professional learning, provision of accessible materials, and investment in technology to facilitate inclusion rather than an add-on.

Inclusive education is gaining ground as a practical pathway for improving educational equity, but also as a right-based entitlement for all students. Around the world the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities asserts that everyone is entitled to a right-based inclusive education. This entails a system committed to providing accessibility, reasonable accommodation and removing participation barriers (United Nations, 2006). The CRPD Committee, through General Comment No. 4, goes further to define inclusive education not just as placing learners with disability into mainstream classrooms without further change, but as an entire re-organization of policy, pedagogy, and supports to support all learning (Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2016). In turn, UNESCO also promotes inclusion as the core feature of quality education and states that the routinization of curriculum, teaching, and learning can lead to exclusion, unless schools design for the inclusion of "all means all" learners (UNESCO, 2020). This international framework offers direction for the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), where Kurdish students with special educational needs (SEN) face interconnected barriers to effective English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning through systemic capacity, teacher preparedness and differential access to supportive technologies (Abas & Abbas, 2023; Gorani and Mahmoud, 2024; Hamasaeed & Abdulrahman, 2023).

The gap between inclusive education policy and practice remains a significant challenge in the KRI. Research in Iraq, and specifically within the Kurdistan Region, notes that teachers are supportive of inclusive education, yet cite practical limitations such as insufficient training and resources and inadequate institutional support as challenges that prevent effective implementation (Abas & Abbas, 2023). This has real implications for EFL learning, which is heavily reliant on practice, communication and access to the language through multimodal input. English language teaching and learning in Iraq in general has been identified as being significantly affected by context-specific pressures, including teacher professional learning and equitable learning conditions (Borg & Capstick, 2024), suggesting that EFL inclusion in the KRI will necessitate attention to both the quality of English language teaching as well as disability-related accessibility. The crucial, yet constrained, role of teachers in ordinary schools further underscores the importance of systemic support and capacity-building for inclusive education in the KRI.

A second barrier to including SEN learners in EFL classrooms, in the KRI, relates to teacher preparedness and professional capacity for inclusive pedagogy. Studies on special education needs in Duhok governorate specifically noted the role of teacher concerns regarding workload, lack of specialist support and effective professional development (Abdi & Naaman, 2025) in reducing teacher willingness to employ inclusive teaching practices. Research in professional learning contexts suggests that effective inclusion depends on the design of sustained teacher development which scaffolds effective teaching practices through

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professional learning schools (Ainscow et al., 2013). If teacher concerns remain largely unaddressed, classroom inclusive practice is vulnerable to "participation gaps," where students with SEN are present in classrooms, but excluded from meaningful EFL learning experiences (Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2016; UNESCO, 2020).

A third challenge relates to specific EFL-related obstacles for SEN students. In Kurdistan Region-focused research for Kurdish students with SEN learning EFL, limitations cited include a lack of accessible materials, poor differentiation and adaptation of tasks, and inadequate modification of assessment methods (Hamasaeed & Abdulrahman, 2023). This corresponds to rights-based ideals that equitable access demands reasonable accommodations and alternative forms of demonstrating learning, rather than making disability a learning barrier (Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2016). From a practical EFL instructional perspective, this may translate to reducing a reliance on phonetic drills, whole-class or turn-taking oral response, and timed written responses alone as modes of accessing and demonstrating language knowledge. It means rather an investment in multiple modalities of accessing the content and demonstrating proficiency in an EFL class, especially in response to language-based needs in literacy, communication, and sensory domains (UNESCO, 2020; Domagaa-Zyk, 2013).

Modern pedagogical approaches have identified evidence-based practices for overcoming these barriers in EFL, such as the implementation of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and assistive technologies. UDL provides a concrete set of design principles centered on multiple means of representation (input), expression (output) and engagement (motivation) and can be effectively integrated with local practice across cultural contexts (Almumen, 2020). Recent synthesis research supports its efficacy as an inclusive instructional practice that improves academic outcomes (Almeqdad et al., 2023), and research in EFL specifically shows that UDL teaching significantly supports reading comprehension and vocabulary development (Alghamdy, 2023). Incorporating UDL in EFL classes in the KRI would equip teachers with strategies for planning naturally supportive and barrier-free instruction that involves visual supports, differentiated text, chunked information, choice-based participation and audio reinforcement without a need for excessive individualization.

Another avenue for inclusive EFL is AT (assistive technology) and adaptive technology, which relies heavily on teacher capacity and systemic support for successful implementation. Studies have shown that teachers' knowledge and perceptions of AT, as well as their perceived barriers (e.g., insufficient training, time, technical support), influence whether or not AT becomes a useful tool in the classroom (Atanga et al., 2020). While some teachers have found digital learning and AT use beneficial for SEN learners in English classes during COVID-19 lockdowns, it also has implications for equal access and lack of readiness (Belda-Medina, 2023). AT has proven to increase access and learner autonomy in EFL for SEN learners, allowing them more practice time with minimal difficulties, especially for reading, writing, and communication (Klimova and Zamborova, 2023). Generally, studies on technology-enhanced special education show growing evidence for how assistive and learning tools can help students with special needs achieve positive outcomes when supported with the right Pedagogy and scaffolding (Cheng & Lai, 2020). The WHO-UNICEF report recommends integrating AT as a mandatory part of the education system, ensuring accessibility and providing training and sustained use (World Health Organization & UNICEF, 2022). In KRI schools this would mean considering AT as part of the standard education system, not as a supplementary option.

