



TEACH US THE WAY WE WANT: TEACHING APPROACH FOR SPECIAL NEEDS STUDENTS

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Abstract:

This study was conducted to explore the learning of special needs students in reading and writing; determine their preferred teaching approaches; and obtain their suggestions to improve the teaching of both reading and writing modules. Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was conducted in obtaining pertinent information. Results regarding what the learners learned; and the best approach for teaching English revealed interesting insights which could guide special needs teachers. Suggestions which aimed at improving English teaching were also provided.

Keywords: teaching approach, special needs, deaf and mute

1. Introduction

There is no master key in teaching. Each classroom needs different keys to unlock. In teaching, one approach may not suite the learners no matter how splendid or acceptable it is for many. Thus, a teacher needs to untangle the mystery of knowing what his learners' preferred approach. It is only through this that learning will be meaningful and fruitful for the students.

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It is always the aim of each teacher in every classroom to make their students learned. However, this is not always the case. Sometimes their efforts failed and resulted to frustrations. Hence, as mentioned by San Jose and Galang (2015) teachers are placed into a dungeon of confusion on how they could become effected teachers. Thus, we believed that to become an effective teacher, one needs to determine his learners' preferred approach(es) by inquiry. The teacher's findings may guide him to adopt, to formulate and to act according to the students' needs.

Several literatures have presented that effective teaching involves "*flexibility and creativity, constant monitor and adjustments*" (Mulligan, 2011); depends on the frequency of the approached used (Bay, 2012); applies theory into practice (Loughran, 2012); applies approaches pertinent to students' learning (Knutson, 2014); involves utilization of tools to know how students learn and determines the things which hinder learning (Center to teaching learning, 2014) and puts the students' needs in the cornerstone before doing any instructional decisions (Rasmussen, 2015). These imply that inside the classroom, the learners are to be considered delicately; that they should be involved in the learning process and even in choosing the appropriate approach(es) for them.

But do these literatures can also be considered in a special needs classroom? Are the special needs students' needs different from those who are in the mainstream classroom? It was on these grounds why this study was conducted. In consideration of the special needs' disability, this study determined what they learned from their English classrooms; what were their preferred approach(es) in reading and writing; and what were their suggestions to improve the delivery of English. There were several studies which dealt with approaches in teaching the deaf and mute; however, those researches did not describe and include personal experiences, learning and suggestions rather quantitatively and squarely measured the effectively of the approach.

1.1 Research Questions

The primary goal of this qualitative-exploratory research was to determine which teaching strategies applied by the special needs teacher were considered by the students as relevant in their understanding of the lessons in reading and writing. Specifically, this study sought to answer the following questions:

1. What the special needs participants learned from the reading and writing modules?
2. What strategies which were considered best by the special needs participants used by the teacher in the reading and writing modules?
3. What were the suggestions of the special needs participants to improve the teaching strategies in reading and writing modules?

1.2 Theoretical Lens

This study was anchored on the Normative Theory of Teaching. This theory contends that educational system should be on the concept of what a learner should learn by a certain age. Conversely, comparing with international education norms, problem arises because of the standardization. Understanding norms and creating educational environments that encourage teachers and students to become better and consequently meet or excel norms is critical. Penalizing learners who did meet the norms is inappropriate.

This Normative Theory of Teaching was very appropriate in this study because the participants had hearing and speaking handicapped which hindered them to acquire the expected norms, the learning outcomes. Moreover, it was worthy to note that these special needs students were taught not by a specialized special education teacher but by an English teacher with the aid of sign-language interpreter.

The Normative Theory of Teaching has four sub-theories:

First, *the Cognitive Theory of Teaching*. The sub-theory pre-supposes that a single theory of teaching cannot serve the purpose of education; hence, there should be more than one theory because teaching may be interpreted in various ways. In this research, this contention is very suitable. In teaching students with special needs, innovation and variation of teaching strategies is essential to keep the learners attentive, active and cooperative. Thus, single strategy would make the learners uninterested and bored.

Second, *the Theory of Teacher-behavior*. This sub-theory merely interested to determine the interaction between the teacher and students in the classroom. In a special needs classroom, teacher-students inter-action is very different compared to a normal classroom. Utmost patience and understanding are needed by the teachers so that unfavorable situations may be minimized. For instance, adult deaf and mute students have no sense of time (San Jose and Galal, 2016) making them always late or absent in class. Hence, teachers sort to repeated reminder. Moreover, they asked for one-on-one assistance.

Third, *the Psychological Theory of Teaching*. This sub-theory focuses on the contractual connection between the teacher and learners. Contractual connection means the close encounter of teacher and students. This means how both parties connect with each other. It concerned the relationship of the teacher and students whether, functional or humanitarian, and to what extend some guidance and help are given to students beyond classroom hours.

Fourth, *the General Theory of Teaching* assumes that teaching is a process and performed to make change in the attitudes of the learners. This theory implies the procedures on how the teaching is being conducted. It is assumed that teaching is based

on the curriculum which has learning outcomes to be attained. It explains the transformation of the learners after the entire course was given.

