

Identifying and uplifting slow learners in the English classroom



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ABSTRACT

Slow learners are students with borderline intellectual functioning and their education causes a great challenge to teachers and academic administrators. As they do not clearly belong to the category requiring special education services, they are often neglected in schools and their learning problems are not seriously discussed or debated. There are no intervention or accommodation plans for slow learners in most schools. Hence, this group does not receive any specialized education services by the governments or academic institutions as they are considered normal students. In most situations, it becomes the sole responsibility of the teachers to handle such struggling students in their classrooms.

Introduction

The learning problems of slow learners are almost the same across the world. They belong to an identifiable group of children for whom only certain unique instructional methods are effective in the regular class. They may not benefit much from the usual teaching techniques employed in the class. The lessons, planned for the majority of students, often fail to meet the specific learning needs of the slow learners. As a result, they lose their academic motivation and are left to struggle to make progress in their studies.

Slow learners are students with below average cognitive abilities. They are not

disabled, but they struggle to cope with the traditional academic demands of the regular classroom. They take longer time than their peers to understand a new concept and need extra support to do their schoolwork. Mercer (1996) defines slow learners as children who are doing poorly in school, yet not eligible for special education. According to Griffin (1978), slow learners are students who learn more slowly than their peers. At the same time, they do not have a disability requiring special education. Although slow learners may have special educational needs, they do not fit neatly into the special education system. They are not averse to learning, nor do they have any learning disabilities.

How to identify slow learners

It is a difficult task for teachers to identify slow learners. The learning difficulties of the visually, auditorily or otherwise physically challenged are clearly visible to the observer but the handicaps of the slow learners are not always so obvious. Proper identification of all students with learning problems and early interventions would greatly reduce the need for remedial programmes. Misidentification or improper labelling of students with learning problems can have negative consequences. Unlike students with more visible and identifiable characteristics, slow learners often have good physical and motor skills. As a result, they often go unnoticed until the result of a formal assessment or test is announced. A systematic or scientific way of identifying slow learners does not exist in most schools in India. There is no nationwide programme in our country to deal with the learning difficulties of this large minority group. It is up to the teachers to identify the slow learners in their classrooms and to do their best to meet the needs of these struggling students. So there should be a comprehensive plan in every school to create greater awareness of the need for this programme among teachers and parents and to implement necessary support services. The following strategies can be used to identify slow learners.

Observation

Observation is a basic quality every teacher should possess. It is one of the oldest and the most effective methods of learning about

children. As Genesse and Upshur (1996) state, "Observation is basic to assessing human skills and behaviour" (p.77). With constant classroom observation, a teacher can understand and evaluate each student's strengths and weaknesses. It also gives vital information about their interests, needs, experiences, abilities and learning styles. A close watch of children engaged in a classroom activity can reveal to us how creative, active and emotional they are. The signs of slow learning are apparent when students struggle with the learning tasks. At the same time, they may not have any other obvious attitudinal or motivational difficulties. Teachers can use the information gathered from observing their children to individualize the instruction for the slow learners in their class. By ongoing classroom observation, teachers can notice various signs of difficulties some students may face in cognitive skills, language development, temperament, and socio-emotional development.

Assessments

Classroom assessment is the process of observing, recording and documenting students' academic progress and behaviour. It gives vital information about each student's unique needs, interests, strengths and weaknesses. During the assessment process, teachers closely monitor the various actions of students on a daily basis in order to understand them better. This will help them gain insights into each student's learning styles and needs. The basic purpose of assessment is to collect

information about individual students to know more about each one. Students' individual problems can be identified through proper assessment. When a problem arises in the class, it should be noted down immediately and plans should be made to remedy it. For a proper identification of slow learners, the emotional aspects of the children under observation should also be assessed. The emotional disturbances can sometimes be a reflection of their learning problems. Some slow learners may have complex and challenging behaviours. Such behaviour is likely to prevent the teacher from maintaining discipline in the class.

Evaluation

Evaluation and assessment are sometimes used interchangeably. But their processes are different. Evaluation is the process of reviewing the information gathered through assessment. These activities include tasks such as formal teacher-made tests, curriculum-embedded tests, oral questions, and a wide variety of other cognitive and psychomotor performance activities. It also includes assessment of motivational and attitudinal variables and of learning skills. Teachers can rely on a wide range of formal and informal evaluative measures. Formal evaluative activities include class tests on language skills and various other oral and written exercises like note taking, assignments, projects and presentations. Informal activities include pair, group or whole class discussions, debates, teacher questionings, marking or commenting on various kinds of performance, checklists

and observation of learning activities and student responses to classrooms tasks.