Emerging technologies such as AI-enabled tools present new opportunities and new equity concerns. Early evidence suggests that personalized assistive

learning tools enhanced by AI may help children with neurodevelopmental disorders by offering appropriate pacing, guided support and repeated practice (Barua et al., 2022). The overarching caveat from the OECD in relation to this development is that the advancement of digital innovation should include careful consideration for inclusion and digital equity so as not to widen the existing gaps (OECD, 2021; OECD, 2023). Furthermore, disability reporting by UNICEF highlights that it is the hidden children with disabilities who fail to be adequately addressed due to inaccurate counting (UNICEF, 2021; UNICEF, 2023). It is important that, should AI-enhanced and emergent technologies be introduced in KRI, these pilots should be monitored carefully in terms of accessibility, teacher training and Pedagogy, and access to all learners (OECD, 2023).

To summarize, the improvement of EFL for Kurdish youth with SEN in KRI requires multi-layered action: inclusion as a rights-based policy; continuous professional development for teachers; inclusive design principles (UDL) in teaching practices; and equitable access to AT and technology when managed thoughtfully. It is clear from the literature that teachers play a crucial role in enabling successful inclusion, but teacher readiness and skills need to be addressed (Abdi & Naaman, 2025; Gorani and Mahmoud, 2024; Ainscow et al., 2013). The literature indicates that UDL helps in inclusive EFL, while technology serves as an inclusive learning facilitator if provided with training and equal access (Almeqdad et al., 2023; Alghamdy, 2023; Klimova, 2023; World Health Organization & UNICEF, 2022). If KRI education policy makes the investment in integrated learning environments that these findings recommend, it can successfully transition inclusive EFL from aspiration to effective reality and support student access, achievement and future success (UNESCO, 2020; Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2016).

2.2. Context: EFL learning and inclusion in Iraq and the Kurdistan Region

Across sectors and levels, EFL teaching in Iraq/KRI has been characteristically diverse and of varying quality depending on factors such as teacher development, curriculum and assessment, and lack of resources (Borg & Capstick, 2024). The impact of such variation is relevant to inclusive EFL in that learners with SEN are negatively impacted by a system where teaching rigidly addresses learners' needs; and a system dominated by high-stakes testing and limited differentiation.

Focus on Kurdish students with SEN, on the other hand, provides valuable classroom-level perspectives on learning special needs EFL. From interviews and student questionnaires of teachers and students with SEN learning EFL in Sulaimani, Hamasaeed and Abdulrahman (2023) identify and discuss the challenges teachers and students face, serving as a strong indication that learning inclusive EFL should include both teachers and students' perspectives.

While a separate body of research focuses on the concept of inclusion across Iraq/KRI and emphasizes teacher support for inclusion but also teachers' facing obstacles such as inadequate teacher training, limited resources and inadequate and ill-defined support mechanisms (Abas & Abbas, 2023; Gorani, 2024), evidence from Duhok specifically suggests that the level of teachers' concern could be quite significant and could vary according to teachers' years of experience, indicating teacher readiness and sustained professional support. The question of teacher preparation and continuous training to effectively meet needs is not only characteristic of Iraq but seems quite serious according to research in Duhok.

Thus, effective learning of EFL for Kurdish students with SEN needs reform not just in terms of "better methods", but also of reform at various levels

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(policy, organizational, teacher learning, classroom practice and technologies). A map of the primary barriers is developed and discussed below from a multi-level perspective.

3. Challenges to inclusive EFL learning for Kurdish youth with SEN

The cited works suggest a matrix of interrelated problems functioning at the system, school, teacher and student levels. For clarity, this section divides the barriers into six clusters relevant for EFL in KRI schools (Abas & Abbas, 2023; Ainscow et al., 2013).

3.1. System-level barriers: policy-to-practice gaps

Lack of consistent implementation structures and opportunities for continuous professional learning and resources challenge inclusive education in Iraq and the Kurdistan Region (Abas & Abbas, 2023; Ainscow et al., 2013). Inclusive education not backed up by procedural framework and sufficient resourcing may make individual EFL teachers 'solely responsible for solving inclusion' with minimal AT, adaptation, and special educational support.

International documents suggest that inclusive education is about coordinated system response-in terms of governance, resources, flexibility, curriculum adaptation, and monitoring regarding participation and learning (Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2016; UNESCO, 2020).

3.2. School-level barriers: Infrastructure, Class Size, and support services

The reality of inclusive practice relies on factors that are school wide and out of teachers' control, such as access to resource rooms, teachers' time for collaboration, qualified personnel (i.e. Specialists) and physical access (Gorani and Mahmoud, 2024). Teacher driven studies also indicate the importance of structures and training for inclusive practice and lack of alternative assessment and access to materials, particularly within EFL instruction, can be prohibitive due to the need for constant repetition and reinforcement within language learning.

