

DEALING WITH SLOW LEARNERS IN THE LANGUAGE CLASS*

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As the shades of colour black & white the children of yester years were termed as normal & mentally retarded. But here we forget that there is a shade of grey in between the two. The same way there is a group of children who are neither normal nor retarded. They are slow learners.

(R. Sholapurwala)

Nowadays language educators face challenges in dealing with slow learners, i.e. students who fail to learn a foreign language at the same rate as their peers. This paper seeks to find out the characteristics of these learners depending on various internal and external factors, determine the problems that hinder them from learning a foreign language effectively and to find efficient methods of working with them. As a matter of fact, they do badly at school for various reasons: low intellectual abilities, lack of concentration, less exposure to the subject taught, cultural issues, lack of emotional growth, untrained teaching staff, etc. Our firm belief is that these children have a wide range of abilities that can effectively be utilized by teachers to achieve the desired results, i.e. achieve a reasonable degree of academic success, even though at a slower pace than average students. Teachers should be able to cope with these difficulties with patience and high professionalism.

Key words: slow learners, limited intellectual ability, remedial teaching, academic success, professionalism.

Introduction

Today, most comprehensive schools around the world provide a foreign language as a compulsory subject in the syllabus, aiming at teaching students to communicate in a foreign language both orally and in written form.

Learning a foreign language has some obvious benefits, however, it is challenging. And this is natural: a foreign language has a different system of grammar, it uses a completely different alphabet and different sound system. So

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learning thousands of new words is not easy, either. It is particularly difficult for slow learners to study a foreign language.

Every language teacher has to deal with slow learners at one point or another. Statistic data show that two out of every ten students in a class are slow learners. The number within the whole class may not be very high, but just the fact that there are slow learners requires attention. Those who have experience to teach slow learners a foreign language, can find out many difficulties connected with their capabilities. A teacher should have endless patience and high professionalism to cope with these difficulties in the teaching process. The most essential thing for them to realize is that the problem is not that the students are not able to learn, but rather that they do so at a different pace.

A Slow Learner: Definition and Characteristics

A “slow learner” is a term used to describe a student who has limited intellectual abilities to learn necessary academic skills, the one who learns more slowly than his/her peers. However, distinction should be made between *slow learning students* and *mentally retarded* ones (the latter being also called “backward”, “under achiever” “learning disabled” “educationally subnormal” and the like), based on their rate of learning. By no means should a slow learner be equated with a mentally retarded, because the former is capable of achieving a reasonable degree of academic success even though at a slower rate than average student. As an adult, a slow learner usually becomes self-supporting, independent and socially adjusted, but at the early stage he adapts himself to regular classroom programmes which fit in with his slower learning ability.

We should also distinguish between *slow* learners, *shy* learners and learners who are simply *not motivated*. Shy learners are not necessarily slow, they are shy to speak out loud and lack confidence. Students who are not motivated are simply not interested and need to be engaged in order to participate fully in class. Finally, slow learners are students who are not able to follow the current pace, i.e. they don't learn as fast as the rest of the class (busyteacher.org).

There are a number of reasons for slow learning, which are very specific to the individual learner: it may be due to their limited mental ability, their background, lack of concentration, less exposure to the subject taught, cultural issues, lack of emotional growth and secure environment, etc. A child's capacity to learn different subjects varies from student to student. Students show interest in the subjects they like and neglect other subjects if not taken care of.

Usually students are identified as slow learners on the basis of their poor performance. It is sometimes difficult to identify slow learners as they are no different in physical appearance from normal children: they are quite well-built, they can function normally in most situations and therefore are easily admitted into comprehensive schools for ordinary children where the curriculum is drawn up to meet the needs of average children. So they find it extremely difficult to cope with secondary school curriculum, unless it is oriented towards practical and real life activities. They are capable of being educated in ordinary schools and even achieving a moderate degree of success, if they are allowed to proceed at a slower pace and the syllabus is adapted to suit their abilities. But, they will not be able to

keep pace with the average children and never be able to learn all the things we expect normal children to master by the time they leave school. They will not be able to go for higher studies despite all the guidance and educational facilities made available to them. They have poor memories. Their attention span is short and they cannot concentrate on one topic for long.

Slow learners face challenges in the process of education. In fact, they have difficulty with reasoning skills. This suggests that it will be more challenging to learn new concepts. New skills need to be based upon already mastered concepts. Things are made more complicated when the majority of the class have already mastered a concept and is moving on, while the slow learner needs more time. This can lead to gaps in knowledge and basic skills. They may find it difficult to listen carefully and speak clearly, which may result in limited vocabulary development. Self-confidence can also be an issue. They are prone to anxiety, low self-image, and eventually may be quick to give up. They often feel “stupid” and start hating studying. They spend all day doing something that is difficult for them. Here the question that may arise is: If these students struggle so much, why are they often not eligible for Special Education? Special Education services are provided for students who have a disability. Slow learners tend to perform at their ability level, which is below average. Although a student does not receive special education services, he/she will require additional help and support through regular education. Most of the students don't have parents and their personal life greatly influences the teaching/learning process. Even some of the most efficient teachers are not adequately armed to identify and guide slow learners to reach their optimum levels.

They are therefore cannot, as most children, to meet the normal demands of education and life in modern society. Many of them will be absorbed into the life of the community as adults and will contribute usefully without drawing undue attention to them. The period at which their limitations are so obvious is that of the school years. At school certain skills such as verbal intelligence, the capacity for abstract and conceptual thinking are valued. These students have learning difficulties which tend to increase if the teaching is not suitably graded to their slower rate of progress, and modified to achieve the most effective ways of learning. Hence there is a greater need for special educational measures for the slow learners to ensure maximum progress they are capable of.

