



Methods and Techniques for Activating Students with Sen¹ on Foreign Language (English) Classes in Poland

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Abstract

The article discusses issues related to learning a foreign language in relation to students who require a highly profiled didactic approach due to the emerging special educational needs resulting from the detection of dysgraphia, dyslexia, or any other dysfunctionality; in its main part we propose the use of some effective foreign language learning techniques. Some of them have gained considerable popularity in Poland.

Subject Areas

Education, Linguistics

Keywords

Language Lesson, Dysfunctional Student, Dyslexia, Mnemonics

1. Introduction

Premature learners are reported to have a natural need of autonomous action and discovering reality. Regardless of age and their natural predispositions, such learners mostly want to play and have fun. While making an attempt to analyze the issue in question, [1] observes that being happy (or, at least, making oneself able to be happy, regardless of the eternal conditions) remains the prototype of positive emotions, calling it “the bottom line of life” (p. 19). Certainly, a remark like this cannot remain unanswered, especially in the field of education. First of all, it appoints a teacher to become a highly creative person when attempting to introduce and teach language in respect to such learners. This might be carried

¹SEN: Special Educational Needs.

out through such tasks like songs, games (and some worksheets like cut-outs or crafts for illiterate, or poorly literate, learners). Generally, what children need most of all, is an open space for many happiness-providing activities, like dancing and singing, a possibility to largely experience experiment and fun. They need a calm and kind atmosphere in which they can be able to grow up and learn. While being immersed in such external conditions, a child is also able to extremely quickly learn a foreign language, mostly because a child never associates learning with something negative. For every child, foreign language learning can be a fantastic play. As they can hardly ever feel shy or lost, when they make a mistake, they try incessantly. They try, repeat and memorize; they do not waste time on unnecessary activities. They know they are not experienced learners, so they do not make deliberate plans for learning and nor do they prepare to learn. They simply study. They concentrate on learning in combination with the openness to new knowledge, their natural curiosity about the world and the positive attitude to success.

Similar, or even mostly exactly the same remarks can concern all SEN learners. On the one hand, they do have a right to be recognized as having the emotional potential that can be compared with the one of, as they are called, “normal” learners; on the other hand, however, mostly because of the deficiencies discovered in them, they do need some forms of special educational treatment that should both help them learn the language and experience fun and happiness, not depriving them of many of these emotional feelings and/or attitudes that have been rightly ascribed as natural to “normal” learners. One of the aims this paper has been written is to turn one’s attention onto the forms and/or various language deliverance procedures that might be made use of when teaching (attempting to teach?) such learners. While assuming that the general knowledge on how to deal with various SEN-diagnosed learners is largely inadequate in many language teachers, and that—in consequence—many language teachers wrongly assess such learners as naughty, hard-learning and/or even not able to follow the general principles sketched in the core syllabus, we still believe that what such learners need most of all is a bit of understanding, jumping in their shoes and looking at the world outside from their position, regardless of whether you are their mate or teacher.

2. Teaching SEN Learners and Its (Immediate?) Consequences

Regardless of whether classes (foreign language classes included) are provided to the students in which no disorder of pedagogical disability has been detected, or to the ones found as being dysfunctional, they have to be-in general-of a lesson-quality form. In other words, such lessons contain a whole range of features that are usually poorly tolerated by dysfunctional students (which obviously means that different types of pedagogical and cognitive dysfunctionality, such as dyslexia, ADHD, dysgraphia, etc., will show a much higher degree of the lack of

