



CHAPTER 33

CONTRIBUTIONS OF LANGUAGE LEARNING TO SPECIAL NEEDS EDUCATION

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Introduction

Special Education, also called special needs education, is the education of children with intellectual, hearing, vision, speech, or learning disabilities; gifted children with advanced academic abilities; and children with orthopedic or neurological impairments (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2018). It is the education designed to facilitate the learning of individuals who, for a wide variety of reasons, require additional support and adaptive pedagogical methods in order to participate and meet learning objectives in an educational programme. Reasons may include (but are not limited to) disadvantages in physical, behavioural, intellectual, emotional and social capacities (UNESCO, 2022).

Educational programmes in special needs education may follow a similar curriculum as that offered in the parallel regular education system, however they take individuals' particular needs into account by providing specific resources (examples: specially trained personnel, equipment, or space) and, if appropriate, modified educational content or learning objectives. These programmes can be offered for individual students within already existing educational programmes, or be offered as a separate class in the same or separate educational institutions.

The philosophy of Special Education is centered on a law written in 1975 called the Education for All Handicapped Children Act. It stated that all children, despite having a disability, should have the opportunity to engage in a free public or private education. This law was the first to require that schools address the needs of students with disabilities and move toward a more inclusive model. The Special Education teaching philosophy essentially advocates that no matter what obstacles a student has, they can learn if given the right tools with the appropriate instruction.

Language in the context of education usually involves a shared set of verbal codes, as in English, German, Latin, French, etc. It can be seen as a generic, communicative phenomenon, especially in descriptions of instruction. Both definitions of language are important to understanding the relationship between language and education. Teachers and students use spoken and written language to communicate with each other when it comes to: presenting tasks, engaging in



learning processes, presenting academic content, assessing learning, displaying knowledge and skill, and building classroom life (Akhter, 2015). From government policies, to curriculum and teacher training, to textbooks, language is central to all aspects of academic instruction and must be taken into consideration to create effective language policies and programs especially for children with special needs.

Children fail to learn language in school for a variety of reasons. In some cases, their academic difficulties could be directly attributed to deficiencies in the teaching and learning environment or as a result of their special physical or mental learning challenges. For example, children with limited English language may fail because they do not have access to effective bilingual or English as a second language (ESL) instruction (Garcia & Dominguez, 2017). Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may have difficulty if instruction presumes middle-class experiences. Other children may have learning difficulties stemming from linguistic or cultural differences, still, some other children need specialized instruction because of their special learning needs/challenges. Children with special needs have many characteristics similar to those identified in typically developing children. These difficulties may become more serious over time if instruction is not modified to address the children's specific needs (Geoff, 2015). Unless these children receive appropriate interventions, they will continue to struggle, and the gap between their achievement and that of their peers will widen over time.

In this chapter, provision of special needs education is examined. Effort is made to present the contributions of language learning to special needs education in the areas of language learning education for children with special needs; English language learning for children with special needs, remediation in English language learning for children with special needs, special teaching strategies in English language for children with special needs, Referral services for Special Education in language learning, and classroom Implications of language learning to Special Education. Finally, Challenges of language learning for special children, and some strategic possibilities for addressing the challenges of language learning are presented.

Language learning education for special needs education

Children learn best in a language they use and understand. Predictably, when children are required to learn to speak or read in a language they do not understand, the results are poor learning outcomes. In comparison, instruction in language for children with special needs can yield significant benefits both at the individual and systemic levels which include:

- i Improved education access, equity, and inclusion;
- ii Improved early literacy outcomes;
- iii Increase in learner-centered teaching practices and assessment;
- iv Increased parental and community involvement in education; and



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- v Improved education efficiency due to lower dropout and repetition rates.

Implementing effective instruction in language learning for children with special needs should use required careful contextual factors as well as the engagement of a variety of stakeholders to ensure that language is addressed and incorporated in curriculum, teacher placement and professional development (Mader, 2017). It requires clear policies, standards, benchmarks, and practices from the national level to the classroom level to ensure that children with special needs receive the instruction they need to become active language learners. Often, an important first step in designing and implementing effective language of instruction policies for children with special needs is the use of mapping exercises that can provide important data and insights for implementing policies effectively, and influencing programmatic decision making (Padurean, 2014).