3.3. Teacher-level barriers: preparation, confidence, and concerns

Teacher readiness consistently appears as a key barrier. Teachers in inclusive contexts often report limited knowledge and training to support learners with disabilities and SEN (Abas & Abbas, 2023; Gorani and Mahmoud, 2024). This evidence further suggests that teacher concerns about inclusion are measurable and influenced by contextual factors, reinforcing the need for targeted professional development and school support (Abdi & Naaman, 2025).

In technology-related inclusion, teachers may also lack AT knowledge and confidence. Research on teachers of students with learning disabilities shows that teachers' assistive-technology knowledge, perceptions, and perceived barriers are crucial determinants of whether AT is used effectively (Atanga et al., 2020). During COVID-19 conditions, work on AT for SEN learners in English teaching similarly points to the role of teacher preparation and digital competence (Belda-Medina, 2023). These findings suggest that even when tools exist, they may not translate into improved learning unless teachers are trained to use them pedagogically.

3.4. Curriculum and assessment barriers in EFL

These EFL curricula become barriers when only one access route (e.g. Text-intensive reading and writing, speech-only speaking and listening, speed-demanding tests) is offered and no equally acceptable alternative access route is provided. Inclusion requires removing barriers via appropriate accommodations and designing in accessibility (Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2016). For Kurdish learners with SEN, EFL may add another layer (home language, L2 of school and L3 of EFL), further complicating memory demands, reading difficulties and participation-if there is no differentiated instruction. The references cited cannot determine the degree of this linguistic complexity but clearly demonstrate a

need to focus efforts on improving access to, and quality of, EFL in Iraq/KRI (Borg & Capstick, 2024).

3.5. Technology access barriers and digital inequity

While there is potential for technology to offer advantages for SEN students, disparities in access and adoption could also pose an exclusionary threat. Research on digital equity and inclusion by the OECD warns that the digitalization of education could even deepen inequalities unless systems are designed with inclusive access, digital skills and support in mind (OECD, 2023) and UNICEF's data efforts regarding disability highlight how disability can become 'invisible' through inadequate data and uneven access to services which could affect future planning and equality (UNICEF, 2021, 2023). Accordingly, inclusive EFL in KRI would have to address technology as a capability dependent not on its availability but on the available infrastructure, devices, access and support provided for teachers at school level.

3.6. Disability-specific learning barriers in EFL

Because the barriers for learning EFL are not the same for all SEN profiles, and because a "one-size-fits-all" inclusion approach often fails to remove the obstacles that prevent full access, participation and progress, the types of support that best meet the learning needs of SEN profiles must be individually differentiated. An inclusive EFL approach is based on the notion that the provision of support should be based on the learners' modality of communication, processing profile and accessibility needs, but that the outcome should still focus on functional language development.

For deaf and hard-of-hearing learners, EFL learning will not be challenging when learning is built upon activities involving phonology (e.g., sounds discrimination drills) and speaking tasks where oral communication is the only access mode (e.g., oral exams). In such learning environments, DHH learners will be excluded from the spoken input for listening comprehension tasks and pronunciation work, as well as from conversational exchanges in oral English. However, learning barriers for deaf and hard-of-hearing learners in EFL classrooms are not only based on auditory skills, but on lack of access to classroom talk, slow turn-taking, and limited access to language exposure. The implementation of technology can provide solutions in the form of accessible input (captions for videos, real-time transcription, visual scaffolds) and communication interfaces that convert audios into visual or textual forms. In inclusive EFL classrooms technology can facilitate participation for deaf and hard-of-hearing learners in different modes (e.g., typing replies in online chat or discussion forums, constructing visual presentations, dialogue generation via an application on a tablet or a computer) in order to enable language learning, but avoid a complete ban on opportunities to access the input and output for all learners in the classroom (Domagaa-Zyk, 2013).

For learners with intellectual disabilities the problem in learning English as a foreign language would be concerned with working memory limitations, slower cognitive pace, difficulties with abstract language, lack of generalization and motivation for learning. The most effective teaching strategies to implement inclusive EFL classroom for intellectual disability would be highly structured, sequential and multimodal (using visuals, audio, touch and movement) teaching with rich repetitions in meaningful contexts and strong focus on what learners want and learn and not just what is thought to be good for them (e.g. Classroom language, daily language, greetings). They are likely to lose motivation if tasks appear difficult, long or socially risky. Hence, learning environment needs to focus on consistent activities, predictable interactions and concrete vocabulary acquisition through

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communication and interaction opportunities which are accessible for them and focused on meaningful interaction (e.g., class routine communication, requesting needs, social greetings). As suggested by some innovative studies humanoid robots have provided an environment where some learners with intellectual disabilities showed increased motivation to participate in language interaction due to human-like interaction, repetition of instructions in a low-pressure, socially safe manner.

In relation to the learners with neurodevelopmental disorders (e.g., autism spectrum conditions, ADHD, developmental disorders, etc.), language learning is hampered by various problems in regulating their attention, executive function, sensory sensitivity and social interaction. While some learners find it hard to cope with chaotic classroom environments, unexpected transitions or unstructured open-ended speaking tasks that involve complex social reasoning, others do well in rule-based tasks but require careful planning to use language in real communicative contexts. Thus inclusive EFL benefits from well-established routines, visual schedules, low sensory demands and explicitly modelled conversational patterns, and practice opportunities in structured non-threatening contexts such as role plays and scripted conversations (Domagaa-Zyk, 2013). Furthermore, recent advancements in technology such as AI-enabled supports can be beneficial for these learners, as these assistive tools may allow for individualized pace of interaction, adaptive feedback and repetitive language practice in non-socially demanding contexts, in a manner that addresses their learning difficulties. AI-enabled tools may facilitate vocabulary acquisition, provide scaffolds for reading, and enable interaction and language practice, but they need to be designed with sensitivity for children's privacy, equity, and need for social interaction and explicit pedagogy, to serve as inclusion support rather than as tools of segregation or dependency (Barua et al., 2022).