Questionnaires and interviews

Questionnaires and interviews are two important research techniques that help teachers to tap into the knowledge, opinions, learning strategies and problems of their learners. When these techniques are applied, learners get a chance to express their needs and difficulties in learning. Teachers can use these techniques with their students, co-teachers and parents and record the information for subsequent reflection and analysis. They also help teachers to elicit factual data about individual students. Learner interview is an effective way of getting closer to the learners' individual needs and difficulties. A great advantage of learner interview is that teachers can also make other observations about the learner's attitude, nonverbal behaviour, home background, etc. Hence, it is more productive than a questionnaire.

Case study

Case study is one of the most effective methods of identifying slow learners. By this technique, the family background of a child, his/her early life, home environment, etc. can be understood. It also helps to find out the various learning and behavioral problems of a student. Case studies play an important role in second language classroom research. Teachers can utilize a wide range of methods for collecting and analyzing data, rather than being restricted to a single procedure. It can be done by

observing and finding the everyday situation of slow learners in English classroom and the various challenges they face in learning. In short, a case study is not always limited to an individual language learner. It can be applied for the study of a group of students in a class, a whole class, a whole school or even an entire chain of schools in a district.

Strategies to support slow learners in the English classroom

It is a common belief that slow learners in the regular classroom are neither rare nor unique. Therefore, no single technique is sufficient to deal with them. They need special instructional pacing, frequent feedback, corrective instruction, and modified materials to keep pace with the rest of the class. There should be a great variety in instructional materials and presentation methods to circumvent their learning deficiency and to keep them actively engaged in the learning process. When the content of the lesson is more concrete, visual, familiar, and personally significant, they begin to show interest in it. Teachers should make use of every opportunity to encourage them and reinforce the idea that they are improving. It is also important to check for understanding at each point of learning, and give them ample opportunities to practise, and review the target language, both inside and outside the classroom.

Motivation

Cognition and motivation are the two most important factors that lead to success in learning. It is only when motivational and

cognitive factors interact and jointly influence, effective learning takes place. Students need both the cognitive skill and the motivational will to do well in school (Pintrich & Schunk, 2002). Of the two, motivation has a dominant role in student success. Student motivation is an enabler for academic success. Lack of academic motivation is a real problem for slow learners and a great challenge for teachers. Slow learners need strong motivation, both extrinsic and intrinsic, and proper guidance to build self-confidence. They often get frustrated and stop proceeding with the activities when the task is too difficult for them. If teachers can break down the task into smaller units, they can build confidence in slow learners and make the tasks achievable for them.

Varied instructional strategies

It is a challenge for teachers to accommodate the variability of students into their instructional strategies. As students differ in their interests, knowledge, skills and learning styles, teachers need to introduce a variety of instructional approaches and methods in their class. A single method of teaching cannot accommodate all students with different learning styles. So it is essential to ensure variety in instructional strategies to engage students with various intelligences and to achieve instructional goals. Every teacher should have a variety of methods to meet all of their instructional goals. To deal with the slow learners, teachers should develop various instructional strategies that specifically address their learning needs.

Accommodations and adaptations

Instructional accommodations and adaptations are effective measures in catering to the learning difficulties of slow learners. They are not just for the struggling students. When proper accommodations are made, all students equally benefit. Hallahan, et al. (2012) defines accommodations as “changes in instruction that don’t significantly change the content or conceptual difficulty level of the curriculum” (p.38). Accommodations or adaptations neither dilute the essence of the lesson nor make any changes to the core curriculum. They do not fundamentally alter or lower standards in instructional level or content. But some changes are made in the lesson delivery method in order to give better opportunities for all students who differ in their learning styles.

