17 Slow Learners: How are they Identified and Supported?

Younis Salim Al-Hashmi
Batinah South Region

1   INTRODUCTION

Slow learners are students who learn more slowly than their peers, yet do not have a disability requiring special education (Griffin, 1978). As a supervisor, during my regular visits to schools in my region I have noticed that teachers of English face challenges in dealing with such learners. One reason for this is that these teachers do not receive any particular training in how to support slow learners. However, there has been no research in Oman into how teachers of English identify and deal with slow learners and the purpose of this study is to explore these issues. I also hope through this study to draw attention to the existing problem of slow learners and to raise awareness of the methods of detection and the interventions which English language teachers in my region (and elsewhere in the country) might benefit from.

2   SLOW LEARNERS

2.1   Definition

Psychologists and educational researchers use a range of terms to refer to learners whose achievement is low. In this study I use the term slow learners, who are defined as "children who are doing poorly in school, yet are not eligible for special education" (Shaw, Grimes & Bulman, 2005: 11). As Lescano (1995) explains, it is important to distinguish between slow learners and those who are learning-disabled:

> The first is the student who does not learn successfully due to general socio-cultural problems, frustrating past language classroom experiences, inadequate use of strategies, or lack of interest. The second type of slow learner is the student formally diagnosed as "learning-disabled" by specialists in child psychology.

A number of factors may account for slow learners. Khan (2008) lists several, such as a lack of emotional growth, the lack of a secure environment, limited

opportunities for learning, absenteeism from school, untrained teachers and large class size. It is important for teachers to be aware of this range of problems that can cause a child to be considered a slow learner. In terms of language learning, slow learners may have had negative past experiences of learning and consequently lost interest; they may also be characterized by the inadequate use of learning strategies. Of course, slow language learners' problems are not solely related to language learning; more general problems listed above, and additional factors such as family problems at home, can also be influential.

2.2   Identifying Slow Learners

A website called 'Helping slow learners' (www. foundationosa.org/slow.htm) lists ten characteristics of a slow learner:
1.   Functions at ability but significantly below grade level.
2.   Is prone to immature interpersonal relationships.
3.   Has difficulty following multi-step directions.
4.   Lives in the present and does not have long range goals.
5.   Has few internal strategies (i.e. organizational skills, difficulty transferring, and generalizing information.)
6.   Scores consistently low on achievement tests.
7.   Works well with "hands-on" material (i.e. labs, manipulative, activities.)
8.   Has a poor self-image.
9.   Works on all tasks slowly.
10.   Masters skills slowly; some skills may not be mastered at all.

This list highlights issues which teachers can attend to in identifying slow learners. Various tools need to be used in collecting data about these issues. These can be teacher-made or commercially produced, and include tests, checklists, and rating scales. Also, as Genesee & Upshur (1996: 77) note, "observation is basic to assessing human skills and behaviors", and thus is a useful strategy in identifying behavioural problems. In addition, much useful information can be obtained from interviewing parents, teachers, classmates, and the students themselves.

Lescano (1995) comments specifically on the characteristics of slow language learners. He suggests that "their weakest skills are generally writing and reading. That is why, for example, hyperactive or attention-deficit students tend to disturb the class and misbehave whenever these skills are emphasized". He adds that

> Many slow learners show difficulties in perception. They tend to ignore details and go for overall comprehension and production. They do not notice, for instance, the apostrophe or the plural forms when reading. In the same way, some may omit forms of speech when writing or speaking.

2.3   Working with Slow Learners

Harmer (2001) suggests that students learn more quickly if the teaching methods used match their preferred learning styles. As learning improves, so too does self esteem. This has a further positive effect on learning. Students who have become bored with learning may become interested once again. The student-teacher relationship can improve because the student is more successful and is more

interested in learning. A number of strategies are suggested in the literature for supporting and motivating slow learners. Lescano (1995), for example, suggests the following:

- Give daily evaluations.
- Use simple vocabulary in directions and instructions.
- Use standard formats and limited types of responses for each assignment.
- Provide multi-sensory prompts to elicit correct responses.
- Analyze and break down difficult tasks.
- Increase time-on-task rates (more teacher questions, group participation, effective use of signals, gestures, etc.).

A further list of strategies is presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Strategies for supporting slow learners (www.foundationosa.org/slow.htm)

- 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.
- 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.
- Encourage your child to explore areas of interest to him/her. Career opportunities often come from these interests.