Overall, inclusive practice in Kurdistan region must provide for both universal inclusion strategies (based on Universal Design for Learning), and targeted pedagogical responses that are designed according to individual needs of learners with SEN to remove specific barriers they face regarding EFL input, classroom interaction and language output. (Domagaa-Zyk, 2013; Alemi & Bahramipour, 2019; Barua et al., 2022).

4. METHODOLOGY

A qualitative approach, was adopted for this study. A number of academic papers were selected, international documents and policy papers concerning inclusive education, EFL and special educational needs learners in Iraq and the Kurdistan Region and thematically analyzed them in order to identify major issues and best modern practices such as UDL and assistive technology.

5. Modern educational practices to strengthen inclusive EFL learning in the KRI

From these readings, "modern EFL practices for inclusivity" are best categorized into these three interdependent components:

1. Inclusion pedagogy and UDL as the framework/design principle

2. Assistive and adaptive technologies as access mediators

3. AI and future technologies as personalization tool and ethical implementation

5.1. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) as a practical framework for inclusive EFL

The framework of UDL helps to plan lessons so that information can be accessed and processed, meaningful activities can be offered, and the knowledge gained can be demonstrated in different ways. Cross-cultural research focusing on how UDL works in inclusive classroom settings in other countries demonstrates how this inclusive planning

framework is implemented in different ways depending on context. It is suggested that "copying" a framework is problematic, but that adaptation for context is useful (Almumen, 2020). The framework of UDL also benefits from the synthesis of evidence. A systematic review and meta-analysis have found that UDL can improve learning outcomes in various circumstances, thus supporting its use as an inclusive general planning framework when applied well (Almeqdad et al., 2023). In EFL, research findings suggest that the implementation of UDL can have a positive effect on both vocabulary acquisition and reading comprehension skills of learners (Alghamdy, 2023), therefore this can be understood as a broad application of accessible design for all learners as well as for learners with SEN.

Operationalizing UDL in inclusive EFL practice.

A) Provide multiple means of representation (accessible input). Learners are provided with input in different forms and/or multiple ways, enabling them to acquire knowledge differently. For example: Learners are given vocabulary and texts in various ways-simplified text, audio resources, visuals, and when necessary, bilingual texts. Key vocabulary is introduced with the help of images and short video-clips. Materials are captioned where necessary. Learners who struggle with reading are given access to text-to-speech tools (where available) to overcome decoding barriers, recognizing the value that AT can offer learners of EFL to develop autonomy (Klimova and Zamborova, 2023).

B) Provide multiple means of action and expression (accessible output). Learners have a number of different ways to demonstrate what they know and what they can do. For example: Students demonstrate their knowledge of the target language orally, by typing, drawing picture-based responses or via recorded audio/video segments. Alternative assessments are utilized-e.g. Portfolio tasks, projects or presentations, structured oral interactions instead of traditional timed written tests. This reflects the commitment of inclusive education to remove learning barriers and make accommodations where necessary (Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2016).

C) Provide multiple means of engagement (motivation and participation). Teachers employ a variety of methods and activities to promote motivation, interest, and engagement for all learners. For example: Learner choice of content (e.g. Sport, local culture, technology). Varied modes of presentation, e.g. Games, drama, stories, pair work and group work.

Use of structured and predictable lesson sequences and routines to create familiarity for learners with neurodevelopmental disorders (a finding consistent with the growing literature on how personalized and structured AT can support learners with neurodevelopmental conditions; Barua et al., 2022).

Reasons for UDL application in KRI contexts.

Where specialist support and service provision is lacking, UDL offers a usable framework for mainstream EFL teachers to design their lessons to benefit the entire class rather than requiring a constant number of exceptions to the rule. Furthermore, UDL allows for the design of teaching and learning experiences that remove barriers and uphold the rights-based approach (Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2016).

5.2. Assistive and adaptive technology to support access and participation

The use of AT is seen as a global, universal agenda, whereby this type of technology must be included in services "not as an add-on", but as a critical tool for full participation and autonomy. "The global assistive technology report recommends actions to strengthen access and system, to ensure that all people with needs for AT can acquire and use this assistive technology effectively" (World Health

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Organization & UNICEF, 2022, p.8); in a classroom context, technology can serve to remove physical or mental barriers to learning (access to reading, writing, communication, participation in lessons). Research in EFL indicates the ability of AT to support learners' autonomy and enhance success while acknowledging the limitations and issues that stem from poor quality implementation and a lack of teacher training and familiarity with tools (Klimova, 2023; Cheng and Lai, 2020). Similar findings are suggested with special education English learning research indicating variable teacher use of technology with SEN learners during times of crisis (Belda-Medina, 2023), reflecting teacher knowledge and perceptions' influence on AT implementation in the classroom (Atanga et al., 2020).