adaptation to the requirements imposed on them by the lesson, quite often bordering on psychic or even intellectual absence from this type of activity). Certainly, a lot could be said at this point about the traditionally recognized structure of the lesson (a linguistic lesson included), the essence of overlapping coherence of its emerging segments, the level of required cooperation between the teacher and students (as well as the students themselves); one could also hypothetically theorize that a sufficiently strong strengthening of the intellectual presence of students in the lesson-and thus giving up the frontal presentation of information, in favor of the actions that would trigger the emergence of various forms of mediation as a result of more active learning activities of students-could eventually lead to their growth of interest in the educational content. It is generally known that classes of this type require, relative at least, increase of the component based upon students' independent search for solutions, which is directly connected with the increase in the role of their educationally-grounded independent decision making; this situation directly affects the development of autonomous education of pupils, which-as demonstrated by a number of studies carried out by various Polish experts (e.g. [2] [3] [4]), positively influences the quality of output in pupils, including also dysfunctional (mostly dyslexic) pupils here. This is, however, not what this article is meant to be about.

The didactic situation mentioned above seems to be the most possible to achieve in the future, when two conditions are fulfilled: 1) a sufficiently high involvement of subject devoted teachers (FL teachers included); and 2) the transition from various forms of generally observed frontal teaching to these teaching methods which predominantly focus on the student as well as their individual needs.

At present, as it seems, it is that the student's individual needs that ought to be noticed in a much better way; alongside, his/her-in many cases-non-standard requirements (which is especially important for students with varying degrees of dysfunction) ought to be carefully assessed and, subsequently, any necessary forms of work adjusted, so as to meet this type of evidently appearing expectations. Considering that-in accordance with the existing psychological assumptions-there are different types of student's reactions to the messages transmitted to them (both in relation to content and the forms of transmission), and that-mainly in the case of dysfunctional students-these reactions are often reported to be brushed for extreme behaviors (not very willingly accepted by both the teacher and by some part of the class), a number of rules and ways of behavior should be developed and elaborated, as a result of which both functional and dysfunctional pupils may be able to approach the planned goals of the lesson. Such a form of educational activity would mean-at least to some extent-the fulfillment of the expected educational results by both groups of learners.

Obviously, while taking into account the fact that each of the dysfunctional pupils (depending on the type of dysfunction), will react to the form of message transmission in a slightly different way, the forms of activity enhancement of

this type suggested below should be modified accordingly. It seems, however, that in any case, the multi-sensory stimulation proposed in 1920 by S. Orton (in [5]) will be helpful. In accordance with the assumptions developed by Dr. Orton, using such practices, a number of activities that affect many different senses possessed by man should be taken into account. At the same time, it should be assumed that the most common techniques should be those that will enhance the overall level of educational potential growth in dysfunctional people in the least complicated way possible. [2], for example, points out that such activities, in connection with a whole range of other techniques aimed at strengthening of information messages (such as chanting-related activities, frequent use of repetitions, melodic forms associated with movement, or the application of some of the selected principles of rhythmicity) greatly enhance the growth of educational potential of dyslexic students participating in foreign language classes. [4], in turn, mentions that the careful and long-term use of various forms of multi-sensory stimulation in relation to dyslexic and dysgraphic pupils release the individual level of creativity of such students, which helps them to more closely associate with the messages thus assimilated. Thus, such activities provide students with various pro-creative possibilities, allowing them to participate more fully in the entire FL educational processes.

Certainly, when implementing various forms of multi-sensory actions, one should always notice the type of dysfunction of a particular student, as well as the forms of learning acquired by them. It should not be assumed in advance that all dysfunctional students will react in a similar way to every message they have received (see, for example, the learning model developed by [6]). Thus, the educational techniques proposed to them should be adapted to their individual expectations, because only then will they achieve a more complete increase in the effectiveness of the applied educational techniques. Due to the fact that what constitutes an additional difficulty-these techniques must be used at the same time also in relation to students who are not dysfunctional, they must meet educational requirements also in relation to this type of students.

