

The challenge of learning disability in the Hong Kong English classroom

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ABSTRACT: Addressing the needs of students with learning difficulties in the mainstream English classroom in Hong Kong is a major challenge for a range of reasons, including a lack of research into the topic. This narrative suggests that such students are likely to be experiencing difficulty in a number of subject areas, and that a collaborative approach is an effective way of designing strategies to help them. This narrative further reports on an action research project, which has begun the task of developing strategies to meet the needs of this group of students and their teachers.

KEYWORDS: Hong Kong, English teaching, learning disabilities, action research, genre.

Teaching English to secondary students in Hong Kong is a challenging task. Large class sizes of often up to forty students, an educational context which emphasises the teaching of grammar and exam pressure are some of the factors confronting the English language teacher. Add to this the “hidden” and often unidentified problem of learning disability, and the teacher is entering new and uncharted waters. How to teach a student with a learning disability English, who is a native speaker of Cantonese, is an educational problem facing teachers in daily practice in Hong Kong, and the focus of this brief narrative.

Learning disability is identified in Hong Kong on the basis of a psychological assessment, exam results and teacher observation. It is estimated that students with learning disability comprise approximately 14% of the current total school population in Hong Kong (Hong Kong Department of Education, 1990). The term learning disability has been used in Hong Kong as an umbrella term embracing differing levels of exceptionality, including students with normal or low intelligence (Lo, 1998, p. 26) and those viewed as academically unmotivated or academically less able (Chan, 1988, p. 137). Essentially, students with learning disabilities are often bunched together with low proficiency English students, with no pedagogical distinction made between the two groups (Simich-Dudgeon & Boals, 1996).

Learning disability, in most cases, has a cognitive basis, and problems encountered in all areas of language learning are not transitory difficulties that are easily pedagogically addressed. In the area of writing instruction, when compared to normally achieving students, students with learning disabilities tend to produce writing samples which are less coherent and refined (Baker et al., 2003; Graham et al., 2001; McAlister et.al., 1999) They also have difficulty generating ideas, organizing text and applying meta-cognitive skills (McAlister,1999, p.160) . At my school, which is a secondary school for students with learning problems, pedagogies predominantly designed for use in mainstream classrooms have had to be adapted to provide additional scaffolding, particularly in respect of the organization and sequencing of tasks and activities. Strategies and activities have had to facilitate

inclusion, yet at the same time provide this additional scaffolding so that the student can participate in the learning task.

Despite a wide interdisciplinary literature on learning disabilities, little is known about how learning disabilities affect students studying English in Hong Kong and more generally in the English teaching classroom. I am suggesting that learning disability and its impact on second language learning is a relatively under researched area. The students at my school have significant problems in all areas of English including reading, writing and speaking. On the face of it, these difficulties are obvious, considering that the students' native language is Cantonese. Cantonese is spoken at home and in the wider community, and students have minimal exposure to English. However, a feature of learning disability is that students have problems in all areas of language learning, including their native language. It is not simply localized to English but may also be apparent in Chinese language learning. Teachers of Chinese, at my school, report on students who experience difficulties in the organization of Chinese texts and the expression of ideas and concepts.

The difficulty for the teacher in Hong Kong is that these students are integrated, by default into the regular classroom. By this I mean that there is minimal special provision made for students with learning disabilities. In addition, I have found that there is also minimal information available, both through formal psychometric testing and school reports which identify exactly what difficulties such students are experiencing. Professional advice about the difficulties the student may encounter in the learning process is also not always available to the teacher, and parents are often reluctant to admit that their child may have a learning disability and are also, understandably, hesitant to share information with the teacher. It is left pretty much up to the teacher to discover the student's difficulties through the evaluation and observation of performance. The implication is that such students receive no additional support for the problems they encounter in language learning and are often perceived and labeled as unmotivated, under-achieving or lazy.

The policy in secondary schools in Hong Kong is that all students must study English. However, neither a range of specific strategies nor a modified curriculum for students with learning disability has been developed. Where adaptations *are* made, these occur at school level. It is within this context that such students frequently experience failure in a number of subjects, including English, Chinese and mathematics. With the current trend moving away from special provision and towards mainstreaming in all schools, regular English language and other subject teachers in Hong Kong will increasingly be called upon to teach students with learning problems in regular classrooms, whose backgrounds, levels of knowledge, motivation and educational needs are diverse (Chan, 1998, p. 137).