2. Method

Presented in this chapter are the methods and procedures used in this study. The presentation includes the research design, research participants, research instrument used, and procedures in gathering the information.

2.1 Research Design

This research used the qualitative – phenomenological method. Qualitative method is usually used to reveal personal experiences and insights of individuals. As Jackson, Drummond and Camara (2007) mentioned that it is 'primarily concerned in understanding human beings' experiences in a humanistic, interpretive approach. Unlike the quantitative research, this study did not measure the level of satisfaction of the deaf and mute students on the teaching approaches used rather it specifically looked into their individual experiences in the English classroom.

Phenomenological method was appropriate in this study because as Patton (1990) mentioned that it is used to explore 'how it is that individuals' experiences what they experience'. This means that in phenomenology method, the value of the experience of something to be grasped and understood. For Creswell (1998), phenomenology focuses on 'the essence, meaning and consciousness of the experience; for Rossman and Rallies (1998) and Munhall (2007), it is used to inquire about the 'lived experiences' of a person; and Schwandt (2000) phenomenology understands "how the everyday, inter-subjective world is constituted". In this research, the real experiences, reactions, impressions, encounters and insights of the special needs on the teaching experiences was of the utmost concern.

2.2 Research Participants

The research participants of this study were the special needs (deaf and mute) students who were enrolled for two semesters during the school year 2016-2017. The participants were grouped into three Focus Group Discussion (FGDs). Each FGD was composed of 10 members. Considering the students' culture, the girls were grouped into one.

2.3 Research Instruments

We formulated guide questions based on the research questions. The guide questions were composed of three main questions and added with probe questions to exhaust all possible answers. All questions sought to determine the participants' obtained

knowledge from the reading and writing modules; it also focused on their reactions, experiences, impressions, and thoughts on the teaching strategies used by the teachers; it also looked into their views on the best teaching strategies which helped them better understand the lessons and gathered their suggestions which could help improve the teaching strategies.

2.4 Procedures in Gathering Information

The pertinent information for this study was primarily acquired through Focus Group Discussion (FGD) from the three (3) groups of special needs (deaf and mute) students. This study took two semesters (30 weeks). During the first semester, we developed several approaches for reading and writing which we believed could help us deliver the lessons to the learners. Below were the strategies.

Although the researchers were not special education professionals, we applied these strategies based on our observations and experiences. Our efforts were not influenced by the Soviet defectology (the study of children with disabilities) and Soviet traditions of teacher education rather out of the felt need of the learners and ours too.

| | |
|--|--|
| A. <i>Word-picture Vocabulary</i> | Vocabulary words were numbered in the text and students were asked to choose a figure which was referred by the word. |
| B. <i>Video Story</i> | Short stories in English with subtitles were taken from youtube.com. The stories were played in the IPTV and a sign language interpreter would explain the meaning of the words and the message the story convey. |
| C. <i>Re-telling a story</i> | After each story, a student was called to re-tell the video story. |
| D. <i>Writing Vocabularies on the board</i> | All vocabularies were written on the board for the deaf and mute students to see. |
| E. <i>Drawing a vocabulary word</i> | In every story, aside from word-picture vocabulary, students were asked to draw words not only to enhance their spatial abilities but also to help them imagine a word. |
| F. <i>Group work</i> | Groupings for the deaf and mute students were pre-determined by the teacher. The teacher identified a lead – student to have interactions among the members. Moreover, a close and constant monitoring for each group was necessary. |
| G. <i>Sequencing the events of the story</i> | The plot of the story was rumbled and students were tasked to make a proper sequence of the story. Each event had a picture and a caption. |
| H. <i>Drawing the plot of the story</i> | The plot of the story is written in four quadrants. Students are tasked to draw the plot according to the statements. |

These approaches were all utilized in reading and writing. To have a good evidence of these approaches, students were asked to make a portfolio. The portfolio served as a good reference for the students to recall their lessons and the approaches used. After two semesters, the students with their portfolios were grouped into three Focus Group

Discussion (FGD). Using the interview guide questions, they were asked regarding the teaching approaches used in the classroom. No approach was offered to them. They were given the freedom to mention any. By not mentioning or feeding any approach, the learners had the liberty to choose or recall those approaches. Through this, bias was eliminated. During the FGD, we facilitated the procedures of the discussion and took detailed notes and recordings of the proceedings. After the Focus Group Discussion (FGD), the information obtained were transcribed, coded, data analyzed and interpreted based on the research problems.