3   METHODOLOGY

3.1   Research Questions

This study addressed the following questions:
1.   How do Grade 10 teachers of English in Oman identify slow learners?
2.   How do these teachers support slow learners?
3.   What difficulties do teachers say they face in working with slow learners?

3.2   Context & Participants

The population of my study is all Grade 10 teachers of English in the Batinah South Educational Region. All of these teachers were present at two examination marking centres at the end of the 2008 school year and I administered a questionnaire to them there. I administered 140 questionnaires and just over 74% of these were returned. The sample for this study thus consists of 104 Grade 10 teachers of English in my region.

3.3   Data Collection & Analysis

The questionnaire is an appropriate way of eliciting the opinions of a large number of respondents. It is also an efficient research method, in terms of the time it takes to collect and analyze data (see Dörnyei, 2003; Bryman, 2001 for further discussion of questionnaires). I recognize, though, that questionnaires can provide a breadth of responses without providing in-depth detail.

The questionnaire I used here consisted of three parts. Part 1 elicited background information about the participants. Part 2 asked teachers about the strategies they use in identifying slow learners, while Part 3 focused on the ways in which teachers support slow learners and the challenges they face in doing so. Most questions were of the Likert-scale type, but some open-ended questions were also included.

The design of my questionnaire was influenced by my literature review and my experience of my context. I piloted my questionnaire with some teachers and amended it according to their feedback. For example, I added the Arabic equivalent for terms such as counsellor and social worker to minimize misunderstandings.

The closed questionnaire responses were converted into numbers and analyzed quantitatively (using descriptive statistics). Open-ended responses were analyzed thematically and categorized into groups.

4   FINDINGS

4.1   Background Information

One of the questions in Part 1 of the questionnaire asked the teachers whether they had a counsellor (مرشد نفسي) or a social worker (اخصائي إجتماعي) in their school. All 104 respondents said they had a social worker but none said they had a counsellor. The teachers were also asked about the number of periods they teach each week. Over 61% said they taught at least 21 lessons, while around 39% said they taught a maximum of 20 lessons. I also asked teachers about the size of their classes. Half the respondents said they taught classes of 31-35 learners, with 20% saying their classes were larger than 35.

4.2   Identifying Slow Learners

In Part 2 of the questionnaire teachers were asked about how they identify slow learners. The results for this question are shown in Table 2. This shows the percentage of the 104 teachers who said they use each of the strategies listed.

Table 2: Identifying slow learners

How do you identify slow learners?	%
1 I use an entry test at the beginning of the semester	67.0
2 I use the students' exam results from previous years	59.7
3 I use the result of continuous assessment	86.5
4 I use an intelligence test	24.0
5 I use observation of the learners in class	96.0
6 I don't identify slow learners	10.0

Only 10% of the respondents said they did not identify slow learners. Amongst those who said they do, the most commonly used strategy was observation, followed by continuous assessment.

Table 3: Supporting slow learners

Strategies	Always/ Usually	Sometimes/ Rarely	Never
I modify my language to suit their level	96	8	0
I try to develop a good relationship with them	93	11	0
I make use of excellent students to support slow learners	91	12	1
I praise them when possible	86	18	0
I react politely to their responses even if they are incorrect	86	18	0
I mix slow learners with excellent students in group activities to benefit from each other	86	18	0
I use a variety of techniques to suit the different students' learning styles	84	20	0
I provide clear feedback	84	20	0
I analyze and break down difficult tasks	83	18	3
I use simple vocabulary in directions and instructions	79	23	2
I try to understand the reasons behind their weaknesses	66	31	7
I provide longer wait time after asking questions in order to give slow learners a time to think	63	31	10
I engage slow learners in extra curricular activities	61	37	6
I anticipate their difficulties and prepare activities to help them	60	39	5
I use tasks and activities that add fun to the lesson	59	45	0
I concentrate on fluency rather than accuracy	52	50	2
I ask the social worker in the school about the slow learners' background	49	47	8
I use tutorials to support slow learners	42	47	15
I organise meetings with slow learners' parents to discuss their child's difficulties	30	62	12
I write the lesson aims on the board at the beginning of the lesson	19	43	42

4.3   Supporting Slow Learners

Part 3 of the questionnaire asked the teachers about the strategies they use to support slow learners. A number of strategies were listed and teachers were asked to indicated how often they used each on a five-point scale of Always to Never. The results are given in Table 3 above. Here 'Always/Usually' responses are collated, as are 'Sometimes/Rarely' answers. The strategies are listed in descending order according to frequency teachers said they used them.