One should take into account not only these forms of teaching that stimulate separately the sense of sight, hearing or touch and the ones by which more senses are stimulated at the same time, but also those where the main role is played by movement. What is more, such types of activation methods and techniques should not only be adapted to the individual dysfunction-related needs of students, but what is especially important here-also clearly affect their creative sphere. [3], while discussing some of the activating techniques (mainly the ones strongly affecting the sense of sight), points out that the primary purpose of this type of activities should be to create a pro-educational atmosphere in the classroom, where dyslexic students should also be included. Thus, it is possible to use not only sets of pictures, shaping the resources of declarative knowledge of the pupils, but also thematically related (e.g. in the form of a comic) pictorial series, responsible for the creation of context, *i.e.* an element so important in language

learning. In this way, it is possible-also with reference to dyslexic and dysgrammatic pupils-to activate their areas of acceptance of the order of speech communication during the transmission of data in the foreign language (mostly English) they learn.

A series of exercises based on colorful tables, diagrams, cards, etc., the use of which should allow pupils (also not dyslexic ones) to pay more attention to the emergence of various grammar rules, will serve similar purposes. One can also use various types of new generation educational help forms, such as video projectors, or even interactive whiteboards. In this way, appropriately designed lessons will not only encourage students to participate more actively in them, but also-clearly activating their affective areas-help them become more actively engaged in various educational forms that appear during the lessons. The preparation of the exercises, forcing students to enter the project more physically (e.g. with the help of materials made during their attempts to access the interactive whiteboard), should eventually lead to the appearance of cognitive cohesion with the expected educational content (which, in turn, should help increase the level of material/language acquisition potential of the participants of such classes).

In addition to the educational activities shortly described above, one can also use many different language games, ask students to participate in the creative production (on a blackboard or interactive whiteboard) of various thematic maps related to a specific lesson topic, introduce skillfully some of the forms of competition in creating verbal portraits concerning a given topic (in relation to collocation, as well as direct forms), organize quizzes providing not only formative, but also summative (diagnostic) information in relation to current levels of knowledge of all classroom students, as well as many other syntactic-, or semantic-related forms, effectively supporting (with the help of meticulously organized influence on the selected senses of the students) the overall process of language orientation in the classroom. As noted by [3], the use of these forms of teaching not only does not cause a decrease in pro-lingual motivation in dyslexic learners but, contrarily, their motivation is reported to be distinctly increased and the investigated dyslexic students themselves –when either co-opted to rival teams (consisting of dyslexic and non-dyslexic students), or working alone-in no way feel less comfortable and sometimes even demand the organization of this type of language classes.

Another, but certainly not worse, form of organizing language classes for groups in which there are dysfunctional students can be lessons, where the main emphasis has been located onto the sense of hearing. Because of the fact that, as it is commonly known, dyslexic students reveal considerable difficulties here, especially in their attempts of the synthesis of the content they hear, the language activities proposed here are basically to help them distinguish the sounds heard, and memorize foreign words, phrases and terms. The series of exercises used here, aimed at acquiring the quality of foreign language (English) sounds by both the dyslexic and the non-dyslectic pupils (such as, for example, exercises based on the discrimination of minimal pairs, or various forms of chanting, of-

ten associated with the performance of properly coordinated movement activities), when used appropriately long and systematically, can become quite an effective aid for both types of students. In addition, in the situation of really big activation problems, that may appear in dysfunctional (mainly dyslexic) children, one can record the lexical ranges on a cassette or a CD, and later give it to such students, together with a request to systematically listen to and repeat the sounds recorded there.