Practical AT options for inclusive EFL (examples aligned with the review evidence):

- **Text-to-speech and speech-to-text** for reading/writing barriers (supports decoding and composition).
- **Captioning and transcription tools** for deaf/hard-of-hearing learners and for general comprehension support, consistent with technology strategies for DHH learners in EFL contexts (Domagała-Zyśk, 2013).
- **AAC (augmentative and alternative communication) supports** for learners with communication difficulties (e.g., picture-based vocabulary boards).
- **Word prediction, spelling support, and simplified interfaces** for learners with learning disabilities.
- **Accessible digital dictionaries and vocabulary apps** with images and audio for multimodal
- input.

Implementation guidance (KRI-focused):

- Start with the accessibility features that already exist in common devices (phones/tablets/laptops) to reduce cost barriers.
- Build a small “AT toolkit” at school level (e.g., a set of devices, headphones, microphones, basic accessibility software), and train teachers on both technical use and pedagogical integration, addressing the barriers documented in teacher-focused AT studies (Atanga et al., 2020).
- Ensure school leadership allocates time for teacher collaboration and troubleshooting, because AT without routine support often becomes abandoned.

5.3. AI-enabled and emerging technologies: personalization with safeguards

AI and emerging technologies are discussed increasingly as ways to foster inclusion and personalize learning, including the use of personalized assistive tools for learners with neurodevelopmental disabilities (Barua et al., 2022). Policy level discourse on the growing relevance of AI, robotics and other frontier technologies to education suggests both benefits and governance challenges (OECD, 2021).

Within KRI contexts, AI-driven tools can support inclusive EFL if framed as supports to, rather than substitutions for, effective pedagogy, and if they are utilized equitably and inclusively, e.g. In the forms of adapted vocabulary practice, automated written feedback, or text-based scaffolding and speech recognition features to support pronunciation practice and translation.

Robotics and structured interaction:

Innovative research in EFL has seen humanoid robots incorporated to teach EFL learners with intellectual disabilities and reported gains in learner engagement and structured interaction (Alemi & Bahramipour, 2019). Although robotic applications will unlikely be widespread in KRI schools, this study provides a principle-that structured, engaging,

multimodal interaction helps learners with learning difficulties overcome conventional instruction methods.

Ethical and equity considerations:

Digital equity is central to any successful initiative; without thoughtful design, technology can exacerbate divides (OECD, 2023). This is especially critical for children with disabilities, where their needs and access to services are often invisible in planning and data systems (UNICEF, 2021, 2023). Therefore, any adoption of AI must be accompanied by:

equitable access to hardware/connectivity, adequately trained teachers, robust data privacy and safeguarding procedures, ongoing monitoring of learning engagement and outcomes for learners with SEN.

6. An actionable model for inclusive EFL development in KRI

An integrated model that synthesizes the referenced material can be proposed to KRI stakeholders. The model has four levels:

Level 1: Policy & system alignment (Education Authorities)

Promote inclusion standards that align with CRPD (United Nations, 2006; Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2016), focusing on barrier reduction and reasonable accommodation. Develop guidelines for inclusive EFL implementation, considering assessment accommodations, differentiated curricula and access to assistive technology. Enhance data collection and monitoring systems to support SEN learners, ensuring that these students are "seen, counted, included" (UNICEF, 2021).

Level 2: School-enabling conditions (Leadership)

Establish supportive, small "inclusive teams" responsible for coordinating AT access and accommodation. Develop infrastructure necessary to support assistive technology use and broader accessibility. Incorporate designated planning and collaboration time for EFL teachers and SEN specialists.

Level 3: Teacher Professional learning (EFL + inclusion together)

Offer training that integrates UDL lesson design, differentiated teaching strategies, AT integration and inclusive assessment. The UDL approach has been shown to enhance cross-cultural applications and learning (Almumen, 2020; Almeqdad et al., 2023).

Address teachers' practical concerns about the workload associated with teaching students with SEN, and ensure these concerns are addressed through coaching rather than one-off training sessions; this acknowledges that teachers' attitudes impact implementation feasibility (Abdi & Naaman, 2025; Gorani and Mahmoud, 2024). Develop teachers' knowledge and skills in using AT, recognizing existing gaps in teachers' familiarity and perception (Atanga et al., 2020).

Level 4: Classroom design & learner support (Daily practice)

Every lesson designed according to the principles of UDL (representation, expression, engagement). AT services should be an available resource within all lessons, not just as a compensatory measure for students with SEN. Care must be taken with any blended learning activities, ensuring equity and participation of learners with SEN, a practice that is supported by broader research in special education technology (Cheng & Lai, 2020). Implement AI tools only after a thorough analysis of ethical implications and accessibility issues for the target users and teachers, as per OECD guidelines on digital inclusion (OECD, 2023).

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7. Findings

1) Inclusive education is acknowledged as a necessity but limited in implementation within Iraq/KRI: The principle of inclusion in Iraq and the KRI is largely established, yet implementation faces obstacles such as a lack of sufficient training, resources, and organized support structures (Abas & Abbas, 2023; Gorani and Mahmoud, 2024; Ainscow et al., 2013).