Learners’ interests and experiences

A successful educator is one who can transfer the learners’ common experiences into meaningful learning situations. The lessons planned for slow learners should be engaging and facilitate the twenty-first century learning skills such as communication, collaboration, critical thinking and creativity. To quote Nair (2013), “Texts which leave space for the learners to engage themselves in, and lead them to higher order cognitive realms where they are “willfully forced” to employ critical thinking skills and argumentative skills alone can develop in them language competence” (p.69). Slow learners, in

general, cannot understand things, which are outside the range of their immediate experience. Therefore, teachers should try to develop lessons that incorporate students’ interests, needs and experiences. This will make the students feel that the lessons are designed for them with their specific interests and experiences in mind. They do better in the class where the content of the lesson is presented in a concrete and experiential manner. When teachers give simple and concrete examples from everyday life situations, they learn better.

Collaborative Learning

Language acquisition is essentially a social process. It is mainly by interacting with others that people develop fluency in a language. Collaborative learning is a joint attempt in which students work in a group, mutually searching for understanding, solutions, meanings, or trying to make a product. It is a situation in which two or more people learn or attempt to learn something together. It is a significant shift from the typical teacher-centred classrooms. It facilitates the creation of an intellectual synergy of many minds coming to bear on a problem. This kind of mutual engagement in a common endeavour can lead to mutual exploration, meaning-making, and instant feedback from peers. Most collaborative learning activities focus on students’ exploration of the course material rather than the teacher’s presentation of it. In a collaborative learning situation, a teacher functions as an expert designer of intellectual experiences for his/her students

and not as a mere transmitter of knowledge. The teacher is a facilitator who monitors the students who are engaged in discussions and active work with the course material.

Integrating Communication Technologies

The rapid evolution in educational technology is offering ample opportunities for students in personalized learning. Students are now able to access the rich multimedia content, the vast fund of online resources, social networking tools, digital games, etc. to make their learning more interesting and independent. The growth and development of Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) has influenced every field of education. It plays a major role in second language acquisition. By using the Internet and other communication technologies, students can be easily motivated and involved in many learning activities which are related to their daily life. The Internet offers unlimited access to vast amounts of authentic materials on any topic and gives enormous opportunities to interact with any one across the globe. Students can now search for information and clear their doubts without depending much on their teachers.

Feedback

Feedback is a great reinforcer for learning and achievement. It has a major influence on students' academic success. A positive feedback has the power to initiate further action and it improves both teaching and learning. It helps students understand the

subject better and gives them clear guidance on how to proceed with their learning. But it is very important to ensure that the feedback given in class is always constructive. It contributes to learning only when the learner reflects on the lesson and works on the action points. The aim of giving feedback is not just to focus on students' language errors. Instead, it should be aimed at motivating them and showing clearly the ways in which they can improve. The focus should be on progress rather than deficiency. With proper feedback a student is given multiple opportunities for self reflection. It also gives them greater self-satisfaction and higher aspirations for future achievement. Suggestions for improvement should be highlighted as to how students can close the gap between their current level and the level they are trying to reach. Teachers should try to create a culture of success in class where students can make achievements by improving their current performance, rather than trying to compare themselves with their peers.

Affective teaching

Although the concept of affective teaching is not a new issue in education, it is not widely utilized by teachers in the regular classroom. Affective teaching is the democratic process of interacting with students in a caring, conscious, and committed way. In other words, it is a way of teaching on two levels – intellectual and emotional – using both the brain and the heart. Developing and exploiting affective strategies help to create a positive learning

atmosphere in class. It can be done by encouraging learners to identify achievable aims and work towards autonomous learning, through personalizing activities and collaborative tasks. Teachers should use some relaxation techniques to lower the anxiety level and to create interest in learning. Slow learners, who have low self-esteem and no motivation, need an affective stimulation to foster interest in studies. By activating the affective domain, teachers can awaken their curiosity and interest in learning.

Affective teaching requires an open and free communication with students to facilitate authentic interpersonal relationships. When teachers interact with students in an atmosphere of openness, the emotional base of students is honoured and accepted without any prejudice. The emotional impact of teachers' behaviour can influence learning because it helps to instill in students a love for the subject they study. When the teacher provides warmth, acceptance and empathy, the learners feel free to regard their emotions and personal meanings as legitimate content in learning.

Conclusion

Slow learners are not students who are destined to fail. With proper identification and effective support services, teachers can solve most of the problems they face in language acquisition. It is important that

teachers should learn more about the specific learning and personal problems that can cause a child to become a slow learner and make necessary accommodation strategies to address their individual problems.

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