

An Overview of Teachers and Slow Learners Challenges in a Language Classroom in Some Secondary Schools in Sokoto State

H.S. Aliero

Abstract

The main thrust of this paper is to examine the methods employed by language teachers in coping with slow learners in the classroom. The cognitive skills development, causes of delay in development and speech and language skills development were also highlighted. Challenges confronted by language teachers in dealing with slow learners in the classroom were also discussed. Recommendations were offered for further improvement. It was however recommended that the teacher should as much as possible avoid placing slow learners in frustrating situations.

Background

A brief interview was conducted by the researcher in order to assemble views and opinions pertaining to slow learners in some selected secondary schools in the metropolis. Some of these schools includes: Usmanu Danfodiyo Model Secondary School, Caliphate Tarbiyah Academy, Jagaba International Schools, Hafsatu Bello Arabic Secondary School and Sani Dingyadi Unity Secondary School. The language teachers were interviewed on the following questions:

- a) How do you identify a slow learner in the classroom?
- b) After identification, how do you evaluate the level of weakness of the child?
- c) After evaluation and identification of slow learners, how do you handle these types of children in school environment?

A number of views and opinions were gathered from the interview. On the identification of slow learners in the classroom, majority of the views expressed showed that certain peculiar symptoms can be observed from a slow learner as follows:

- 1) Language Development problem(broken sentences)
- 2) Assessing the level of vocabulary (limited vocabulary)
- 3) Verbal abilities
- 4) Spelling Mistakes
- 5) Reading Problems
- 6) Interaction with other Children

On evaluation of the level of students' weakness, most of the views indicated that intelligent test, group test, attainment test, spelling test, vocabulary test and personality test and Children behaviour test are some of the tests to be use to find out their level of weaknesses.

In handling the identified slow learner, after evaluating his/ her problem the following suggestions were provided.

- 1) There should not be more than 20 students in the class.
- 2) Different styles of teaching in different subjects should be employed.
- 3) On language development problem, the teacher should teach the pupils how to pronounce the word clearly and ask the students to repeat the word.
- 4) Teacher should use flash cards for teaching difficult words.
- 5) Teacher should use memory and games cards to teach difficult words.
- 6) Listening and comprehension skills should be developed.

On reading difficulties, teachers should use charts to teach students. Memory flash cards can also be used for this purpose. Pictures on a wall with stories can also help slow learners to remember and understand a word.

Other exercise that may help slow learners in reading difficulties includes:

- Visual activities using Television and Computer
- Finding missing parts
- Memory games
- On spelling
- Organize competition of spelling among students
- Check and recheck methods
- Weekly tests and spelling
- Spelling games on Computer
- On writing
- Encourage them to write, ignore their mistakes at the early stage.
- Involve students in writing small stories
- Engage them in form filling, letter writing telegraph recording.
- Involve them in form filling and diary writing
- Involve them in Writing in School Magazine and News Papers.

Introduction

Slow learners, otherwise known as educationally sub normal, are learners who possess limited ability of comprehension due to various reasons, arising from the educational process (Thompson,2015). It is a term people used to describe a student who possess the ability to learn necessary academic skills but at a rate and depth below average of same age peers. To be able to grasp the concept being taught, a slow learner requires more time and additional resources from teachers to achieve success. This assertion was corroborated by (Dobson,2012) who noted that .It is important to note that the slow learner does not translate to intellectual disability otherwise

called mental retardation. A slow learner learns slower than average learner and thus he/she requires some help to be able to cope.

Although slow learners do not receive special educational services like those with special needs, they require additional help, support and accommodation by their teachers and parents. Slow learners need to be included in programmes that school already have aimed at improving the learning process of a slow learner.

Conceptual explanation

A language is a method of human communication either spoken or written, consisting of the use of words in structured and conventional way (John,2007). It is a system of communication used by a particular country or community. A language teacher teaches foreign language to native speakers

Slow learners are children who are doing poorly in school, yet are not eligible for special education; their intelligent test scores are too high for consideration as a child with mental retardation (Merver,1999).

Slow learner is a term used to describe a student who has the ability to learn necessary academic skills below average of same age peers.

Slow learner is a child who cannot be classified as handicapped, but is not able to cope adequately with the classroom academic routine. He is a child whose Intelligent Quotient is low enough to cause considerable lack of understanding about what is being taught.

Traditionally, a slow learner is anyone with a full scale I.Q. one standard deviation below the mean but not as low as two standard deviations below the mean. If in an I.Q. Test one has a mean average of 100 within one standard deviation of 100 which means that most students have an IQ of 85-115. Those who fall two standard deviations below the mean are often identified as those with intellectual disability. (Erin, 2004).