2) Teacher concerns and preparedness are crucial for success in inclusive EFL: Teacher anxieties concerning the inclusion of students with special needs (e.g., additional workload, management issues, limited specialist support) are common in KRI settings (Abdi and Naaman, 2025). If teachers lack the training needed to practice inclusive pedagogy, inclusive education remains sporadic, with adverse effects on EFL outcomes (Hamasaeed & Abdulrahman, 2023).

Here's the academic rewrite of the provided text, maintaining the original meaning:

3) Kurdish SEN learners encounter EFL-specific learning barriers

KRI-specific evidence has demonstrated that students with SEN face barriers related to: access of EFL learning materials and tasks, lack of differentiation, absence of individual support, and assessment methods inappropriate for diverse needs (Hamasaeed & Abdulrahman, 2023).

4) UDL is a high-impact "design solution" for inclusion and relevant to EFL

UDL functions as a system to preempt barriers by providing multiple means for representation, expression, and engagement. The impact of UDL is supported across studies (Almeqdad et al., 2023), internationally applicable (Almumen, 2020) and demonstrably effective in boosting EFL reading and vocabulary learning (Alghamdy, 2023).

5) AT supports access, but uptake is limited by teachers and systems

AT and related adaptive tools promote participation, autonomy and access to language. These findings are supported across the EFL and SEN AT literature (Klimova and Zamborova, 2023; Cheng & Lai, 2020). Nonetheless, the use of AT is influenced heavily by teachers' knowledge, attitudes and identified barriers (Atanga et al., 2020) and as outlined in global reports, AT is not only a classroom issue but a systems issue (WHO & UNICEF, 2022).

6)Emerging tech/AI has promising potential-but digital equity is a risk

Personalized teaching delivered via AI, along with innovative AI supported-tools for students with neurodevelopmental disorders (Barua et al., 2022), and robots used for EFL (Alemi & Bahramipour, 2019) hold potential for supporting SEN learners. However, at policy-level, technology is also a risk of increased disparity if it is not designed for equity and inclusion (OECD, 2021; OECD, 2023). Disability-specific reports have also emphasized the chronic lack of access for many children with disabilities without responsive systems (UNICEF, 2021; UNICEF, 2023).

7) Rights-based alignment ensures sustainable change

IE is a right that necessitates barrier removal and the provision of reasonable accommodation and support-rather than merely placement in mainstream education settings (United Nations, 2006; CRPD Committee, 2016; UNESCO, 2020). The rights-based approach provides both clear expectations and accountabilities.

8. Recommendations (A Phased Road-map for KRI implementation)

Short term (0–6 months)

1. Inclusive EFL audit: Assess current needs and resources in terms of AT and teacher training within

EFL education. Teacher-centered perspectives should be at the forefront (Abas & Abbas, 2023; Gorani, 2024).

2. UDL resource bank: Develop a small set of inclusive EFL lesson templates for different language skills (e.g., reading, speaking) and provide teacher training on adapting them.

3. AT "quick wins": Activate built-in device accessibility features and ensure access to headphones and assistive tools for reading and listening.

Medium term (6–18 months)

4. Teacher coaching & collaboration cycles: Implement professional development activities centered on designing inclusive EFL lessons and assessments, focusing on the practical needs and concerns of teachers (Abdi & Naaman, 2025).

5. School AT acquisition & support system: Streamline AT acquisition and maintenance protocols and develop clear processes for students to seek help with AT, avoiding the abandonment that often occurs when support is lacking (Atanga et al., 2020).

6. Inclusive assessment reform: Incorporate alternative assessment methods that consider the diverse needs of SEN learners (e.g., portfolios, oral assessments with accommodations).

Long term (18–36 months)

7. System-wide inclusive capacity: Scale teacher training programs and monitoring systems; integrate inclusive EFL indicators into overall school evaluation metrics.

8. Responsible AI integration: Pilot AI-enabled adaptive learning technologies once teachers have the necessary preparation and equitable access is guaranteed (OECD, 2021; OECD, 2023).

9. Partnerships & research: Fund local research projects to evaluate inclusive EFL initiatives within the KRI context, building upon existing Kurdish research on SEN/EFL (Hamasaeed & Abdulrahman, 2023).

Actionable and KRI-focused

A) Policy / Ministry / Directorate Level (system actions)

1. Integrate inclusionary EFL standards with CRPD guidelines

Mandate reasonable accommodation in EFL instruction and assessment; outline specific processes and ensure accountability (United Nations, 2006; CRPD Committee, 2016).

2. Develop an "Inclusive EFL Implementation Guide" for KRI schools

Incorporate UDL lesson-planning templates, a menu of accommodations (for reading, writing, speaking, testing) and specific minimum requirements for AT (UNESCO, 2020; Almeqdad et al., 2023; WHO & UNICEF, 2022).

3. Provide a baseline package of Assistive Technology for every school

Include readily accessible, high-impact tools such as: headphones, microphones, accessible-enabled devices, simple TTS/STT options, captioning support (WHO & UNICEF, 2022; Klimova, 2023).

4. Collect disability-sensitive data for inclusion and EFL progress

Establish a mechanism to monitor the participation and progress of students with SEN in EFL and thereby ensure their visibility in planning and resource allocation (UNICEF, 2021; UNICEF, 2023).