The three most frequently used strategies for supporting slow language learners, according to these teachers, were modifying teacher talk to the learners' level, developing a good relationship with them and using better learners to support the

slower ones. The three strategies least used were tutorials, meeting slow learners' parents, and writing lesson aims on the board.

Teachers were also asked to suggest any further strategies they used to support slow learners. Few additional ideas emerged here; one was using games and competitions to motivate learners and make learning enjoyable. Additionally, teachers were also asked to comment on difficulties they faced in supporting slow learners. The issues they mentioned were:

- large classes
- slow learners' lack of response to teachers' instructions
- limited time to provide special support due to heavy workloads
- lack of support from parents
- lack of motivation in learners.

5   DISCUSSION

This study provides some preliminary descriptive information about English teachers' practices in identifying and supporting slow learners. Regarding the first of these issues, teachers seem to rely on less formal methods for identifying slow learners, such as observation and continuous assessment; more formal strategies which involve specific tests are not used, and this may reflect the fact that, according to these teachers, specialist counsellors with the appropriate background in educational psychology are not available in schools. The picture that emerges here is that there is no systematic approach to identifying slow learners and that individual teachers must take responsibility for this in any way that they feel is appropriate. It is also worth noting that 10% of the teachers here said they did not take any specific action to identify slow learners. This may mean that the slow learners in these teachers' classrooms do not receive any particular support.

In terms of the strategies teachers use to support learners, some of these reflect those suggested in Lescano (1995) (e.g. use simple vocabulary, break down tasks – see earlier discussion), but the strategy reportedly used by most teachers here was simplifying teacher talk to enhance learner understanding. More able learners were also widely used to support slow learners. Overall, the teachers here reported using a wide range of strategies to support slow learners. Some, though, such as tutorials and meetings with parents, were not widely used.

The teachers also identified particular challenges they faced in supporting slow learners. Finding the time to do so was an issue, as teachers felt their workloads were already heavy. In some cases teachers also felt that parents were not sufficiently involved in supporting slow learners and that this made the teacher's work harder. Large classes were also seen to be an issue (as noted earlier, 70% of the teachers said they taught classes of 30 or more learners).

On the basis of these results there would seem to be scope for in-service training which focuses on the issue of slow learners and which engages teachers in discussions of how they can identify and support them. Findings from this study could be usefully fed into such training in order to provide a basis for awareness-raising and discussion among teachers.

5.1   Limitations

The findings of this study apply to the participants and context studied here. Further research with other groups of teachers in other parts of Oman would make it possible to assess the extent to which similar patterns hold true elsewhere. This study also relied on a questionnaire which consisted largely of closed items; further research seeking more qualitative understandings of teachers' work with slow learners would thus also be valuable given the limitations of questionnaire data in providing in-depth understandings of participants' responses.

6   CONCLUSION

It is my hope that this exploratory study can create greater awareness and discussion in Oman 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. I am sure that 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. It is also important for further research to build on this initial study and for the Ministry to develop guidelines to assist teachers in supporting slow learners.

REFERENCES

Bryman, A. (2001). *Social research methods*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Dörnyei, Z. (2003). *Questionnaires in second Language research: Construction, administration and processing*. New York: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Genesee, F. & Upshur, J.A. (Eds.). (1996). *Classroom-based evaluation in second language education*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Griffin, D. (1978). *Slow learners: A break in the circle: A practical guide for teachers in secondary schools*. Andover: Chapel River Press.

Harmer, J. (2001). *The practice of English language teaching* (3rd ed.). London: Longman.

Helping slow learners. Retrieved 25 January 2009 from
http://www.foundationosa.org/slow.htm

Khan, S.M. (2008). Education of slow learner. Retrieved 25 January 2009 from
http://research-education-edu.blogspot.com/search/label/Education%20of%20Slow%20Learner

Lescano, A.A. (1995). The remedial English project. *English Teaching Forum, 33*(4). Retrieved 20 January 2009 from
http://eca.state.gov/forum/vols/vol33/no4/p40.htm

Shaw, S., Grimes, D., & Bulman, J. (2005). Educating slow learners: Are charter schools the last, best hope for their educational success? *The Charter Schools Resource Journal, 1*(1). Retrieved 20 January 2009 from
http://www.ehhs.cmich.edu/~tcsrj/shaw4.pdf