

HOW MIGHT SPECIAL EDUCATION PRINCIPLES BE APPLIED IN LANGUAGE TEACHING

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Abstract

This paper explores the possibility of applying special education principles in language teaching. Three major components of language teaching, teachers, learners and setting that contribute to the failure of language teaching in Thailand are examined and suggestions from a special education point of view are given to alleviate the problems. Using some of special education principles in language teaching when and where possible might be one of the answers to producing competent language learners and users.

The incorporation of special education principles in language teaching can be beneficial. If language learners, especially second-language learners are viewed as students with special learning needs, their instructors might plan what they want to teach and how they teach differently. Teachers of English in Thailand must be well aware that English teaching has not been very successful. We have not been able to produce adequate numbers of students who after so many years of learning can use English accurately and proficiently. What or who is to be blamed then? As a language and special education teacher, I would like to propose another approach to language teaching, the incorporation of special education principles in language teaching. If we look at the learners as having certain handicaps: not being a native speaker, not having good models, not having appropriate learning strategies, not being taught the ways they can learn and not being taught in the right atmosphere and setting, we might plan our lessons, teaching strategies and other related components to be more suitable to the students' needs. Also if we are to think of English teaching in Thailand as one type of national investments, we must aim for good products and satisfactory profits. We need to invest wisely.

From the above mentioned factors which seem to be the causes of failure in language learning, I see then the need to look at these factors closely from a special education point of view. In this paper I plan to discuss such factors as teachers and teaching strategies, students and learning strategies, classroom atmosphere and arrangement and other related matters. Before I continue talking about these factors, let me offer a very brief discussion on the meaning of special education and some of its principles including fundamental instructional strategies that might be applicable to language teaching. I must emphasize at this point that I completely agree with Neisworth, Bagnato & Demchak (1987) when they said that not every special teacher will use all available strategies nor will all the strategies be appropriate for all skills and all students. Instruction at its best should be an individualized process. Hence, skill teachers will pick and choose what works best for them in each particular learning situation.

Special education is especially designed instruction to meet the individual needs of special students.

Special students are those with special learning needs. Because of these needs, they require instructional adaptations in order to learn successfully.

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Task Analysis is the breaking down of tasks into their component parts so that each skill involved in performing the overall task is specified. Task analysis provides a basis for sequential instruction. A teacher can precisely pinpoint a student's behavior, place the student at the appropriate level for instruction, and then assist the student in mastering the skill. Because the skill is broken into small steps, student error is reduced.

Shaping involves rewarding progressively closer approximations of a specified objective. That is when a learner makes even slight progress toward an objective, the behavior is immediately reinforced.

Chaining teaches the right sequence of behavior in that the component behaviors are linked together to form more complex skills. Behaviors can be chained in either a forward manner or backward manner. If forward chaining is used, the first step will be taught first, and subsequent steps will be added until the whole sequence is learned. If backward chaining is used the learner will perform the final step first, and the step immediately preceding it is performed next. Backward chaining moves back through the steps until the learner is performing the skill independently.

Prompting and fading is a strategy that involves a visual stimulus, sound or touch that the teacher uses to set the occasion for a particular behavior. Prompts may be visual, verbal, or physical. The prompts acts as a crutch that assists the learner to perform a task that might otherwise be too difficult. However, the prompt is gradually faded until the learner independently performs the skill.

Modeling and imitation are not new techniques. When teachers show or demonstrate an activity, they model and encourage imitation. Good modeling includes reinforcement for the imitator. A learner is likely to imitate a model if the behavior is perceived by the observer positively.

Questioning permits the teacher to guide learner behavior toward a specified objective. If the learner does not respond correctly to the question, the teacher can either tell the child the answer or provide verbal prompts. The teacher should start with minimum verbal prompts and move toward stronger verbal prompts as necessary.

Activity pairing is using a part of the environment to become a conditioned event for a particular behavior. Music may be played, for example, to announce English-speaking-only situation. Eventually, merely putting on the music will cue the students to speak only English.

Behavior rehearsal refers to having a learner repeatedly practice a particular behavior. Sometimes the teacher may have a student rehearse a skill that is not usually practiced at school (talking to a non-native speaker of English-a tourist). A variety of behaviors are "rehearsed," or role-played, in a classroom. After the student has mastered the behaviors in the role-playing situation, the teacher might take them to a tourist attraction to use the behaviors that were rehearsed.

Discrimination learning is when the teacher attempts to teach the learner to differentiate behavior of the students under the control of specific stimuli, or signals. The teacher teaches discrimination by following these steps: (1) give distinctive prompt for the correct behavior, (2) provide many opportunities to practice and be reinforced for the desired response in the presence of the prompt, (3) reduce opportunities for children to practice inappropriate behavior in the presence of the prompt, and (4) gradually fade any continued prompts that were used (Willoughby-Herb and Neisworth, 1983).