5. Technology policy must ensure digital equity safeguards

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Embed device access, internet connectivity and training, as well as clear privacy and safety guidelines, before rolling out advanced AI technologies (OECD, 2023; OECD, 2021).

B) School leadership level (organizational actions)

6. Create a lean "Inclusive Support Team"

Ensure representation of a coordinator, EFL leader, and SEN point-person who can coordinate accommodation, manageAT implementation, and oversee communication with parents (Gorani, 2024).

7. Facilitate scheduled collaboration time

Institute monthly co-planning meetings for EFL teachers to share UDL lessons, accommodation strategies and student case studies-a method that reduces stress and ensures consistency (Abdi, 2025).

8. Formalize a school-based referral and support process

Document simple steps to refer needs, design accommodations, integrate AT, and implement a cycle of monitoring and review (following CRPD requirements for inclusion) (CRPD Committee, 2016).

C) Teacher professional development (capacity building actions)

9. Mandatory UDL training for EFL teachers

Provide practical applications: (a) developing one unit of curriculum using UDL, (b) creating accessible routines to teach vocabulary, (c) designing diversified assessment formats (Almumen, 2020; Almeqdad et al., 2023; Alghamdy, 2023).

10. Assistive Technology training must focus on pedagogy, not just technology

Teach teachers how to use AT for learning purposes (e.g., "how TTS enhances understanding of complex texts," "how STT supports the writing process"); directly address barriers found in AT research with teachers (Atanga et al., 2020; Belda-Medina, 2023).

11. Targeted modules by disability type

DHH students: captioning, visual supports, alternative response modes and technology-enhanced access (Domagaa-Zyk, 2013).

Neurodevelopmental disorders: individualized strategies, predictable environments and supportive assistive technologies (Barua et al., 2022)

D) Classroom-level EFL practices (immediate instructional actions)

12. Make UDL lesson design the norm

Representation: provide multimodal content (visuals, audio, simplified text). Expression: allow diverse response formats (written, oral, project-based, recorded). Engagement: incorporate choice, gamification and structured routines (Almeqdad et al., 2023; Alghamdy, 2023).

13. Create a menu of inclusive EFL assessment options

Move beyond high-stakes, timed testing to: portfolios, projects, oral responses with prompts and support, and differentiated rubrics (CRPD Committee, 2016; UNESCO, 2020).

14. Normalize the use of AT as standard options in classrooms

Treat accessibility tools as everyday classroom options to avoid them becoming a separate or stigmatized set of add-ons (Klimova, 2023; WHO & UNICEF, 2022).

E) Phased Implementation Plan (Pragmatic timeline)

0-6 months: UDL templates + teacher training + AT quick wins + easy accommodation policy 6-18 months: coaching cycles + school support teams + inclusive EFL assessment reform + routine maintenance & procurement of AT.

18-36 months: pilot AT & inclusive equity-checked AI + scaled rollout + monitoring with disability-sensitive data + continuous professional learning (OECD, 2021; OECD, 2023; UNICEF, 2021).

Conclusion

An inclusive approach to teaching EFL to Kurdish youth with SEN in the KRI requires a combination of rights-based inclusion (as the driver), teacher professional capacity development (as the engine), and modern learning and teaching strategies including UDL, AT, and responsibly governed AI (as the drivers of effective practice and system change). The references highlight both long-standing barriers to inclusion in the Iraqi/KRI context (e.g. Gaps in training, limitations in resources, inconsistent structures) as well as promising strategies, demonstrating that UDL can be a particularly effective and globally relevant pedagogy; AT tools can remove barriers and enhance autonomy for learners with SEN; and carefully managed and ethically deployed AI can also contribute to learning personalization (Almeqdad et al., 2023; Klimova, 2023; OECD, 2023; World Health Organization & UNICEF, 2022). Crucially, context-specific research about inclusive education in the KRI and Kurdish SEN learners in EFL reveals local challenges and supports contextually relevant, teacher-centered, and system-supported interventions (Abas & Abbas, 2023; Gorani, 2024; Hamasaeed & Abdulrahman, 2023).

Unless inclusive EFL in the KRI is conceived as a systemic requirement rather than an isolated set of arrangements for a few, sustainable progress is unlikely. Treating inclusion as the norm-supported by policy, training, and enabling tools and technologies-can promote equity, access, participation, and success for Kurdish youth with SEN in schools across the KRI.

