

Classroom Challenges: Working with Pupils with Communication Disorders.

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Abstract

The challenge of actively involving students with communication disorders in the formal education systems prompted this desktop study on some of the challenges and problems associated with students with communication disorders in the classroom. This paper examines the relationship between communication disorders and learning from a very basic and simplified point of view. The intention is not to get deep into the jargon of disability studies, but to assist teachers in having basic understanding of pupils with communication disorders so that they also actively engage them in their teaching approaches. As such, the paper does not claim to be a professional and expert point of reference. It is derived from and built on simple desktop literature study and document analysis. The thrust of the paper is simply to make sure that students with communication disorders are fully and actively involved in their classroom learning activities. It argues that teaching and learning are two sides of the same coin. We thus conclude that when people talk about teachers' effectiveness, they are talking about actual student learning. Generally there are as many teaching and learning methods as there are teachers. These have been grouped into basically two philosophies of teaching and learning: the traditional teacher-centred philosophy and the contemporary student-centred philosophy. In the modern world, the most accepted criterion for measuring good teaching is the rate and level of learning taking place among students. It has been established that people largely learn by doing, hence the widely accepted belief that between the above two philosophies, the student centred approach is the best. This paper argues that, if this is the case, then there is a risk of students with communication disorders being excluded from effective learning that goes on, unless measures are taken to make sure they are fully and actively involved in the learning process..

Keywords: Challenges, communication disorders, classroom, pupils, teachers, students, teaching, learning.

1. Introduction

As observed by Brice (2012) communication is very critical to children's development. Brice (2012) thus, sees the ability to communicate as a prerequisite to effective learning among school pupils. Nevertheless, many children have been found to experience communication disorders that interfere with their ability to communicate effectively. This paper examines the relationship between communication disorders and learning from a very basic and simplified point of view. The intention is not to get deep into the jargon of disability studies. The paper simply aims at assisting teachers have basic understanding of pupils with communication disorders so that they actively engage them in their teaching approaches. The paper does not claim to be a professional and expert point of reference. It is derived from and built on simple desktop literature study and document analysis. The paper starts by defining important concepts and orienting the study problem through an exposition of the two main teaching and learning philosophies (teacher-centred and pupil centred). This exposition serves as the conceptual framework guiding the argument in the paper. We then give an outline of the statement of the problem before discussing what literature says about communication disorders and making conclusions and recommendations of the study.

2. Defining Important Concepts

Communication: In this paper we define communication as the exchange of information and the sharing of meanings. The sharing of meanings translates into the ability to produce and comprehend messages. As long back as 1948, Wiener (1948), argues that this ability is about the transmission of all types of messages, including information related to needs, feelings, desires, perception, ideas, and knowledge. Fielding (2005) simply defines communication as a transaction whereby participants together create meaning through the exchange of symbols. Communication, thus, occurs through a variety of modalities. These include non-linguistic, verbal, and paralinguistic processes. It has been established that these processes influence the ability of individuals to communicate with other people.

Communication disorder: According to Gleason (2001) communication disorder is a condition in which an individual has speech and language problems resulting in one failing to communicate effectively. Such disorders range from simple sound substitution to the inability to understand or use one's native language. From a general point of view, communications disorders involve problems in speech that may interfere with one's success in life.

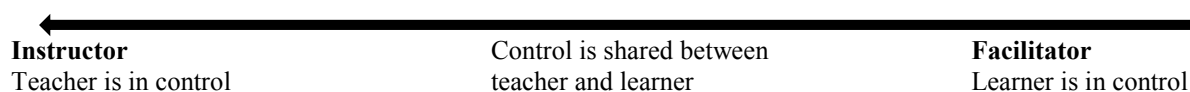
Teaching and learning: According to Shumbayaonda and Maringe (2000), teaching is a multifaceted process encompassing a variety of activities which are all aimed at promoting learning in students and learners. Learning can simply be seen as change of behaviour resulting from experience (Shumbayaonda and Maringe, 2000).

Teacher-centred teaching methods: These are teaching philosophies and practices that tend to be more authoritarian and conservative, and emphasize the values and knowledge that have survived through time. They are highly teacher-controlled learning processes and practices (Shumbayaonda and Maringe, 2000).

Pupil-centred teaching methods: According to Shumbayaonda and Maringe (2000), these are learner-centred teaching methods in which the pupil has power and control in determining both the outcome and pace of the learning process. The learner is not only active but has power to control the learning process as in open and distance learning.

3. An Overview of Teaching and Learning Approaches

According to Petty (2004) teaching methods are measured on a continuum of two extremes as illustrated below:



The above continuum poses the question: who should have control over learning, the teacher or learner? Petty (2004) identifies three sets of teaching methods: teacher-centred methods, active methods and student-centred methods. These methods are represented on the above continuum by teacher as instructor; teacher and learner sharing control; and teacher as facilitator respectively. Teaching and learning can take any of these positions or any other variations on the continuum. Petty (2004) sees lecture, demonstration, questioning, notes and handouts as highly teacher-centred methods; supervised student practice, discussion, group work and student talk, games and active learning methods, role-play, drama and simulations, seminars and whole-class interactive teaching as active methods in which control is shared between teacher and learner; and reading for learning, private study and homework, assignments and projects, essays and reports, guided discovery, learning from experience, independent learning and self-directed learning as student-centred methods in which learner is in control and teacher takes facilitator role.