According to Markay (2001) a slow learner is a student below average intelligence whose thinking skills have developed more slowly than the norm for his or her age mate. This child will go through the same basic developmental stages as other children, but will do so at slower rate. However, this development while being slower nevertheless is relatively even.

A slow learner has been found to develop at different pace compared to their age mates who are average in intelligence. This is because reasoning skills are typically delayed which makes learning new concept difficult. Teachers are often confronted with challenges of how to deal with slow learners in the classroom. This is because a slow learner needs more time, more repetition drills and more resources from teachers to be able to succeed.

According to Maitafsir (2001), children learn only when readiness is established in the child. He noted that for learning to take place, the learner should be matured, motivated, interested and should aspire to learn. Other researches stressed intrinsic rewards, differentiated curriculum and motivation (Bonn,2017).

By implication, teachers are expected to appeal to the cognitive structure of the learners so as to desire to learn, the success of this leads to successful reception of information presented to the learner.

Crupton (2009) in a research conducted in Washington discovered that out of every six students that are in the classroom today, one has been classified as a slow learner.

Cognitive skills development is characterized by the way a child learns, acquires knowledge and interact with his environment. Different cognitive skills are required by the child as he reaches certain developmental milestone. Teachers can encourage their children cognitive development in the area of memory, concentration, attention and perception through the following activities: practice alphabets, practice counting, practice shapes and colours and offering of variety of games.

However, cognitive development can be delayed which in turn makes a child a slow learner. The delay is due to a good number of causes some of which include the following:

- A wide range of different learning disabilities
- Exposure to alcohol toxins before birth or afterwards, including lead poisoning
- Institutionalization or neglect during infancy or early childhood
- Down syndrome or other genetic disorders
- Autism or spectrum disorder.

As with most types of cognitive delays, early treatment can make a big difference in the progress your child makes.

On speech and language development, it is important to note that the first three years of life is the most intensive period for acquiring speech and language skills when the brain is developing and maturing. These skills develop best in world that is rich with sounds, sights and consistence exposure to the speech and language of others.

These periods (infants and young children) are said to be the critical periods for speech and language development. If these critical periods are allowed to pass without exposure to language, it will be more difficult for the child to learn.

The first sign of communication is said to occur when an infant learns that a cry will bring food, comfort and companionship. Infants also recognize the voice of their mother as they grow Children vary in the development of speech and language skills. However, they follow a natural progression or timetable for mastering the skill of language. It is important to note that sometimes a delay can arise in the course of the development of speech and language skills. Sometimes a delay may be caused by hearing loss or due to speech and language disorder. Early detection of these symptoms can help doctors and other health professionals determine if a child is on tract or if he or she requires extra help.

Factors that affect slow learner

a) Medical Conditions:

Alexia: This is defined as language impairment caused by injury to areas of the brain that process visual information. This injury prevents people from being able to write.

Dyslexia: This is a specific learning difficulty which affects mainly reading and spelling. Dyslexic is characterized by difficulties in processing word sound and by weaknesses in short term verbal memory. The effects could be seen in spoken English and written language. Structured and multi sensory methods can be use to improve the literacy skills of the student.

Strophosymbolia: It is a type of disorder in which letters are transposed, reversed or confused; more generally, it is a disorder in which objects are perceived in mirror image (Wilson, 2012).

b) Environmental Factors:

- 1) Parental background: The parental background of a child play a significant role in determining whether the child could be slow learner or not. A child who came from a broken home or from parents who do not value western education is not likely to pay any serious attention to what is being taught.
- 2) Socio economic status of the parents: The economic status of parents and their ability to shoulder the educational needs of their children is also an important factor for consideration. Parents who cannot cater for the learning materials, registration fees and feeding expenses of their children may likely have effect on the academic performance of students.
- 3) Bullying: a child who is a bully may not have adequate time to concentrate on his studies. This is because he is always busy causing friction and quarrels among his peers. He always wants to subdue his colleagues and want to have an upper hand in all situations.
- 4) Truancy: a child who is very far from the school environment will always be a habitual late comer to school. He hardly meets first or second periods. This development could be as a result of parent inability to cater for his transport fares. Similarly, when the school is located on a busy street, where the volume of traffic is very high makes crossing difficult and this can contributes to his/her late coming to school.
- 5) Violence in schools: violence in school is another factor which causes slow learning among students. Violence has serious consequences on the learning abilities of students. School violence may lead to emotional problems such as aggression. Violence can affect students' cognitive development which consequently affects learning process.

