

SLOW LEARNERS: ROLE OF TEACHERS IN DEVELOPING THE LANGUAGE SKILLS**T. BANU RAMLAKSHMI**Assistant Professor Senior, Dept of English /Science and Humanities
SNS College of Engineering, Coimbatore**Abstract**

Students with below average cognitive abilities whom we cannot term as disabled are called slow learners. They struggle to cope with the traditional academic demands of the regular classroom. Actually slow learners are normal students but the problem is that they are simply not interested in studying under traditionally accepted system of education. The objective of this article is to understand the characteristics of a slow learner and the role of teachers to improve them in developing the language skills.

Introduction

A Slow Learner may be called dull normal, low normal or borderline retarded. But we prefer the term Slow Learner. About 1 out of 5 children are Slow Learners. They often are delayed in walking or talking. Most Slow Learners are born with the problem. Severe head injuries, meningitis, or the mother's use of alcohol or cocaine during the pregnancy can cause a child to become a Slow Learner.

Unfortunately these children are often "overlooked" since they do not have a Learning Disability and are not Mentally Retarded. Slow Learners may have problems not only with math and reading but also with coordination such as penmanship, sports, or dressing. Often they are quiet and shy, and they have trouble making friends. They may have a poor self confidence. They have trouble with abstract thinking such as in social studies or doing math word problems. They often have a short attention span. All of these problems cause them to have a poor self esteem.

Characteristics of Slow Learners

Here are some general characteristics of slow learners. Students may display some or all of these depending on their age and degree of problems acquiring knowledge at school. First, they are frequently immature in their relations with others and do poorly in school. Secondly, they cannot do complex problems and work very slowly. They lose track of time and cannot transfer what they have learned from one task to another well. They do not easily master skills that are academic in nature such as the times tables or spelling

rules. Perhaps the most frustrating trait is their inability to have long-term goals. They live in the present and so have significant problems with time management probably due to a short attention span and poor concentration skills capabilities.

It should be pointed out that just because a child is not doing well in one class does not make that student a slow learner. Very few children excel in all subject areas unless there is great deal of grade inflation at that school. That is why it is essential that standardized tests scores be examined in depth by the parent or teacher to look for trends. Also there is a difference between a slow learner and a reluctant learner. A slow learner initially wants to learn, but just has a problem with the process. A reluctant learner is not motivated and can also be passive aggressive creating even more of a problem for teachers and parents through a ploy that involves non-cooperation. There is seldom anything wrong with the learning ability of reluctant learners.

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- They cannot do complex problems and work very slowly.
- They lose track of time and have difficulty transferring what they have learned from one task to another well.
- They do not easily master skills that are academic in nature, such as the times tables or spelling rules.
- Perhaps the most frustrating trait is their inability to have long-term goals.
- They live in the present and have significant problems with time management.
- They often have a short attention span and poor concentration skills.

Working with Slow Learners

- Reduce distractions by providing a quiet, private place to work.
- Emphasize strengths. Use lots of praise and reinforcement frequently.
- Make lessons short. Limit the working time and have several short work periods rather than one long one.
- Add variety to the academic routine. Do active things and use educational games, puzzles, and other techniques as much as possible.
- Work on material that is somewhat challenging but allows success. Work that is too hard or too easy is a turn-off.
- Make learning fun and comfortable. Your positive attitude is very important.

- Encourage your child to talk to you. Ask what he did in school. Ask what the best part of his /her day was. Ask questions about the TV shows he/she watches. Talk about what he/she has heard, done, and plans to do.

Communicate with your students

- Go over his/her daily work to reinforce the learning. Slower learners need repetition.
- Provide meaningful, concrete activities rather than abstract.
- Give short specific directions and have your child repeat them back to you.
- READ! Set an example by reading yourself. Read to your child and have your child read to you.
- Work closely with the teacher to help strengthen academic areas that are weak in school.
- Stress the importance of education.
- Encourage your child to explore areas of interest to him/her. Career opportunities often come from these interests.

Slow-learners are not averse to learning, and have no limitations for learning, but in fact have their own psychology for learning. Hence the challenge for the parents or guardians or teachers is to understand the student's areas of interests and develop a teaching plan to cover syllabus in a given time frame.

Research in this field has contributed to the development of several innovative strategies to deal with such slow learning students to learn and enhance memory like:

- Involve students with a practical model or case study of short time span and relaxed environment so that they can visualize or feel the situation
- Proceed in steps once the students are comfortable and involved in looking for solutions
- Involve them in activities discrete from routine home chorus like sports and excursions to motivate such students to learn without cramming monotonous textbooks
- Provide a variety of activities for learning such as painting a picture of a reading assignment
- Provide them ample opportunity for success

Examples of interventions for slow learners

Environment: Reduce distractions, change seating to promote attentiveness, have a peer student teacher, and allow more breaks.

Assignments: Shorter and with more variation, repeat work in various forms, have a contract, give more hands on work, have assignments copied by student, have students use three transfer method where they have to show the work three different ways.

Assessment: Shorter tests, oral testing, redoing tests, short feedback times, don't make students compete

What to avoid: Cooperative learning that isolates the student and places him or her in a no win situation. Using a standardized test. Ignoring the problem.

What to encourage: Grouping with a patient partner. Learning about the child's interests. Placing the student in charge. Mapping, graphic organizers, and hands-on work. Using Bloom's taxonomy of tasks to make the assignments more appropriate.