Since this paper is guided by learner-centred methods let us explore the concept in more detail. Learner-centred methods of teaching are derived from constructivism, a group of theories that see effective learning as experiential learning through real life experience. Constructivism advocates for problem based adaptive learning that integrates new knowledge with existing knowledge and allows for creation of original work or innovative procedures. It envisages a self-directed, creative, and innovative learner. In this context the learning goal is the highest order of learning like practical problem solving, creativity, and originality.

Montessori (1946) observes that education is not what the teacher gives; education is a natural process spontaneously carried out by the human individual, and is acquired not by listening to words but by experiences upon the environment. Thus, the constructivist approach to teaching and learning encourages learners to arrive at their version of truth, as influenced by their background, culture or embedded worldview. It has been established that children develop their thinking abilities by interacting with other people and the physical world around them (Montessori, 1946). According to social constructivists, it is therefore important to consider the learners' background and their culture throughout their learning process. According to Wertsch (1997), this background helps to shape the knowledge and truth that learners create, discover and attain in the learning process. As observed by Glasersfeld (1989), the responsibility of learning should increasingly reside with the learner. Constructivists, therefore, emphasize the importance of the learner being actively involved in the learning process. This is very different from traditional educational viewpoints in which the responsibility of ensuring that learning occurs rests with the instructor. In traditional approaches to learning the learner plays a passive, receptive role. Glasersfeld (1989) argues that learners construct their own understanding. They do not simply mirror and reflect what they read.

According to constructivists, instructors should simply become facilitators, not traditional teachers. The major difference between the traditional teacher and the facilitator is that where the teacher lectures and tries his level best to pour drums of information into learners' heads, the facilitator helps the learner to organise and understand information some of which the learner already has albeit in disorganized forms. In the teacher ideological approach to learning, learners play a passive role. In the facilitator ideological approach to learning, learners play an active role in the learning process. Therefore, the degree of emphasis is what matters here. In facilitation emphasis turns away from the instructor and the content towards the learner. Thus, a facilitator needs to display a totally different set of skills than a teacher. Where teachers tell, facilitators ask. Where teachers lecture from the front, facilitators support from the back. Where teachers give answers according to set curricula, facilitators provide guidelines and create the environment for learners to arrive at their own conclusions. Where

teachers mostly give monologues, facilitators are in continuous dialogue with learners (Petty, 2004).

Generally speaking, as observed by the Society for Quality Education (accessed on 4 November, 2013), in a classroom situation, a pupil-centred teacher tries to create an environment which will motivate the pupils to discover new skills and knowledge. The current thinking is that teachers should not simply transfer facts into passive students' heads. Rather they should facilitate their discovery of relevant information. From this line of thinking, teachers should not always stand in front of the class and teach a lesson. Instead, activity centres should be set up around the room with the children moving from one point to another. Students may also be assigned to work together in groups on a project.

From the foregoing, a teacher may use the following pupil-centred and independent study teaching methods: reading; private study; homework; field projects; class and seminar presentations; and project reports. Most of these approaches call for effective communication, usually a big challenge to students with communication disorders. This paper addresses this issue so as to come up with recommendations on how to deal with the challenge.

4. Problem Statement

One of the major purposes of school education centres on verbal communication. This involves effective transmission and exchange of opinions and ideas verbally. It has been established that when school children have communication disorders, such disorders are most likely to negatively affect their speech and language development. According to Cooley (2007), this results in these students falling behind both socially and academically. As observed by Yanoff (2007), the end result is that more learning disabilities form as a consequence of communication disorders, especially in reading. This paper thus addresses these problems and challenges so as to come up with ways of overcoming the challenges to ensure effective learning among students with communication disorders.

5. The Challenge of Communication Disorder

According to Brice (2012), it has been established that learners with communication disorders have serious deficits in their ability to communicate. Usually a communication disorder occurs in one's ability to use language, speech and hearing. Language difficulties are summarised into spoken language, reading and writing difficulties. Speech disorders centre on articulation and phonology, fluency (stuttering), and voice challenges. Hearing difficulties express themselves in speech problems as in articulation / voice and language problems. Examples of hearing impairments include deafness and hearing loss, which can result from a conductive loss, a sensorineural loss, a mixed loss, or a central hearing loss (Brice, 2012).

