

STRATEGIES FOR “SLOW LEARNERS”

Contrary to common belief, slow learners in the regular classroom are neither rare nor unique. The student commonly called a slow learner is one who cannot learn at an average rate from the instructional resources, texts, workbooks, and learning materials that are designed for the majority of students in the classroom. These students need special instructional pacing, frequent feedback, corrective instruction, and/or modified materials, all administered under conditions sufficiently flexible for learning to occur. Slow learners are usually taught in one of two possible instructional arrangements: 1) a class composed mostly of average students, in which case up to 20% may be slow learners, or 2) a class specially designed for slow learners. Whether you meet slow learners in a regular class or special class, you will immediately feel the challenge of meeting their learning needs. Their most obvious characteristic is a limited attention span compared to more able students. To keep these students actively engaged in the learning process requires more than the usual variation in presentation methods (direct, indirect), classroom climate (co-operative, competitive), and instructional materials (films, workbooks, co-operative games, simulations). If this variation is not part of your lesson, these students may well create their own variety in ways that disrupt your teaching. Other immediately noticeable characteristics of slow learners are their deficiencies in basic skills (reading, writing, and mathematics), their difficulty in comprehending abstract ideas, and most disconcerting, their sometimes unsystematic and careless work habits.

Compensatory Teaching

Compensatory teaching is an instructional approach that alters the presentation of content to circumvent a student's fundamental weakness or deficiency. Compensatory teaching recognizes content, transmits through alternate modalities (pictures versus words), and supplements it with additional learning resources and activities (learning centers and simulations, group discussions and co-operative learning). This may involve modifying an instructional technique by including a visual representation of content, by using more flexible instructional presentations (films, pictures, illustrations), or by shifting to alternate instructional formats (self-paced texts, simulations, experience-oriented workbooks).

Remedial Teaching

This is an alternate approach for the regular classroom teacher in instructing the slow learner. Remedial teaching is the use of activities, techniques and practices to eliminate weaknesses or deficiencies that the slow learner is known to have. For example deficiencies in basic math skills are reduced or eliminated by re-teaching the content that was not learned earlier. The instructional environment does not change, as in the compensatory approach. Conventional instructional techniques such as drill and practice might be employed.

Instructional Strategies for Slow Learners

While no single technique or set of techniques is sufficient teaching the slow learner, the suggestions that follow are a starting point for developing instructional strategies that specifically address the learning needs of the slow learner.

Develop Lessons that Incorporate Students' Interests, Needs, and Experiences

This helps address the short attention spans of slow learners. Also, these students should be made to feel that some of the instruction has been designed with their specific interests or experiences in mind. Oral or written autobiographies at the beginning of the year, or simple inventories in which students indicate their hobbies, jobs, and unusual trips or experiences can provide the structure for the lesson plans, special projects, or extra-credit assignments in the year.

Frequently Vary Your Instructional Technique

Switching from lecture to discussion and then to seatwork provides the variety that slow learners need to stay engaged in the learning process. In addition to keeping their attention, variety in instructional technique offers them the opportunity to see the same content presented in different ways. This increases opportunities to accommodate the different learning styles that may exist among slow learners and provides some of the remediation that may be necessary.

Incorporate Individualized Learning Materials

Slow learners respond favorably to frequent reinforcement of small segments of learning. Therefore, programmed texts and interactive computer instruction often are effective in remediation of basic skills of slow learners. In addition, an emphasis on frequent diagnostic assessment of the student progress, paired with immediate corrective instruction, often is particularly effective.

Incorporate Audio and Visual Materials

One common characteristic among slow learners is that they often learn better by seeing and hearing than by reading. This should be no surprise, because performance in basic skill areas, including reading usually is below grade level among slow learners. Incorporating films, videotapes, and audio into lessons helps accommodate the instruction to the strategies learning modalities among slow learners. Emphasizing concrete and visual forms of content also helps compensate for the general difficulty slow learners have in grasping abstract ideas and concepts.

Develop Your Own Worksheets and Exercises

Textbooks and workbooks, when written for the average student often exceed the functioning level of the slow learner and sometimes become more of a hindrance than an aid. When textbook materials are too difficult, or are too different from topics that capture your students' interests, develop your own. Sometimes only some changes in worksheets and exercises are needed to adapt the vocabulary or difficulty level to the ability of your slow learners. Also, using textbooks and exercises intended for a lower grade could ease the burden of creating materials that are unavailable at your grade level.

Provide Peer Tutors for Students needing Remediation

Peer tutoring can be an effective ally to your teaching objectives, especially when tutors are assigned so that everyone being tutored also has responsibility for being a tutor. The learner needing help is not singled out and has a stake in making the idea work, because his or her pride is on the line, both as a learner and as a tutor.

Encourage Oral Expression Instead of Written Reports

For slow learners, many writing assignments go un-attempted or are begun only half-heartedly because these learners recognize that their written product will not meet even minimal writing standards. A carefully organized taped response to an assignment might be considered. This has the advantage of avoiding spelling, syntax, and writing errors.

When Testing Provide Study Aids

Study aids are advanced organizers that alert students to the most important problems, content, or issues. They also eliminate irrelevant details that slow learners often laboriously study in the belief that they are important. The slow learner usually is unable to weigh the relative importance of competing instructional stimuli unless explicitly told or shown what is important and what is not. Example: test questions or a list of topics from which questions may be chosen help focus student effort.

Teach Learning Skills

You can increase learning skills by teaching note-taking, outlining, and listening. These skills are acquired through observation by higher ability students, but they must be specifically taught to slow learners. Unless your slow learners are actively engaged in the learning process through interesting concrete visual stimuli, there will be little contact emotionally and intellectually with the content you are presenting. This contact can be attained most easily when you vary your instructional material often and organize it into bits small enough to ensure moderate-to-high rates of success.