A separate type of activating exercises is the ones, during which special attention is paid to movement forms. [7] notes that this type of exercise is intended not only to strengthen the entire educational process of students, but-mainly in relation to dyslexic children-they become helpful in the educational processes aimed at strengthening their concentration, lateralization and/or general motor coordination. Therefore, it is suggested one should use various types of activating techniques² including those based on drawing, cutting out, drawing alphabet letters in the air, coloring the prepared linguistic and manual puzzles, or even creating appropriate shapes and/or models with help of plasticine (or any other easy to mold and flexible material). One can also use different types of movement exercises, during which students react or make verbal expressions themselves. Here, in addition to popular songs, during which the students demonstrate the activities described there, the activating techniques can also include forms of action based on simple simulations (e.g. pupils, while observing specific mimic movements performed by the teacher and/or students, try to guess the content of-preferably two-word long-definitions), as well as simulations based on previously dealt with dialog forms³. In the situation of dyslexic pupils, one can also use a series of pictures, thematically related to the expected dialogue situation. This type of exercise can be used for all levels of learners' language proficiency; various types of mimic demonstrations can also be used here (e.g. in reference to the-earlier announced-organization⁴ of a party, a number of the learners can demonstrate what s/he believes should be at the party, while the others, using the 2nd person singular, make an attempt to guess his/her thoughts by turning them into sentences).

Apart from what has been specified so far, let us briefly mention the use of various forms of drama, starting with techniques such as storytelling (*i.e.* the techniques combining appropriate actions that relate the teacher, illustrating specific words spoken by her to the story to be conveyed by her in this way), up to the organization of full theater performances (e.g. for the parents of children participating in the said performances). Each of these activating techniques can also be used in relation to special educational requirements. [9] recalls that drama workshops regularly organized by her also successfully involved hearing im-

²A wide range of this type of exercise can be found, for example, in [8].

³An example of such a situation may be a simulation: *You organize a party, decide with your partner how it will look like. Use the previously known forms defining the near future.* Depending on the necessity, all segments of such a simulation can be discussed in advance, and the expected definitions can be practiced again.

⁴See the footnote above.

paired, visually impaired, and even average dyslexic (in the latter case, everything depended on inventing types of organized roles, and related issues). It seems, however, that-after developing appropriate forms of conduct-such type of pro-lingual activities could also be applied to other types of pupils with special educational needs (e.g. the students with diagnosed ADHD).

Workshops of this type, and the activating techniques used there, appear to be quite a motivating educational measure, in the scope of which not only basic (classical) language-specific activities are included (such as learning memorized issues, and thus recognizing the grammatical order at the syntactic-semantic level), but also-which is extremely important-a large amount of various creative activities. The aim of such actions is to recreate-and to illustrate it artistically with gesture and/or mimicry-specific characters in the form in which they can be imagined by their creators. In this context, drama workshops are the activities that release and develop one's creative personality. Following apt Wessels's remark [8], this personality is an essential part of each of us. Additionally, it becomes helpful in seeing our-selves from the inside, in this way helping each of us to fully understand the meaning of our functioning, understanding the world and the structure of thinking. Such a goal is also a goal identical with the process of word-based communication: if I say something to someone, if I inform someone about something, I always pay attention to the proper selection of words and/or expressions, because I want my carefully selected phrases (or their deliberate lack) to be able to make a potential recipient behave in a specific-expected by me-forms of action.

3. Conclusions

Learning this type of approach in respect to communication (what can also be attended by SEN pupils) means not only understanding the phenomenon of communication, but also understanding a whole range of other extremely important terms: 1) that knowledge of words and gestures is necessary to get the right level of the potential of emotions which will certainly be included in the produced verbal and/or non-verbal message; that it depends on each of the interlocutors if (and how) will be received (and understood); 2) that there are iron-like pragmatic rules in communication, dividing every communication contact into segments in which, in addition to locution, there are also pre-locution and illocution; and-what is equally important-3) that each person is able to convey their thoughts in a way which can be properly interpreted and subsequently understood by the recipient. All this is possible to be learned, regardless of whether someone is a dysfunctional person or not.

Certainly, what the paper deals with is mostly the current situation of SEN-diagnosed learners in Poland, not making an attempt to find how much such a situation, when observed in Poland, matches the one possibly found in other countries. Nevertheless, we do hope the remarks produced by us may result in better understanding of the educational needs of such learners in other countries. The floor has obviously been left for further discussion.

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