Communication disorders result from many different situations or sources. For example, according to Brice (2012) language-based learning disabilities emanate from differences in brain structure at birth. In most cases, this challenge is genetically based. Other communication disorders are a result of oral-motor difficulties; difficulties resulting from a stroke which may involve motor, speech and/or language problems; traumatic brain injuries; and stuttering, which is now believed to be a neurological deficit. According to Brice (2012), the most common conditions affecting children's communication include language-based learning disabilities, attention deficit disorder, attention deficit hyperactive disorder, cerebral palsy, mental disabilities, cleft lip or palate, and autism spectrum disorders.

Thus, communication disorders range from sound substitutions to the inability to use speech and language. According to the American Speech, Language and Hearing Association (2001), children with communication disorders usually show delays or a typical development in one or more of the following areas: articulation; fluency; language comprehension; language production; morphology; phonology; pragmatics; semantics; syntax; and voice.

6. Categories of Communication Disorder

According to Sices, Taylor, Freebairn, Hansen and Lewis (2007), communication disorders are categorised into expressive language disorders, mixed receptive-expressive language disorders, stuttering and phonological disorders. Expressive language disorders are characterised by difficulty in expressing oneself beyond simple sentences and a limited vocabulary. In this case one understands language better than he / she is able to say it. He / she may have a lot to say but have difficulties organising and retrieving the words to get an idea across beyond what is expected for his/her developmental stage. Mixed receptive-expressive language disorders comprise problems in understanding the commands of others. Stuttering involves a break in fluency, where sounds, syllables or words may be repeated or prolonged. Phonological disorder is characterised by problems in making patterns of sound errors, for example dat for that.

7. Characteristics of Pupils with Communication Disorders

According to Brice (2012), children with communication problems present many different symptoms. Some of

such symptoms include difficulty in following directions; problems in pronouncing words; failing to express oneself; problems in paying attention to a conversation; problems in understanding what was said; and challenges of being understood because of a stutter or a hoarse voice. Their problems with language involve difficulty in learning new vocabulary, understanding questions, expressing ideas coherently, following directions, recalling information, understanding and remembering something that has just been said, reading at a satisfactory pace, comprehending spoken or read material, learning the alphabet, identifying sounds that correspond to letters, perceiving the correct order of letters in words, and possibly, spelling. Their difficulties with speech may include being unintelligible due to a motor problem or due to poor learning. Sounding hoarse, breathy or harsh may be due to a voice problem. Stuttering also affects speech intelligibility because the child's flow of speech is interrupted.

According to Brice (2012), many of the communication problems can be improved by therapy. It is however, important to note that some of these problems may never be cured (e.g., attention deficit or stuttering). Nevertheless, children can still learn new strategies to overcome such difficulties. Also experience has shown that quite a significant number of children overcome their deficits as they grow older (e.g., mild language delays). In the modern world many children with these deficits compensate by communicating through electronic means (e.g., an augmentative communication device or hearing aid) (Brice, 2012).

8. The Impact of Communication Disorders on Learning

According to Brice (2012), there is a strong relationship between communication and academic achievement. He believes that language and communication proficiency, together with academic success depend on whether students can match their communications to the learning-teaching style of the classroom.

Brice (2012) further observes that, given the correct environment, pupils with communication disorders can produce excellent academic results. They only need to learn the classroom's social, language, and learning patterns. As such, teachers have to put their attention on classroom interactions and the language and communications used within the school to help students learn to communicate in these environments. According to Brice (2012), explicit language and communication planning and non-deliberate language use (e.g., unconscious choice of language) are important features of the school and class environments that provide opportunities for teaching and learning.

9. Recommendations for Handling Children with Communication Disorders

According to Cooley (2007), pupils with communication disorders should be assisted by speech therapists in the classroom. It is however important to note that in developing countries like Zimbabwe this may not be feasible. Cooley (2007) believes that working with a speech therapist will immensely help the teacher to work with pupils with speech and language disorders. He further observes that additionally, the following tips may be helpful in the inclusive setting:

- showing understanding, patience, and acceptance;
- provision of extra time to answer questions;
- encouragement of speech practice by having one-on-one conversations with the student about his or her interests;
- keeping lectures clear, simple, pronounced, and in proper language syntax (no slang);
- making eye contact with the student when listening and speaking;
- repeating mispronounced phrases properly as a question so it does not seem like criticism;
- never mimicking a child with a speech disorder;
- not avoiding calling on children with language development problems;
- making sure the student speaks in front of the class, answers a question, etc. at least once per day;
- setting up practice verbal skills sessions between pairs of students where they read aloud, work on a problem orally, or play games that encourage speech;
- not tolerating teasing or bullying by other students;
- not pointing out communication disorders to others in the class; and
- keeping the classroom environment relaxed and organised (Cooley, 2007).

In conclusion, therefore, working with children with communication disorders is a challenge that requires well-trained and experienced professionals. In these circumstances, teachers can be of great help if they learn about the particular speech and language disorder afflicting the student. In permitting environments the teachers then follow applicable specific teaching strategies, and work cooperatively with the child's speech therapist either within the classroom setting or externally. It has been observed that in many cases, a child with speech problems will achieve normal language development and outgrow their issues by adulthood, especially with the proper support and understanding.

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