Given the linguistic diversity in many countries, especially as it affects Nigeria, language mapping exercises can help identify which languages children with special needs use at home (including spoken and sign languages) and determine which language(s) should be used for instruction within a school community or geographic area.

Language mapping is a way to visually organize the understanding of information. It is hierarchical in nature, beginning with the subject or topic at the top or side of the page, and then branching into sub-topics and details. It is used to record ideas during reading and also to see the relationships among ideas, and distinguish between main ideas and supporting details. Students who use this method well will be able to remember important details from the text they studied and will also acquire the skill to organize information in a memorable and accessible way to help with studying. Think Literacy (2003) in supporting this proposition stated that: Brain - based research shows that visual organizers, such as language mapping, can be highly effective in helping students who are struggling with reading and writing.

Language mapping can also help inform teacher placement. By understanding the languages used in schools and those that teachers speak, policies and practices can be adjusted to promote “teacher-student language match.” Special teachers should be placed in schools and classrooms where they speak the same language as the students. Additionally, language mapping can help identify gaps in available teaching and learning materials for certain languages and prioritize development of materials for languages that have limited resources available.

English Language learning for children with special needs

From their early years, children with special needs are to learn both spoken and written aspects of the English language. These include areas such as:

- i developing the use of grammatical structures and vocabulary;
- ii rules for the effective use of language in a variety of social situations;



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- iii comprehension of spoken and written language;
 - iv being able to tell short stories in; and
 - v expressing some personal needs.

Educational programmes for these children often emphasize curriculum and instruction to facilitate English language learning. With regards to the spoken aspect of English language, instructional programs for children with special needs may emphasize opportunities to comprehend a variety of genres from directions to narratives and opportunities to experiment with modes of expression. It should also feature the reading of stories designed for special children (Cummins, 2019). These children may also be given opportunities to learn how to express themselves through written language, including opportunities to identify letters, words, and opportunities to form sentences, and tell short stories (Ferdous, & Munir, 2002). As regards to the written English language form, classrooms for such children should provide opportunities to learn alphabetic symbols, letter-sound relationships, basic sight vocabulary, and comprehension strategies;

Children with special needs are inherently stimulated language learners and providing them with a tantalizing, rich language environment supplies them with the right tools needed to develop their spoken and written language abilities. Although English language teachers may provide instruction, the instruction should follow the children's needs and interests rather than being prescribed in a predetermined manner (Cummins, 2004). The complexity of language processes requires that children with special needs be engaged in complete or whole English language activities rather than in isolated skill instructional activities that distort language processes by stripping the children of English language complexity.

Over-representation of English language learners in Special Education classes (Yates & Ortiz, 1998), suggests that educators have difficulty distinguishing students who truly have learning disabilities from students who are failing for other reasons, such as limited English. Students learning English are disadvantaged by a scarcity of appropriate assessment instruments and a lack of personnel trained to conduct linguistically and culturally relevant educational assessments (Valdes & Figueroa, 1996). English language learners who need Special Education services are further disadvantaged by the shortage of special educators who are trained to address their language and disability-related needs simultaneously.

Remediation in English language learning for children with special needs

Children with special needs must have access to high-quality instruction designed by specialists to help meet their high expectations. Teachers should employ strategies known to be effective with English learning, such as:

- i Drawing on their prior knowledge;
 - ii Providing opportunities to review previously learned concepts and teaching them to employ those concepts in the new learning;
 - iii Organizing themes or strands that connect the curriculum across the special areas;
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- iv Providing them with individual guidance, assistance, and support to fill the gaps in their background knowledge

Most learning problems of children with special needs can be prevented if students are in positive school and classroom contexts that accommodate individual differences. However, even in the most positive environments, some children with special needs still experience difficulties. For these children, early intervention strategies must be implemented as soon as learning problems are noted. Early intervention means that "supplementary instructional services are provided early in children's schooling, and that they are intense enough to bring at-risk children quickly to a level at which they can profit from high-quality classroom instruction" (Madden, Slavin, Karweit, Dolan, & Wasik, 1991, p. 594).

The intent of early intervention is to create general education support systems for special children as a way to improve their academic performance and to reduce inappropriate Special Education referrals. Examples of early intervention include clinical teaching, peer and expert consultation, teacher assistance teams, and alternative programs such as those that offer tutorial or remedial instruction in the context of general education.