Regular English language pedagogy utilized within the mainstream classroom in Hong Kong, including the use of textbooks, is often not sufficient for students with learning disabilities without significant adaptation of activities and exercises. Different learning disabilities require different kinds of intervention. My experience working with a class of Year Seven students – six of whom have been identified as dyslexic – is that the teacher may need to individually structure learning activities in a clear sequence, using explicit teaching techniques and manage a large class of up to forty students. This may mean breaking difficult tasks down into their component

parts, finding useful methodologies, and obtaining suitable materials to use with students in the regular classroom, which are both clear and suitable. Where relatively simplified materials exist, it is often age inappropriate for secondary students. Building suitable pedagogies is a challenge, which calls for a trans-disciplinary and inter-professional approach, involving teachers, English teaching researchers and special education researchers as active partners in finding solutions

My school has been an active player in this endeavor. To begin with, a large amount of resources has been spent trying to identify the students who have a learning disability amongst those who are poor learners of English. This has meant speaking to parents and wading through reports in an effort to understand the student's difficulties. Once identified, the question remains what sort of programmes can be realistically implemented in the context of a Hong Kong School and what additional programmes can we implement within the resources of the school?

These are questions we are currently exploring in collaboration with the Polytechnic University of Hong Kong, English Department, in a project termed "Enhancing the teaching of English to students with learning problems". The aim of this project is to explore pedagogical practices suitable for students with learning problems in the English classroom. The project follows an action research methodology (Burns and Hood, 1995) involving the active participation of parents, teachers and researchers and a continuous feedback loop allowing us to reflect on the pedagogies trialled. English teachers at the school have been able to implement in their daily practices some of the strategies, which are coming out of this project.

Strategies that we have found to be effective include assisting the student with organizing and understanding the structure of the texts they are writing. An activity-based approach, where the emphasis is on the language skills needed to undertake the activity, is also motivating for these students. For example, students were involved in a sequence of language tasks surrounding the theme "Halloween". The central activity was the holding of a Halloween party and the related language tasks related to their preparation for the party. All the texts used were "procedurally" based texts (Martin, 1989). Students were asked to follow and write procedural texts in all of the related tasks. Many of the sessions were spent on the language skills needed to produce and follow each text, including building background knowledge and vocabulary. Students made a Halloween mask following "how to make" instructions, planned a party, wrote a shopping list, and prepared "cool aid" following directions. The instructional sequence utilized a high degree of repetition and redundancy, enabling students to practice previously learnt skills within different but related activities.

As we have found, both in implementing the research project and in daily practice, teaching students with learning disabilities requires drawing ideas from the fields of both special education and language education. Strategies I have found useful in planning and teaching include:

- Collaboration with the Chinese teachers and co-ordination of strategies, as students with learning problems have difficulty in both languages;
- Emphasizing the building of the student's language resources, that is, building vocabulary and confidence in writing and speaking;

- Individualising instruction as much as possible through using technologies, that is, computer programmes, and using student tutors;
- Presenting instruction and tasks in a systematic, related and logical manner.
- Placing tasks in the context of the wider activity so the student can clearly understand their relevance;
- Utilising explicit teaching methodologies which offer maximum scaffolding. The genre-based approach developed by Martin (1989, 1993a, 1993b, & 2002) has been extensively applied within the research project with promising results.

These strategies can be used within the regular classroom, with accommodation and adaptation of materials and strategies for the student concerned. Finally, the key to success in teaching students with learning problems at my school has been collaboration with other teachers and researchers. This has been achieved through the use of Individual Education Plans (IEPs), which set goals for the student in areas of significant difficulty. Having the student, and if possible their family, participate in the development of their own plan and therefore ownership of their own learning goals, has been a motivating factor towards self-learning. As a teacher, the area of learning disability in the English classroom has caught my interest. I hope by sharing this experience, researchers and teachers will focus some attention on exploring suitable language teaching pedagogies for students with learning disabilities in the English classroom.

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