The three major components of teaching slow learners include:

1. Making the abstract concrete,
2. Not assuming generalization and
3. Working toward automatization of basic concepts. In general, when teaching slow learners, make information as explicit and concrete as possible. If they can see it, touch it, or do it, then learning will be easier.

Ways to develop the Language Skills**Compensatory Teaching**

Compensatory teaching is an instructional approach that alters the presentation of content to circumvent a student's fundamental weakness or deficiency. Compensatory teaching recognizes content, transmits through alternate modalities (pictures versus words), and supplements it with additional learning resources and activities (learning centers and simulations, group discussions and co-operative learning). This may involve modifying an instructional technique by including a visual representation of content, by using more flexible instructional presentations (films, pictures, illustrations), or by shifting to alternate instructional formats (self-paced texts, simulations, experience-oriented workbooks).

Remedial Teaching

This is an alternate approach for the regular classroom teacher in instructing the slow learner. Remedial teaching is the use of activities, techniques and practices to

eliminate weaknesses or deficiencies that the slow learner is known to have. For example deficiencies in basic math skills are reduced or eliminated by re-teaching the content that was not learned earlier. The instructional environment does not change, as in the compensatory approach. Conventional instructional techniques such as drill and practice might be employed.

Instructional Strategies for Slow Learners

While no single technique or set of techniques is sufficient teaching the slow learner, the suggestions that follow are a starting point for developing instructional strategies that specifically address the learning needs of the slow learner. Develop Lessons that Incorporate Students' Interests, Needs, and Experiences. This helps address the short attention spans of slow learners. Also, these students should be made to feel that some of the instruction has been designed with their specific interests or experiences in mind. Oral or written autobiographies at the beginning of the year, or simple inventories in which students indicate their hobbies, jobs, and unusual trips or experiences can provide the structure for the lesson plans, special projects, or extra-credit assignments in the year.

Frequently Vary Your Instructional Technique

Switching from lecture to discussion and then to seatwork provides the variety that slow learners need to stay engaged in the learning process. In addition to keeping their attention, variety in instructional technique offers them the opportunity to see the same content presented in different ways. This increases opportunities to accommodate the different learning styles that may exist among slow learners and provides some of the remediation that may be necessary.

Incorporate Individualized Learning Materials

Slow learners respond favourably to frequent reinforcement of small segments of learning. Therefore, programmed texts and interactive computer instruction often are effective in remediation of basic skills of slow learners. In addition, an emphasis on frequent diagnostic assessment of the student progress, paired with immediate corrective instruction, often is particularly effective.

Incorporate Audio and Visual Materials

One common characteristic among slow learners is that they often learn better by seeing and hearing than by reading. This should be no surprise, because performance in

basic skill areas, including reading usually is below grade level among slow learners. Incorporating films, videotapes, and audio into lessons helps accommodate the instruction to the strategies learning modalities among slow learners. Emphasizing concrete and visual forms of content also helps compensate for the general difficulty slow learners have in grasping abstract ideas and concepts.

Develop Your Own Worksheets and Exercises

Textbooks and workbooks, when written for the average student often exceed the functioning level of the slow learner and sometimes become more of a hindrance than an aid. When textbook materials are too difficult, or are too different from topics that capture your students' interests, develop your own. Sometimes only some changes in worksheets and exercises are needed to adapt the vocabulary or difficulty level to the ability of your slow learners. Also, using textbooks and exercises intended for a lower grade could ease the burden of creating materials that are unavailable at your grade level.

Provide Peer Tutors for Students needing Remediation

Peer tutoring can be an effective ally to your teaching objectives, especially when tutors are assigned so that everyone being tutored also has responsibility for being a tutor. The learner needing help is not singled out and has a stake in making the idea work, because his or her pride is on the line, both as a learner and as a tutor.

Encourage Oral Expression Instead of Written Reports

For slow learners, many writing assignments go un-attempted or are begun only half-heartedly because these learners recognize that their written product will not meet even minimal writing standards. A carefully organized taped response to an assignment might be considered. This has the advantage of avoiding spelling, syntax, and writing errors.

When Testing Provide Study Aids

Study aids are advanced organizers that alert students to the most important problems, content, or issues. They also eliminate irrelevant details that slow learners often laboriously study in the belief that they are important. The slow learner usually is unable to weigh the relative importance of competing instructional stimuli unless explicitly told or shown what is important and what is not. Example: test questions or a list of topics from which questions may be chosen help focus student effort.

Teach Learning Skills

You can increase learning skills by teaching note-taking, outlining, and listening. These skills are acquired through observation by higher ability students, but they must be specifically taught to slow learners. Unless the slow learners are actively engaged in the learning process through interesting concrete visual stimuli, there will be little contact emotionally and intellectually with the content you are presenting. This contact can be attained most easily when the teacher vary your instructional material often and organize it into bits small enough to ensure moderate-to-high rates of success.

Conclusion

The objective of this article is to create greater awareness and discussion about slow learners. Learners in this category will exist in almost every class, yet at present a systematic way of identifying and supporting them does not exist. There is no doubt that the individual teachers have developed many effective techniques for supporting those learners who need additional help. It would be valuable therefore if opportunities could be created for teachers to share and discuss their work with slow learners. Different ways and strategies to develop the language skills discussed in this paper would definitely cater some of the needs of the slow learners in learning English language skills.

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