Positive reinforcement refers to the contingent and immediate presentation of a reward of some sort after a behavior, which increases the future strength of that behavior. Reinforcers may be praise, food, attention, tokens, or favorite activities. The reinforcers used should be as

natural and as age appropriate as possible. One method of reinforcing the learner is to use task-embedded reinforcement. To make tasks reinforcing teachers can (1) use content that is interesting to learners, (2) build favorite activities into the task, and (3) create a gametype activity that involves the objectives (Willoughby-Herb and Neisworth, 1983).

Generalization is the ability to use learned skills in various environments. Instruction should include methods for enhancing the probability of generalizing so that the learner competently performs the skill across settings, people, and time.

We must admit that the majority of English teachers, especially at the primary and secondary school levels are not fully qualified to teach English. These teachers lack both skills and knowledge in English usage and teaching methods. They do not have adequate skills in what Chomsky (1965) called competence and performance. Therefore, they serve as poor models for their students. On the contrary, special education teachers must be specially trained in the knowledge of their students' characteristics, their special needs, their learning styles, specific teaching strategies, and assessment among other things. They must hold special degrees to be able to teach. It is not so in the case of English teachers. It is not uncommon to see teachers whose trainings were in other areas of study, teach English along with English teachers who are also not very competent at teaching English themselves. Besides the lack of knowledge in English, these teachers do not or rarely make use of different methods of teaching. They still stick to the easiest one, the translation method for the reason that it does not require much planning. English teachers have to be trained intensively in methods of teaching and be supervised to use the knowledge gained in various teaching situations. Besides learning the new and different methods of language teaching such as the trend in methodological techniques and approaches which stress the affective factors of the classroom situation where once methodology stressing the classroom transaction, it now concentrates on the classroom interaction (Malamah-Thomas, 1987), teachers have to actually use the newly learned methods. They need to know that the move from transaction to interaction focuses not on the objective of teaching, but on the process of achieving that objective and is known collectively as "humanistic" technique. Examples of such techniques are counseling language learning, suggestopedia and the silent way. New and good teaching strategies and techniques are being discovered more and more. Efficient teachers should keep themselves abreast of these new techniques and use them in their classes when possible. Teaching strategies most often used with special students that language teachers would benefit from knowing and using them as mentioned at the beginning, are task analysis, shaping and chaining, prompting and fading, modeling and imitation, questioning, activity pairing, behavior rehearsal, discrimination learning, positive reinforcement and generalization which could be used in almost every type of teaching. Another important point I want to mention but will not discuss in detail is the teachers' knowledge of assessment. Teachers must know when and how to assess their students and use the results to their benefit. Teachers must assess students' current functioning before starting teaching, between teaching and after teaching to monitor students' progress and to pinpoint problems. Able teachers learn how to use results of diagnostic testing to give prescriptive teaching. Language teachers like special education teachers should be well-trained for the job and must be dedicated, enthusiastic, active, up to date and hardworking. Textbook-blackboard language teachers and table-teaching language teachers should no longer exist or be permanently exterminated. Teachers of English should be specially selected and trained. Not everyone or anyone can be language teacher the same as not everyone or anyone can be special education teacher. Both jobs take very special people to do the job professionally. I blame teachers, as a group of course, as being the cause of 50% of the failure in English teaching. If we are to see better results in English teaching, we must drastically upgrade the English teachers increasing, both their knowledge of English and teaching strategies. We can no longer afford to have imperfect models or else our products can never be of good quality or even close to acceptable. I do not blame the teachers themselves entirely, however, the educational system has a lot to do with the failure. The teachers might not

have adequate and appropriate professional training from the beginning, they might lack opportunities to use English; there might not be adequate intensive in-service training to increase the teachers' knowledge and lastly the teachers might not receive sufficient positive reinforcement from school administrators for doing the job well so that they continue doing a good job.