Special strategies in English language teaching for children with special needs

Special teaching is a carefully sequenced teaching method that accommodates the various individual differences and special needs of the learners. Special teaching requires that, teachers teach skills, subjects, or concepts; then they re-teach using different strategies or approaches for the benefit of children with special needs, who fail to meet expected performance levels after initial instruction; finally, they use informal assessment strategies to identify the possible causes of failure (Ortiz, 1997; Ortiz & Wilkinson, 1991). Teachers conduct curriculum-based assessments to monitor student progress and use the data from these assessments to plan and modify instruction.

In the area of English language learning, English experts work collaboratively with general education teachers to address special children's learning problems and to implement recommendations for intervention (Fuchs, Fuchs, Bahr, Fernstrom, & Stecker, 1990). For example, English for Special Learners (ESL) teachers can share instructional resources, observe each other's classrooms, and offer suggestions for improving instruction or managing behavior as regards to some special learning needs as:

- i. Dyslexia
- ii. Dysgraphia
- iii. Attention Deficit Disorder (AAD)
- iv. Attention Deficit Hyperactivity (ADHD).

It is important to note or identify some of the identifiable warning signs that a student may have as regards to the above learning disabilities. The signs include all or some of the following:

- auditory difficulties



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- reading and writing difficulties
 - motor difficulties
 - memory difficulties
 - attention difficulties

Some special teaching strategies to adopt by teachers in teaching children with special needs are:

1. Creating a positive learning environment where he will focus on what the students can achieve rather than what they cannot: instead of focusing on what the students are struggling with, try to develop the areas that they are finding success in. This will help to boost their self-esteem because success begets success.
2. Highlighting objectives and structure activities of the lesson clearly: Providing an overview of the session's objectives and activities can help students prepare for the day's learning. Having a frequently used learning structure helps students benefit from some regularity and structure in their learning time.
3. Having or creating a set of positive rules: Having a list of ground rules for class time that states the positive actions that are expected of students (as opposed to only a list of don't) can help with students' behaviour.
4. Reducing potential distractions: Reducing noise and any other things that can cause distraction to students will definitely help them keep focus and make more effective lessons.
5. Timing activity effectively: Design lesson plans accordingly. Students with reading and writing difficulties such as dyslexia will need to be allocated more time to carry out given tasks. Those with attention disorder will be given tasks that are short and brisk.
6. Utilizing all the senses for the lesson: By adopting learning approaches that are multi-sensory, children with special needs can better substitute for aspects that they may struggle to learn through. Read text aloud, use visual and kinesthetic aids, and other strategies that stimulate students enough.

In order words, English for Special Language (ESL) teachers can help general education teachers by demonstrating strategies to integrate English learners in mainstream classrooms. They can also share the goal of helping the children regardless of the labels such children have been given. The special language teachers can help other teachers resolve language problems they routinely encounter in their classrooms (Chalfant & Pysh, 1981). They are to serve other classroom teachers who request assistance to design interventions to help children with special needs in the areas of: determining priorities for intervention; helping them select strategies or approaches to solve the problem; assigning responsibilities for carrying out the recommendations; and establishing a follow-up plan to monitor progress. The classroom teachers then implement the plan, and follow-up meetings are to be held to review progress toward resolution of the problem.



Referral services for Special Education in language learning

They are primarily responsible for the education of children with special learning needs, migrant students who may miss critical instruction over the course of the year, or immigrant children who may arrive in a different country's schools with limited prior education. General education alternatives may include one-on-one tutoring, family-support groups, family counseling, and the range of services supported by the government. Such support should be supplemental to and not a replacement for general education instruction.

On the other hand, when prevention and early intervention strategies fail to resolve learning difficulties of children with special needs are involved, referral to Special Education is warranted. The primary referral committees include a variety of specialists, such as principals, Special Education teachers, special language teachers, and assessment personnel. These specialists bring their expertise to bear on the problem, especially in areas related to assessment, diagnosis, and specialized instruction.

Decisions of the referral committee should be formed for data gathered on the prevention, early intervention, and referral processes. The recommendations are to be that each child receives a comprehensive individual assessment to determine whether Special Education services are needed. These should indicate the following:

- i. The child's intellectual ability
- ii. The child's achievement and academic language
- iii. The child's phonological awareness
- iv. Is the child in a positive school climate;
- v. Has the teacher used instructional strategies known to be effective for special needs for English learners;
- vi. Has neither clinical teaching nor interventions recommended earlier resolved the child's problem; and
- vii. What other general education alternatives also proved unsuccessful.

