An Effective Way to Handle Slow Learners in the English Classroom

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Abstract

Slow learners are the students who are low in achieving academic skills and often ignored by others as dull, lazy or inept and marginalised as a part of the education system. Slow learners not only lag behind other students in academics but in the areas of social, emotional and psychological factors. Slow learners are the students with a borderline intellectual functioning and to educate them is a great challenge to teachers and academicians.

As the slow learners do not clearly belong to the category requiring special educational approaches, they are often neglected in the education set-up and their learning challenges are not seriously discussed or debated and solved. There are no proper studies or accommodation plans for slow learners in most colleges. So, this particular group does not receive any specialized educational approaches 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 and balance them with advanced learners.

KEYWORDS: Slow learners, marginalized, borderline intellectual functioning, special educational approaches, academic parenthood

Introduction

The learning challenges of slow learners are almost alike across the world. These slow learners belong to an identifiable set of students for whom only certain kinds of unique instructional methods and approaches are effective in the same regular classes. They may not be benefitted much from the usual teaching techniques, methods, and approaches used in the classroom. The topics with specific techniques, methods, and approaches, planned for the majority of students, often fail to meet the specific learning needs of these slow learners. Consequently, they lose their academic motivation and are left to struggle to succeed in their studies.

Slow learners are students with below-average cognitive learning abilities. They are not considered as disabled, but they struggle with the traditional academic demands of regular classroom teaching. They take a longer time than their peer group to understand a new concept and need extra assistance to do their academic work. Mercer (1996) defines slow learners as the children who are doing poorly in academics, yet ineligible for special education. According to Griffin (1978), slow learners are students who can learn more slowly than their peer group. On the other hand, they do not have a disability requiring special education. Although slow learners may have special educational needs, they don't

fit neatly into the special education system. They are not declined for learning, nor do they have any learning disabilities.

How to identify these slow learners

It is the foremost difficult task for teachers to spot these slow learners. The learning hurdles of the visually, aural or otherwise specially challenged are clearly visible to the observer but the hurdles of the slow learners aren't always so obvious and simply visible. Timely identification of all students with learning problems and early interventions would greatly reduce the need for remedies. Suppose a teacher misidentifies or improperly labels students with learning problems can have a series of negative consequences. Unlike students with more visible and identifiable characteristics, these slow learners often have good physical and motor skills. Hence, they often go unnoticed until the result of a formal assessment or test is announced. A systematic or scientific way of identifying these slow learners does not exist in most schools in India. There is no pan nation programme in our country to deal with the cognitive learning difficulties of this large minority group. It depends on the teachers to identify these slow learners in their classrooms and to do their best to meet the needs of these struggling students. So there should be a proper comprehensive plan in every academic institution to create greater awareness of the need for this programmme among teachers and parents and to implement necessary support services. Below are the main strategies that can be used to identify slow learners.

Observation

One of the important qualities, teachers should possess is keen observation and is one of the primitive and the most effective approach to learning about children. As Genesse and Upshur (1996) state, "Observation is basic to assessing human skills and behaviour". By the constant classroom observation, a teacher can understand and evaluate each student's strengths and weaknesses. It also gives every information about their interests, needs, experiences, abilities and learning styles. Minute observation of children's participation in a classroom activity can reveal to us how creative, active and emotional they are. The signs of these slow learning students are obvious when students struggle with the learning exercises. On the other hand, they may not have any other obvious motivational or attitudinal difficulties. Teachers can use the information pooled from observing their children individualize the instruction for the slow learners in their class. Through 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

Learning assessment is the process of observation, recording and documentation of students' academic progress and behaviour. It gives vital information about each student's unique needs, interests, strengths and weaknesses. While doing the assessment process, teachers closely monitor the various actions of students on a daily basis to know 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. Slow learners' individual problems would be identified through proper assessment criteria. When a problem is encountered in the class, it should be noted down immediately and should plan a solution. To identify these slow learners, the emotional aspects of the children should be observed and assessed. Sometimes the emotional disturbances can be a reflection of their learning problems. Some slow learners might have challenging and complex behaviours. Such behaviours are likely to prevent the teacher from maintaining discipline in the class.

Evaluation and assessment are sometimes used interchangeably. But their processes are different. Evaluation is the process of reviewing the information pooled through an assessment. These include tasks such as formal tests by the teacher, curriculum-designed tests, oral tests and a wide range of other cognitive and psychomotor performance-based activities. It has also an 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 classroom tasks.

Find outs

Questionnaires and interviews are two significant research techniques that help teachers to assess 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 methods with their students, co-teachers and parents and record them for subsequent reflection and analysis. This helps teachers to elicit factual data about individual students. A great advantage of the learner interviews 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.

Ways to support slow learners in the English classroom

Generally, it is believed that slow learners in the regular classroom are neither rare nor unique. Therefore, a single technique is insufficient to deal with them. They need special and specific instructional pacing, frequent feedbacks, corrective instructions, and modified materials to keep pace with the rest of the class. Teachers should prepare a variety of instructional materials and presentation methods to find out their learning deficiencies and to keep them actively engaged in the learning process. When the content of the lesson is more concrete, with visuals, familiar to them and personally significant, they begin to show more interest in it. Teachers should leave any stone untouched 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 practice, and review the target language, both inside and outside the classroom.