Now let's focus on the learners. I believe they lack two essential properties for learning: strategies and motivation. In this aspect, language students are very similar to students with learning disabilities. Learning disabled students have adequate general intelligence and are able to succeed in most school tasks. However, because of specific disabilities in areas such as attention, perception, and memory, they experience difficulty in learning (Lewis & Doorlag, 1987). These students encounter problems in one or more academic subjects. Assuming that language learners also lack abilities in these areas, we should then look closely at their learning strategies and help them use these strategies appropriately. Ruth Garner (1990) stated that strategies enhance learning. However, both children and adults often fail to invoke strategic behaviors. Learning strategies are the methods the students use to plan, begin and complete learning tasks. Students who have disabilities in learning tend to use less effective strategies. They are classified as inactive learners because they fail to become actively involved in the learning task. The majority of language students also fall into this category. If you observe a 50-minute English class, how many students can you see participating in the teaching and learning process? Not more than what you can count on your hands! What is happening in this learning situation? First, we already blame the teacher as being unqualified to teach and uninteresting in their teaching approach. Now we can also blame the learners themselves for not knowing how to learn. As their teachers we need to assist these learners to learn to apply appropriate strategies in various learning situations. Paris, Lipson, and Wixson (1983) introduced the term conditional knowledge to capture the dimension of knowing when to solicit strategies. They stated that adept learners have three types of knowledge about strategies: (a) declarative, or knowing **that**; (b) procedural, or knowing **how**; (c) conditional, or knowing **when**. A learner with only declarative and procedural knowledge about a particular strategy does not adjust behavior to changing task demands. I see language learners as lacking such adjusting behavior. Garner also listed the following five reasons why strategies are not used: poor cognitive monitoring, primitive routines that get the job done, a meager knowledge base, attribution and classroom goals that do not support strategy use, and minimal transfer of strategic activity to new, related situations. Knowing why students do not use strategies, the language teachers can help students enhance their learning by teaching or prompting them to use strategies where and when such strategies are needed. In addition to the lack of learning strategies, students of English lack motivation in learning. Conduct a simple survey with your students. Ask them why they are learning English. The majority will answer, "I don't know." "Because it's in the curriculum." "Because my parents want me to study it." Very rarely you will come across answer like, "Because I want to learn it so that I can use it in the future to further my study, to acquire more knowledge or to use it in my job." Therefore, a major work could be done in helping the learners to see the benefits of studying English. If students know why and what they are doing something for, they will attempt to do the best they can to achieve their goals especially with the right assistance from the teachers. Other important factors about the students that have to be taken into consideration are their learning styles, learning rate and attainment. Skill teachers should know their students' specific learning needs. They need to know their students individually -- that is to know their particular learning styles. Not everyone learns the same way, at the same rate or attains the same amount of information or all the skills learned. Long (1990) said that individual differences affect second language acquisition especially in older children and adults. The learning rate and ultimate second language attainment are highly variable while the acquisition processes and sequences are fairly regular (Ellis, 1985). Keeping these facts in mind, teachers should pay closer attention to the way children learn and help facilitate their learning rate and attainment.

The third most important variable in language teaching and learning is the setting or when and where the students learn. Setting can be seen in immediate classroom terms, referring to the size, location, furniture, and resources of the room in which the class is located. The temporal features can be the time of day, the location of the particular lesson in the class day, the duration of the lesson and others. Setting has a direct effect on the choice of methodological activities and language interaction. The following are types of classroom setting and school adapted from Malamah-Thomas' list (Malamah-Thomas, 1987). Consider how they might influence or constrain the teacher's choice of methodological activities and language interaction :

1. An overly crowded classroom with 35—50 students.
2. A large hall where five different classes are being held. No walls between the classes, only head-high cardboard partitions.
3. A classroom where both desks and benches are nailed firmly to the floor.
4. A classroom where only one textbook is provided for every six students or only textbooks are used--nothing else.
5. A classroom with no electricity supply or cooling equipments.
6. At one o'clock to four o'clock on hot days.
7. A Friday afternoon, towards the end of the term.
8. A School right next to a major international airport.
9. A School where a headmaster cannot tolerate excessive noise in any of his classrooms.
10. A language department staff who all agree on the "communicative" approach to language teaching and deal only with language functions in the classes.
11. A curriculum geared tightly towards the needs and requirements of a final certificate examination.
12. A school which practices strict discipline and a very authoritarian approach.

In a special education classroom, the number of students is kept small. The learning atmosphere is relaxed and permissive. Students receive a lot of attention, guidance and assistance from the teachers. Students are allowed to make mistakes, receive immediate feedback and are corrected in a very positive way. Teachers use a lot and a variety of teaching aids to help the students learn. Special students if mainstreamed, have the opportunity to receive remedial or extra teaching in a resource room. Here, what they have not learned or mastered will be provided to them by a resourceful resource teacher. With the resource teacher students can have extra practice with their friends who have the same problems. If we can provide the same kind of arrangement to language students, a small classroom with appropriate teaching aids, a resource room where they can learn what they have not learned in a regular language class and planned situations or varied linguistic environments where they can actually use English and have fun while doing it, I am quite confident that we will see some changes in the students' language proficiency. Another point to ponder too, is should everyone study English? Do some of these learners have the aptitude to learn English? Do they have a choice?

For the purpose of this paper, I will have to limit my discussion to the three aforementioned factors: the teachers, the learners and the setting for they can be readily and plausibly adapted. There are many more factors that help to contribute to the failure of English teaching in Thailand to name a few the national policy that emphasizes the teaching of English as opposed to other languages, the goals of English teaching, the curriculum and the school administrator's policy. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss these factors in detail. These factors, though, are harder to change but not impossible. We are living in a fast changing world and

must be able to adapt, change or choose what might be a better way of doing things. Looking at language teaching from a perspective of a special educator might be one of the answers to achieve higher success in language teaching and better products-- competent language users. In a highly business-oriented world one must carefully invest and aim for maximum profits. English teaching in Thailand as it has been is a very poor investment. Besides having no profit from the investment, we cannot even gain back the invested capital. Can we afford to have such a profitless business endeavor forever?

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