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پوختە

پەروەردەی گشتگیر تادێت وەک مافێکی یاسایی و پێویستییەکی پراکتیکی قاڵب دەگرێت، بەڵام لەگەڵ ئەوەشدا، جێبەجێکردنی بە نایەکسانی دەمێنێتەوە بە تایبەت لەو چوارچێوەیانەی کە کاریگەری ململانێ و سەرچاوە سنووردارەکان و کەلێنی توانای سیستماتیکی هەیە. لە هەرێمی کوردستان، گەنجانی کوردی خاوەن پێداویستی تایبەت لە بواری پەروەردە، ڕووبەڕووی ئاستەنگی زۆر دەبنەوە لە فێربوونی زمانی ئینگلیزی وەک زمانێکی بیانی: دابینکردنی پسپۆڕی سنووردار، ئامادەکارییەکی کەمی مامۆستایان، دەستڕاگەیشتنێکی نایەکسان بە تەکنەلۆژیای یارمەتیدەر و بەربەستە بەردەوامەکانی پەیوەست بە سیاسەت، پشتگوێخستن، ژێرخانی و نایەکسانی دیجیتاڵی. بە پشتبەستن بە ئاماژە پێشکەشکراوەکان لەوانە (ئامرازەکانی مافە نێودەوڵەتییەکان، ڕاپۆرتەکانی چاودێری جیهانی و لێکۆڵینەوەکانی ئەم دواییە لە عێراق و هەرێمی کوردستان، ئینگلیزی وەک زمانێکی بیانی/ئەدەبیاتی تەکنەلۆجیای پێداویستی پەروەردەی تایبەت)، ئەم توێژینەوەیە کۆی ئەو شتانە کۆدەکاتەوە کە سەبارەت بە پێداویستییەکانی پەروەردەی گشتگیر و بەربەستەکان لە عێراق و هەرێمی کوردستاندا دەزانرێت، پاشان ئەو بەڵگانە دەگۆڕێت بۆ کۆمەڵێەکی دیاریکراوی پراکتیکی پەروەردەیی مۆدێرن. ئەم توێژینەوەیە، باس لەوە دەکات کە باشترکردنی دەرئەنجامەکانی زمانی ئینگلیزی وەک زمانێکی بیانی بۆ فێرخوازانی کورد کە خاوەن پێویستی تایبەتن لە بواری پەروەردە، پێویستی بە (١) ڕێکخستنی سیستمی بنەمادار بە مافەکان لەگەڵ ستانداردەکانی پەروەردەی گشتگیردا هەیە؛ (٢) فێربوونی پیشەیی مامۆستا کە پێداگۆژی و زمانی ئینگلیزی وەک جیاوازی زمانی بیانی دەکاتە ئامانج؛ (٣) وەرگرتنی پێکهاتەیی دیزاینی گشتگیر بۆ فێربوون، تەکنەلۆژیای یارمەتیدەر و پشتگیرییەکانی زیرەکی دەستکرد، کە بە شێوەیەکی ئەخلاقی ڕێنمایی دەکرێن بۆ زیادکردنی دەستڕاگەیشتن، بەشداریکردن و پێشکەوتن. توێژینەوەکە بە چوارچێوەیەکی جێبەجێکردنی پراکتیکی و ڕاسپاردەی قۆناغبەندی بۆ قوتابخانەکانی هەرێمی کوردستان و دەسەڵاتدارانی پەروەردە بۆ بەهێزکردنی زمانی ئینگلیزی وەک بڕگەیەکی زمانی بیانی کۆتایی دێت.

وشە سەرەکییەکان: هەرێمی کوردستانی عێراق، ئینگلیزی وەک زمانێکی بیانی، پێداویستی پەروەردەی تایبەت، تەکنەلۆژیای یارمەتیدەر، زیرەکی دەستکرد لە پەروەردەدا، ڕاهێنانی مامۆستایان.

المستخلص

يتزايد ترسيخ التعليم الشامل كحق قانوني وضرورة ملحة، إلا أن تطبيقه لا يزال متفاوتًا، لا سيما في المناطق المتأثرة بالنزاعات، ومحدودية الموارد، ونقص القدرات النظامية. في إقليم كردستان، يواجه الشباب الكردي ذوو الاحتياجات التعليمية الخاصة العديد من العقبات في تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، منها: نقص الدعم المتخصص، ومحدودية إعداد المعلمين، وعدم تكافؤ فرص الوصول إلى التكنولوجيا المساعدة، واستمرار العوائق المتعلقة بالسياسات، والبنية التحتية، وعدم المساواة الرقمية. استنادًا إلى المراجع المذكورة (الصكوك الدولية للحقوق، وتقارير الرصد العالمية، والبحوث الحديثة في العراق وإقليم كردستان، وأدبيات تكنولوجيا اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية/احتياجات التعليم الخاص)، تلخص هذه الدراسة ما هو معروف عن احتياجات التعليم الشامل ومعوقاته في العراق وإقليم كردستان في العصر الحديث. وتؤكد الدراسة أن تحسين نتائج تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية للمتعلمين الأكراد ذوي الاحتياجات التعليمية الخاصة يتطلب ما يلي: (1) تكييف النظام القائم على الحقوق مع معايير التعليم العالمية؛ (2) التطوير المهني للمعلمين الذي يركز على أساليب التدريس والاختلافات في اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية؛ (3) التبني المنظم للتصميم الشامل للتعلم، والتقنيات المساعدة، ودعم الذكاء الاصطناعي، وفقًا للمعايير الأخلاقية لزيادة فرص الوصول والمشاركة والتقدم. تختتم الورقة البحثية بإطار عمل عملي للتنفيذ وتوصيات مرحلية لمدارس حكومة إقليم كردستان وهيئات التعليم لتعزيز تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: إقليم كردستان العراق، اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، ذوي الاحتياجات التعليمية الخاصة، التكنولوجيا المساعدة، الذكاء الاصطناعي في التعليم، تدريب المعلمين.

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