c) Individual traits

- 1) Method of instructions: a teacher who does not possess varieties of teaching methods, ability to consider individual differences is likely to cause crises in the instructional process which may affect slow learners.
- 2) Language development: Lack of language development can cause a child to be a slow learner. This is because the ability of the child to understand the language of instruction is likely to affect his academic performance.
- 3) Records observation: looking at the students past academic records, weekly tests, terminal tests, assignments, terminal or session examinations is an important instrument to measure whether students is a slow learner or not.
- 4) Accumulated record of the child: This gives important evidence about the level of child academic achievement in the classroom. If a child scores consistently falls below the average score (40 mks) then the child is said to be a slow learner.
- 5) Attendance of extra – mural - class by the pupil: A child who could not attend extra-mural lesson after normal classroom activities is likely to be left behind among his peers. This development could be as a result of the parent inability to shoulder the financial burden of the exercise.

d) Complications at birth: At birth, the child is expected to be born without complications especially when the mother attends anti natal care and following recommendations by health officials. This will help to prevent infant mortality rate. On the other hand, a mother who does not visit hospitals, avoiding anti natal care is bound to have complications which in turn will affect the cognitive development of the child and consequently his learning ability.

e) Hereditary: This is the biological traits or attributes transferred from one individual to another. A father, who inherited traits or attributes of a slow learner, is likely to transfer the same traits or attributes to his offspring who invariably will affect his ability to learn.

Features of a slow learner

Peter (2014) highlights some important features of a slow learner as follows:

- I. They tend to have short memory and short attention span.
- II. They have the tendency to over simplify concepts, term and concentrate on one aspect of a situation at the expense of other aspects.
- III. They cannot generalize as the case with other average students.
- IV. The rate of their intellectual development is slower when compared with their age mates of higher intelligence.
- V. They are easily frustrated and cannot tolerate much anxiety, distress and emotional discomfort.
- VI. They lack self confidence in themselves and expressed low self esteem.
- VII. Their intelligence is only 75% - 90% of other students of their age.

- VIII. They learn at a rate which is 4/5 or 9/10 of normal intelligent children.
- IX. They learn to read appropriately one year later than the majority of children. Experts believed that slow learner may be slow in reading and arithmetic but not necessarily slow in the extent in mechanical or social activities.
- X. Abstract thinking is difficult for a slow learner.
- XI. A slow learner reacts slower than average, self expression is awkward and self esteem is low. It is hard to figure things out themselves especially when given multiple step instruction.
- XII. Most slow learners function below average grade level in all subjects' areas and generally scores consistently low in achievement test.

Challenges of a language teachers and slow learners

The most important challenge of a language teacher is to build trust and faith in the abilities of slow learners. Language teacher should also make concerted effort to provide necessary guidance to the slow learner. The language teacher should help the slow learners overcome their weaknesses and showcase their strengths.

The teacher should endeavour to speak to the slow learner, counsel him and keeping in view his problem areas and provide necessary motivation. Try to provide records on every level of success attained by the slow learner. Language teacher should ensure that a strong level of confidence is built between him and the slow learners. The teacher must keep away from the slow learner any incidence which may have a negative impact on the slow learner and constant counselling proves to be vital in the transformation of the slow learner.

Another important challenge of a language teacher is getting parents involved in building a formidable synergy which is important in improving the performance of a slow learner.

It is important to remember that it should always be a cooperative effort, when language teacher and parents work in coordination, the child morale and performance can be boosted very easily.

It is to be noted that in spite of constant coordinated effort by the language teacher and the parents, a considerable change in the performance of a slow learner cannot be realized in a day or two. It normally takes longer time. Children are usually reticent and need lots of confidence to come out from their shell and open up. This require patience and perseverance on the part of both the language teacher and the parents

Similarly, on the part of a slow learner, one of his major challenges is difficulty in higher order thinking or reasoning. This suggests that it will be more challenging to learn new concepts. New concepts have to be based on already established ones. This can be difficult when majority of the class have already mastered a concept and moving to another. This can lead to gaps in knowledge and acquisition of skills. The more gaps in a content area the more the challenges.

Another challenge of this group of students is the issue of self confidence. They are easily prone to anxiety, low self image and may eventually give up. Sometimes they felt discouraged and felt like leaving school. They spend all day doing something that is difficult for them, it can be very draining. At this stage, teacher can find other activities which the students can successfully accomplished within a short time period.

Factors owing to lack of mastery of what has been taught, faulty methods of work may affects the learning process of a slow learner. If a teacher proceeds too rapidly and does not care to check the level of students mastering of what is being taught, makes slow learner accumulates a number of deficiencies that inter fare with his studies.

Physical factors such as health, physical development, and nutrition, visual and physical defects may pose serious challenge to slow learner. Another serious challenge of a slow learner is the condition in which learning takes place. This includes the classroom, equipments and other instructional materials.

Strategies in coping with slow learners

Lovenstein, (2010) noted that children who are deprived stimulations during their early years (0-5 years) are more likely to be slow learners. It is a critical period during the first four years of life when the potential for intellectual growth must be utilized. There are certain cells in the brain that must be activated during this brief period. If the opportunity is missed, the child may never reach his intellectual capacity.

