



Dyslexia and English Language teaching: a case of identifying needs and planning for support for secondary one students

Background

Catering for students with special learning needs is an issue of concern for inclusive education in Hong Kong. This article describes an attempt by English teachers at a Tai Po secondary school to support dyslexic students in learning English in S1. The school adopted a whole school approach which included both in-class and withdrawal support. The teachers' competency gradually developed from understanding the nature of dyslexia, to attempting to identify particular problems and devising support measures through holistic curriculum planning and deployment of resources.

Level

S1

Strategies used

Dyslexic learners may show weakness in areas of speed of processing, short-term memory, attention, poor reading and spelling skills, memory and interpreting and remembering messages, sequencing and organising information, auditory and/or visual perception, and motor skills (Levine, 1984; Peer, 2000). Turner and Pughe (2003) further note that for dyslexic students, the difficulty is a cognitive one, affecting those language skills associated with the written form. The weaknesses will affect their learning across the school curriculum.

In terms of teaching, multi-sensory techniques emphasise direct teaching of all new materials, and maintaining teacher-student interaction. Krzyżak (2006) describes involving the use of more of the child's senses, especially the use of touch and movement (kinetic learning) in this approach.

Whereas a multi-sensory approach was an instructional strategy usually adopted in the withdrawal mode in the 1970s and early 1980s, a whole school approach may include both in-class mode and withdrawal mode and caters for students with features of dyslexia through coordination of various stakeholders. Using a whole school approach, teachers can devise some strategies to help dyslexic learners through holistic planning and effective deployment of resources. The school case in this article is an example of using such an approach.

What happened

Recent school policy

To sustain a recent effort to care for the needs of dyslexic students, the school tried to strengthen a special education curriculum in English. Two teachers were nominated to work with the Language Learning Support Section (LLSS) of EMB on a project aimed at devising support measures for dyslexic students in their English language curriculum. The collaborative project aimed at improving teachers' competency in dyslexia diagnosis and remediation; and supporting students' learning. To achieve the two goals, the following work was undertaken this year.

1. Understanding of dyslexia

The teachers' understanding of the nature of dyslexia, managing classroom behaviour and teaching techniques increased through sharing of the literature in regular project meetings.

2. Identification of needs of focus students

The teachers could not simply rely on the initial information provided to them on S1 students with dyslexic features. An understanding of the students' specific difficulties and how they may affect classroom performance can enable the teacher to adopt teaching methods and strategies to help them be successfully integrated into the classroom environment. The teachers started by identifying the weaknesses of students in basic English proficiency by examining the daily work, e.g. dictation results, handwriting and spelling problems etc. in a unit of work. Then, the two teachers each selected two students from their own classes as a pilot study giving support focussed on their dyslexia. They opened profiles for the four students to keep track of the students' work, their learning problems and progress.

Both teachers found that the students had great difficulty in spelling and reading. For example, one student made a common dyslexic mistake of directionality when he wrote 'Monbay' as 'Monday.' Student character was also seen as a factor affecting the learning motivation of the students. The teachers also tried to diagnose the four focus students with the help of a dyslexia assessment instrument. The teachers interviewed the students to learn more about their ways of learning, interests and needs. This enriched the profiles of the students and helped the teachers in making pedagogical decisions.

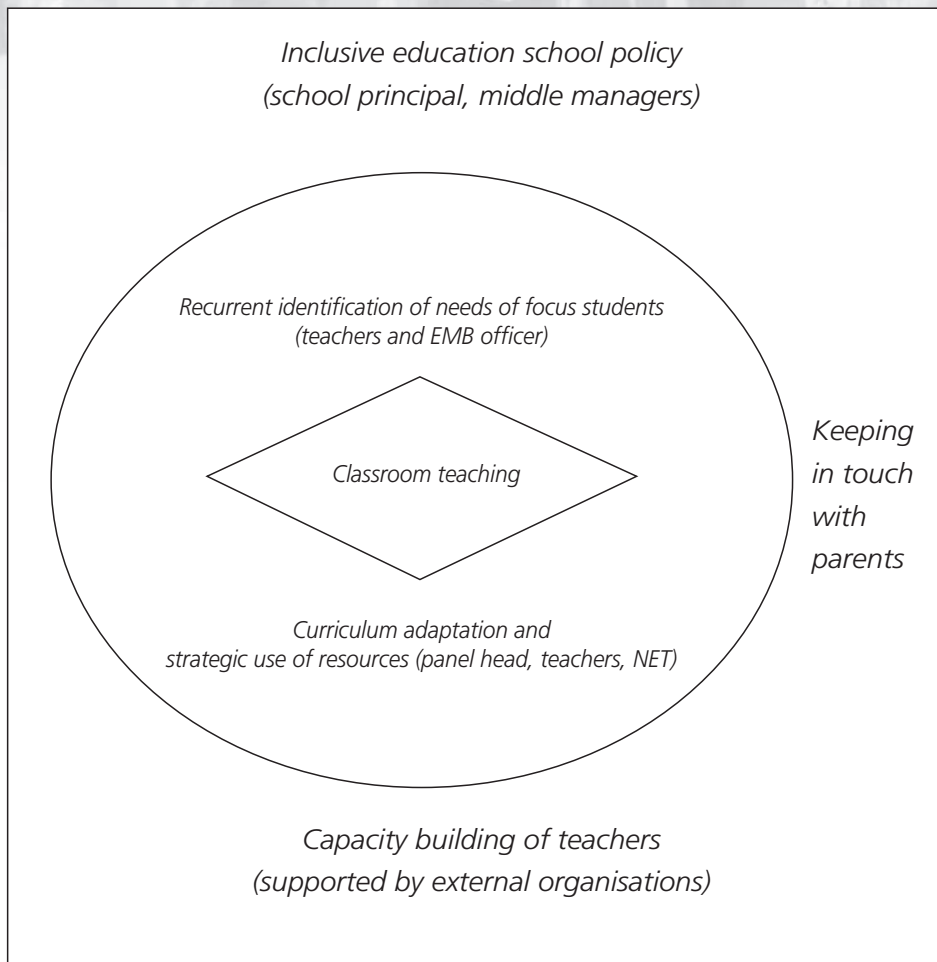
3. Curriculum adaptation and strategic use of resources