Boosting Confidence

Cognition and motivation are the two most important factors that lead to success in learning. When motivational and cognitive factors come together and jointly influence, effective learning takes place. Students need both the cognitive and the motivational skills will to do well in school, where motivation has an up hand in student success. Student motivation is essential for academic success. Academic motivation is a real challenge for slow learners and a great challenge for teachers when motivation lacks. Slow learners need both extrinsic and intrinsic motivation and proper guidance to build self-confidence or else they get frustrated and stop proceeding with the activities when the task is too challenging for them. If teachers can divide the task into smaller ones, they can boost confidence in slow learners and make them succeed.

Different instructional approaches

It is really a challenge for teachers to accommodate the variability of students into their instructional strategies. As students have individual differences in their interests, knowledge, skills and learning styles, teachers need to introduce a variety of instructional approaches and methods in their class. A single teaching methodology cannot accommodate all students with different learning abilities. So it is to be ensured variety in instructional strategies to engage students with various intelligence and to achieve instructional goals. Every teacher should have a variety of methods to meet all of their instructional goals. To handle the slow learners, teachers should develop various instructional approaches that specifically meet their learning needs.

Instructional accommodations and adaptations are important measures to cater and solve the learning difficulties of slow learners. They are not just for these slow learners. When the right accommodations are used, all students are equally benefited. Hallahan, et al. (2012) defines accommodations as the "changes in instruction that don't change the content or conceptual difficulty level of the curriculum" (p.38). These neither dilute the essence of the lesson nor make any changes to the core curriculum and do not fundamentally change or lower standards in instructional level or content. But some changes are adopted in the content delivery method in order to give better opportunities for all students who differ in their learning abilities.

Learners' Point of View

A successful facilitator is one who can transfer the learners' common experiences into meaningful learning situations. The topics planned for slow learners should be engaging and facilitative to the 21st-century learning skills such as communication, collaboration, critical thinking and creativity. According to Nair (2013), "Texts which leave ample space for the learners to involve themselves in, and lead them to high order cognitive learning where they are "willfully forced" to cater and employ critical analyzing skills and argumentative skills alone can develop in them language competence" (p.69). Slow learners, generally, are unable to understand things, which are outside the circle of their immediate experience. Hence, facilitators must try to develop lessons that meet students' interests, needs and experiences. This makes the students feel that the contents are exclusively designed for them with their specific interests and experiences in mind. They

excel better in the class where the content of the lesson is presented in a concrete and experiential method. When facilitators give simple and concrete examples from their everyday life situations, they follow easily.

Collaborative Learning Process

Language acquisition is essentially a social process. It is mainly by communicating with others that people develop fluency in a language. The collaborative learning process is a joint venture in which students work in a group, mutually searching for understanding, solutions, meanings, or trying to make a product. It is a context where two or more people learn or attempt to learn something together. It is an important shift from the typical teacher-centered classrooms. It provides the creation of an intellectual synergy of so many minds coming to bear on a challenge. This type of mutual, cordial involvement in a common endeavour can lead to mutual exploration, meaning-making, and instant feedback from a peer group. Most of these learnings focus on students' exploration of the course material rather than the teacher's presentation of it. In a collaborative learning situation, a teacher acts as an expert designer of intellectual experiences for his/her students and not as a mere transmitter of information and knowledge. The teacher is a facilitator who mentors the students who are engaged in discussions and active work with the course material.

Blending ICT

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

Constructive Feedback for Academic Excellence

Feedback is a great reinforce and a catalyst for learning and achievement. It has a significant influence on students' academic excellence. A positive and constructive feedback has the power to initiate further action and it improves both teaching and learning process and helps students to understand the content better and gives them clear guidance on how to proceed with their learning process. But it is significantly important to that the feedback given in class is always constructive and motivating. It adds 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 but also to motivate them and showing clearly the ways in which they can improve. Progress should be focused rather than deficiency. With valid feedback a student is given multiple opportunities for self reflection. It also gives them greater self-satisfaction and higher

aspirations for their future learning. Suggestions for improvement must be highlighted as to how students can close the gap between their present level and the expected level. Teachers must create a culture of success in classroom where students can make achievements by improving their current performance, rather than trying to compare themselves with their peer group.

Affective teaching and Academic Parenthood

Though affective teaching is not a new concept in education, it is not utilized by teachers in the regular classroom widely. It is the democratic phenomena of interacting with students in a caring, conscious, and committed way and it is a way of teaching on two levels – emotional and intellectual – using both the heart and the brain. Research and developing affective strategies help to create a constructive learning atmosphere in classroom. It is done by motivating learners to identify achievable aims and work towards autonomous self-learning, through personalizing activities and collaborative tasks. Teachers must adopt some stress buster techniques to lower the anxiety level and to create interest in learning. Slow learners, who have less self esteem and no motivation, need an affective stimulation booster to foster interest in learning. By stimulating the affective domain, facilitators can trigger their curiosity and interest in learning.

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

Conclusion

Slow learners are not destined to fail. By the valid identification and effective support services, teachers can solve most of the problems they encounter in language learning. Importantly teachers should learn more about the specific learning and personal problems that can lead a child to become a slow leaner and make necessary accommodation strategies to tackle their individual problems.

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