If a child continues to struggle in spite of all efforts to individualize instruction and to accommodate his learning characteristics, the child definitely has a learning disability (Ortiz, 1997).

Classroom implications of Language learning to Special Education

The classroom implications of language learning to Special Education is that prevention of failure among children with special needs involves two critical elements: the creation of educational environments that are conducive to the special children's academic success and the use of instructional strategies known to be effective with the children.

1. Preventing school failure for special children begins with the creation of school climates that foster academic success and empower such children.



Such environments should reflect a philosophy that all children can learn and that educators are responsible for helping the children to learn.

2. The success of English language learning for special children entails that teachers must share a common philosophy and knowledge base relative to the education of special children learning English. They should be knowledgeable about all of the following areas: second language acquisition; the relationship of native language proficiency to the development of English; assessment of proficiency in the native language and English; sociocultural influences on learning; effective first and second language instruction; informal assessment strategies that can be used to monitor progress, particularly in language and literacy development; and effective strategies for working with culturally and linguistically diverse families and communities.

Challenges of language learning for Special Education

Teaching special children is not like teaching regular children. Teachers usually face a number of challenges in teaching language to special children.

1. The first challenge that the teachers face is communication, as it is often very difficult to get the verbal response from the children. In most cases, teachers fail to understand what the children do want and what they do not want. So, inadequate understanding creates problems in communication in teaching language to special children.
2. Most parents of children with special needs cannot identify that their child is born with special qualities and sometimes they do not want to agree that their child is special. This non-cooperative attitude of the parents constitutes a big setback to the efforts of the special teachers to help the children.
3. Another basic challenge often faced at the beginning of handling the special children is their sitting habits. The children are always unwilling to sit in a place properly. They do not want to sit in a fixed place for a certain time. Most of them like to move and turn back and make noise and unnecessary sounds.
4. English language learners who need Special Education services are further disadvantaged by the shortage of special teachers who are trained to address their language and disability-related needs simultaneously.
5. Lack of sufficient equipment, and proper language therapy for teaching the students at the institutions for the special children often constitute problems in language teaching to the special children.

Some strategic possibilities for addressing the challenges of language learning

There are possibilities for improving teaching and learning in the field of language education to special children. Teachers can be able to communicate and interact with the special children in the classroom in some new and different manners by involving:



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1. They use pre-verbal skills like using rhythm, variations of tone, eye-contact, and vocalization to communicate with the special students. Special language learning classes are important or would be more effective and responsive if the language classroom is engaged in active lively exercises.
 2. The engagement of some modern intervention effort and new innovations. For example, in the case of children with speech difficulties, regular special classes with language therapy are needed to improve their language ability and their behavior. The implication being that if the special children are given regular speech therapy, at least once in a week, and at the same time special language classes are held, it is possible to get the positive and fruitful result within a short time.
 3. Engaging parents in the discussion of the observed special behaviors concerning their children. This will enable the parents participate actively in finding solutions towards the solving of the problems
 4. The need to have some special training. They should be given the opportunity to do a certificate course on Bachelor in Special Education from some government and non-government institutions in the country. Moreover, some national and international NGOs often emerge with a helping hand to train up the teachers of Special Education, therefore prospective special teachers should grab such opportunities to update themselves.
 5. Emphasis should always be on the activities that can ensure that collaboration and patronage are functioning among the teachers, parents, administrators, psychotherapists, and the civil society for a comprehensive tutoring in school.

Conclusion

This chapter has observed that children with special needs in language learning can have opportunities to learn skills in vocabulary, comprehension, reasoning, and composition. They should have access to curricula and instruction that integrate basic skill development with higher order thinking and problem solving.

On the other hand, parents of children with special needs in language learning must be viewed as capable advocates for their children and as valuable resources in school improvement efforts. By being involved with the families and communities of language learners, teachers can understand the social, linguistic, and cultural contexts in which the children are being raised. Thus, educators should learn to respect cultural differences in child-rearing practices and in how parents choose to be involved in their children's education. The chapter has also advocated the training and re-training of special teachers in order that they will be acquainted with more modern methods of language teaching. There is also an urgent need to use modern equipment in the teaching of special children.



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