In the second term, school resources were further tapped to support the students. Some major curriculum and timetabling changes were made.

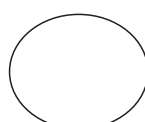
- (i) The students were re-grouped on the basis of examination results. In this way, three of the focus students were put into a smaller sized class where the teacher could pay more attention to individual students.
- (ii) Because some students were observed to have low self-esteem, a confidence-building exercise was devised. At a cross-curricular Valentine's Day function, students had to follow written instructions and a schedule given to them. This helped those weak in organisation and management skills to practise these skills for communication. The teachers also arranged a food ordering role play in a restaurant to create an authentic communication experience.
- (iii) After S7 classes had ceased in March, the Native-speaking English Teacher (NET) was able to give the students extra time on Tuesdays for phonics and sound discrimination.
- (iv) In late April the teachers formed a special study group of eight students, including the four focus students, that received weekly tutorials. These tutorials aimed to provide consolidation of lesson content and to address particular problems faced by the students.

4. Classroom instruction

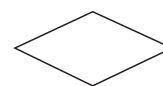
- (i) The teachers adopted a multi-sensory approach using realia and video tapes to help students master the meaning of new words in English lessons.
- (ii) Students were exposed to the topic vocabulary and target sentence structures not only in the initial input but also in revision, quizzes, tests and re-tests, each time with a variety of format, layout and content.
- (iii) The teachers viewed skills training as important. They helped the students build up memory skills in their spelling. For example, a teacher taught her students to memorise the word 'bitter' by associating it with a previously learned word 'butter'. Students were taught to identify and highlight the key words, which were taught in the previous lessons. Scanning skills helped students guess the meaning of longer language patterns, and hence fostered their understanding of the target language.



School level support



Curriculum level planning



Teaching and learning

Building a dyslexia-friendly environment in schools

Impacts

The most successful part of the lessons was that the teachers could see some improvements in student learning even though the progress might be slow. For the focus students, at first they were passive, shy and with low self-esteem, unwilling to learn English at the beginning of the school term. Then they improved, feeling more comfortable and confident in answering questions and trying to finish the tasks on time. The results of dictations and tests and also their motivation have been improving.

Having seen their improvements in learning words and sentence patterns, the students become more confident in dealing with assessments which are used to evaluate students' learning on the recurring language items. Even though the progress has been slow and not remarkable at this stage (as it is in many such classrooms), the students understand that they are being helped on the way. The two teachers have also acquired competency in diagnosing the problems and planning for dyslexic students.



Facilitating factors

The school had a clear policy on special education. The principal and middle managers ensured that the ethos of the school was dyslexia-friendly and informed parents of the dyslexia policy on many occasions. The support from the panel head, the NET, and the LLSS officer relieved much pressure on the two young teachers in managing this new challenge. All these added to the favourable conditions for building a dyslexia-friendly learning environment.

Difficulties and suggestions

The teachers are still facing difficulties when teaching dyslexic students. For instance, the students do not want to be labelled as 'special students'. Therefore, the teachers integrated some challenging items in handouts and tests, which students could choose to answer or omit. They also differentiated the assessments by setting core and non-core parts and kept track of the progress and motivation of the students.

Another difficulty is that the teachers had to adjust the learning objectives from time to time according to students' learning abilities, thus slowing down the planned schedule of work. However, it was pleasing for the teachers to note some improvements in student learning as they had focussed on individual needs.

Students with special learning difficulties can still master a language if they can learn a series of techniques which facilitate their memory of language elements. As this case shows, teachers play an important role in developing these skills, by taking into account their students' interests, expectations and actual needs.

References

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