A website called *Helping Slow Learners* (foundationosa.org) lists 10 points that well summarize the characteristics of a slow learner:

1. Functions at ability but significantly below grade level.
2. Is prone to immature interpersonal relationships.
3. Has difficulty following multistep directions.
4. Lives in the present and does not have long range goals.
5. Has few internal strategies (i.e. organizational skills, difficulty transferring and generalizing information).
6. Scores consistently low on achievement tests.
7. Works well with *hands-on* material (i.e. labs, manipulative activities).
8. Has a poor self-image.
9. Works on all tasks slowly.
10. Masters skills slowly; some skills may not be mastered at all.

Working with Slow Learners

Many educators and administrators find the world of providing instruction for limited English proficient students to be mysterious and complicated. So they have to face challenges in dealing with these children. The reason for this is that these teachers do not receive any particular training on how to support such children, no special services are provided either. It is up to the teachers and parents to provide the help needed for slow learners to progress by using special strategies to assist them in it. The goal of helping a slow learner is not to get them performing at grade level, but to get them performing at their highest level. Harmer (2001) suggests that students learn more quickly if the teaching methods used match their preferred learning styles. As learning improves, so does self-esteem.

Much can be done by teachers to help students with learning difficulties. They can improve their teaching methods, the tasks they assign to their students and the way they assess their work. Below are presented some strategies and ideas that could be employed by educators to cope with such students.

In terms of the **methods** used, 1) teachers should first of all employ simple language while speaking and try to speak more slowly. 2) Explicit instruction method rather than an implicit one would be more appropriate here since such students mostly lack critical thinking skills. 3) Teachers should not ask them open ended-questions, instead, they had better ask precise questions requiring definite answers. 4) The teaching materials should also be concrete and simple. 5) The material should be presented by employing various teaching methods to meet different language styles (orally, visually, kinesthetically, etc.). 6) Tables, charts, graphs and pictures are helpful tools for presenting the new material. 7) When dividing the class into groups, teachers had better pair the slow learner with a strong learner to guide him/her. 8) Summarizing the key points at the end of the lesson is also helpful.

As to the assignments, 1) It's a good idea to provide students with controlled or guided tasks rather than free assignments. 2) The amount of work to be done should be reduced to match the slow pace of the learners. Also large assignments should be split into small parts. 3) The tasks should be within the students' level of capability, therefore, it is important to differentiate tasks, taking into consideration what educational philosopher John Dewey suggested long ago: that we begin where the students are, not where we would like them to be. 4) Graph organizers and outlines are also helpful for students to deal with assignments. 4) Teachers should repeat instructions to the slow learner more than one time; they may need to give the instructions in writing, spell them out, copy them down, etc.

Lescano (1995:40) suggests considering activities that involve the use of different sensory channels: auditory, visual, tactile, or kinesthetic. He also presents some activities and techniques that can be successfully employed in a foreign language class in the following carefully planned stages: warm-up, presentation, controlled practice, production:

- Give daily evaluations.
- Use simple vocabulary in directions and instructions.
- Use standard formats and limited types of responses for each assignment.
- Provide multi-sensory prompts to elicit correct responses.

- Analyze and break down difficult tasks.
- Increase time-on-task rates (more teacher questions, group participation, effective use of signals, gestures, etc.).

Conclusion

In conclusion, we need to remember that every student yearns to be successful. Teachers should do their best to facilitate student success by providing ways to help students achieve their academic goals. Language teachers encounter with different types of students, among them with slow learners, i.e. those with limited intellectual abilities. Slow learners need special attention and care for being duly helped in getting rid of their inferiority in terms of rate of learning and educational achievement. Much can be done by teachers to help such students. By understanding their students' strengths and weaknesses, incorporating a variety of teaching styles and motivating students to learn, teachers are best able to help them reach their goal of becoming competent and productive communicators in English. They can improve their teaching methods, the tasks they assign to their students and the way they assess their work. As long as they continue trying new ways to assist these children, they will be able to make progress and most of all, overcome the fear of language learning.

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Դանդաղ ընկալող օտար լեզու սովորողների հետ աշխատելու առանձնահատկությունները

Մեր օրերում լեզվի դասավանդման պրոցեսում դժվար ըմբռնող սովորողների հետ աշխատելիս ուսուցիչները շատ հաճախ են բախվում խնդիրների: Սույն հոդվածում հեղինակները փորձել են պարզել այդ սովորողներին բնորոշ առանձնահատկությունները, լուծել այն խնդիրները, որոնք խոչընդոտում են

նրանց՝ դժվարացնելով օտար լեզվի յուրացումը, ինչպես նաև գտնել աշխատելու արդյունավետ մեթոդներ և մարտավարություններ: Հեղինակները հավատացած են, որ նման երեխաների հետ աշխատանքը ճիշտ կազմակերպելու դեպքում միանգամայն հնարավոր է, թեև դանդաղ, հասնել ցանկալի արդյունքի:

Особенности обучения неуспевающих учащихся иностранным языкам

В настоящее время в процессе обучения иностранным языкам учителя часто сталкиваются с проблемами, связанными с неуспевающими студентами. Данная статья является попыткой выявить характеристики студентов, проблемы, которые мешают им в процессе изучения иностранных языков, а также найти эффективные методы и стратегии работы с ними. Авторы считают, что при правильной организации работы со студентами, хотя и медленно, но возможно достичь желаемого результата.