Madeline (1997) conducted a research at Illinois University to demonstrate the effects of early stimulation on brain of laboratory rats. The rats in the first group had a thick cortex, which is the thinking part of the brain. They also had a more abundant blood supply; they had a more sophisticated enzyme that is necessary for learning. This research had indicated that when a brain was stimulated, the effects were crucial for learning.

Jerry (2013) suggested ways in coping with the problems of slow learners as follows:

- I. Programmed learning: the teaching of slow learners should be programmed into series of short lessons each item dealing with specific idea at a time. It has been found that slow learners enjoyed best this type of lesson delivery.
- II. Repeat the content of their lesson several times: Because of their short memory span, they cannot transfer what they learnt into long term memory. Provide drill exercise to enable them commit what they learnt into memory
- III. Changes in sitting arrangement and reduction of distractions in the classroom: Let the slow learner work in quiet place where they have enough space to work.

- IV. Tutoring may help students who are slow learners in basic academic areas at school or privately. This is aimed at helping them optimize their abilities to meet the highest expectation.
- V. Present simple concept to them to help provide advance organizers; Slow learners may face difficulty if many concept are provided at the same time.
- VI. The teacher should display management skills to help the slow learner.

Recommendations

At the beginning of the lesson

When a child is in a class, he is in a learning process; the pace of his learning process determines whether he is a slow learner or a fast learner, Language teacher should always take this into consideration.

The introduction should be lucid, simple and free from any ambiguity. Slow learners should occupy the front row of the class for more concentration.

Language teacher should arouse and maintain the interest and attention of his subjects through changing his techniques of instruction from time to time as occasion demands.

Language teacher should ensure that the response of a slow learner to a learning activity is rewarded in order to increase his level of achievement.

During the lesson

Give them learning task that is simple and easy to accomplish. Here, it is important to give them series of short lesson which they can complete and receive immediate feedback about their performance, this because of their short attention span.

Monitor their progress through record keeping: Let the student understand that evidence is available about their progress or otherwise. This will help to build confidence and self-esteem. Let them be aware that they are progressing. This will go a long way in boosting their ego-conscience.

Give sufficient time to complete work and to shorten the task given to them. The teacher should use variety of materials in lesson delivery; give short and limited number of assignments. Slow learners need enough repetition in assignments and other exercise.

Evaluation stage

Give adequate time to slow learners when evaluating your lesson. Cross-classroom grouping should be adopted. Encourage heterogeneous grouping that is, putting the slow learner with some fast learners in one group Cooperative grouping proves to be an effective strategy especially if it is well organized. For example, for every group of 5,2 should be slow learners. Do not allow the slow learner to understand the motive behind the grouping, or to see fast learners as being their superior. Assignments and exercises should initially be done in groups, until when slow learners establish certain degree of learning independence.

Provide meaningful concrete activities rather than abstract. Give short specific direction and have your pupil repeat it back to you. Encourage slow learners to explore areas of interest to him/her.

Other recommendations include:

1. Teachers should form the habit of repeating concepts and terms; this will help slow learners to concretize what is learnt.
2. Slow learners need more time to figure things out. Give more practice problem in a particular area. More time in speech drills or reading comprehension.
3. Teacher to show patience in dealing with slow learners. Slow learners need more explanation and direct instructions and expectation are given clearly. Example list, copy, summarize etc
4. Slow learners need help in organizing their work and other priorities. Provide a home work sheet or planner with a check list format. Show what an organized desk look like.
5. Slow learners need to know why they have to know what they are being taught. Set short range attainable goals. Give encouraging words of praise
6. Slow learners have difference in focussing their attention on learning task. Eliminate as many distractions as possible.
7. Encourage other activities in which the slow learners can experience success and keep them connected
8. Differentiated instruction should be encouraged. This means group instruction based on the ability of the pupils should be used.
9. Teach study skills to help them became more efficient in studying. Example reading and writing skills.
10. At national level, a lot needed to be done to accommodate slow learners. The situation is the same for both state and local government levels. Thus, School psychologist should give appropriate counselling to both teachers and parents on strategies to assist slow learners.

Conclusion

There is a strong need to cater for slow learners in the classroom due to their limited ability of comprehension when compared with fast learners. Teachers should as much as possible avoid placing students in frustrating situation. It is therefore not advisable to keep comparing the work of a slow learner with that of a fast learner. Language teachers should note that it is always good to make slow learners work individually and not in group or class situation where their performance can be compared with those who are fast learners. Teachers and parents should give full attention to the needs of a slow learner. They should also involve other people of the society who can render assistance towards improving the condition of a slow learner.

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