2.5 Trustworthiness of the Study

In handling the verisimilitude of this research, we observed four pertinent procedures as offered by Shenton (2004) and Creswell (2007) in order that all gathered information from its sources were valid and reliable. These four procedures included credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Lincoln and Guba (1985) mentioned that credibility is obtained when there is a long-term encounter and consistent observation of the participants under investigation. This according to Shenton (2004) allowed the researchers to 'demonstrate the true picture of the phenomenon under scrutiny'. In this study, the issue of credibility was addressed through a two-semester (30 weeks) encounter with the deaf and mute participants. The researchers were able to know each participant personally; hence, teachers and participants had comfortable dealings with each other. It was through this atmosphere and trust the researchers were able to conduct FGD and gather information without the feeling of uneasiness.

According to Elo and Kyngas (2008), the aspect of transferability is obtained with the 'researchers are able to give clear description of the context.' In this study, we presented the purpose of the study, the participants, the methods used, the theory where the study was anchored, the procedures, the results and the analysis. All these, we believed described the entirety of the study. Lincoln and Guba (1985), Cobbo and Forbes (2002) and Creswell (2007) mentioned that transferability is obtained when investigators 'provide sufficient description as to whether the findings may be applicable or transferable to another. This simply means whether the current study could be justifiably applied to other settings. We believed that the results of this study could be applicable and beneficial to other teachers who find difficulty in determining the appropriate learning approaches for the deaf and mute students. As a matter of fact, Power and Leigh (2000) mentioned that the 'varied practices and perspectives in special needs education' continue to have impacts on current educational debate and practice. This means that all actions which may contribute to the improvement and development of the deaf and mute students are accepted and welcomed for scrutiny and inquiry.

Trochim (2006) mentioned that dependability of a study solely depended on replicability or repeatability. This aspect was strictly observed by following the standard in the conduct of research. Hence, we anchored this inquiry with the theories appropriate to teaching approaches. Moreover, research questions were subjected to experts' validation. Further, sufficient number of related literatures were sought to strengthen the results and claims of this study.

Conformability, on the other hand refers to the veracity of results which could be verified by other uninterested persons (Trochim, 2006). This was established in this study through the audit trailing, coding, editing, and revising of the obtained information. Lastly, recordings and transcripts of the gathered information were kept and be available upon the request of the readers.

Dependability is difficult to obtain in a qualitative research. However, this aspect was achieved through series of researches of related topic about the special needs. This means that continues inquiries on a certain topic make this research dependable and credible. Previously, we conducted two researches. The first was a case study which aimed to understand experiences of a lecturer who taught special needs for more than two decades. The second was focused on the cognition of the specials needs learners. Information obtained from these previous researches gave sturdy ground for the current research; hence, making it dependable.

3. Results

Presented in this section were the results of the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) among the special needs students. Moreover, thematic analysis and identification of core ideas from the in-depth interview were conducted.

Further, the information revealed from in-depth interviews was categorized by taking into account the recurrence of reactions from the participants. The responses in the Focus Group Discussion were classified into *General* if similarities in responses were 50 percent or more; *Typical* if similarities in replies were 25-49 percent; and *Variant* if the similarities of the responses were 25 percent or below.

3.1 Presentation of Stories

Generally, all participants found having stories was interesting because they could learn not only how the stories developed but also the values they gained. For them, those values they obtained were beneficial to their day to day interaction with their family members, friends and school mates.

Table 1: Themes and Core Ideas on the Best Strategies for **Reading** Module

| Theme | Frequency of Responses | Core Ideas |
|------------------------------------|------------------------|--|
| Presentation of stories | General | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • learning values from the story • retelling the story in front • arranging the sequence of the events of the story |
| | Typical | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • drawing of events • identifying English vocabulary through picture association |
| Consideration of the best strategy | General | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • using video in telling the story |
| Suggestions | Variant | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • putting word lists • giving small numbers of vocabulary words • providing exercises in small group • continuing video story |

Further, the participants generally found re-telling the story to them was very beneficial in the retention of their understanding of the events. Usually, students were asked to re-tell the story in front after a video clip about the story was presented. Another approach they found interesting was the re-arrangement of the jumbled plot of the story or sketching the events. In the re-arrangement of the plot, students were presented with four jumbled pictures and they needed to put a number to indicate the sequence. Moreover, they found drawing the events funny but challenging. Some students were somehow forced to draw in the best they could. Usually, they were given a piece of paper with the plot and they needed to sketch the events according to what was indicated.

On the other hand, the special needs students typically found picture-to-word association as a good approach in revealing the meaning of a word. They obtained better marks in classroom exercises using this approach compared to word-for-word options. This indicated that special needs were visual learners.

3.2 Consideration of the Best Reading Strategy

Generally, the special needs students enjoyed the use of video in presenting a reading selection. They found it as the best approach because they were able to learn more English vocabularies; understand the meaning of the story through visuals and obtain beneficial values.

Usually, a reading selection had 3-5 minutes video clip. The story was narrated with English sub-titles. During the presentation of the video, an interpreter unveiled the meaning of the English words while the lecturer wrote on the board some unfamiliar

words. The pacing of the presentation was very slow. It was observed that the participants were very attentive during the entire presentation although there were few who confirmed with each other. After the video presentation, volunteer students were asked to re-tell the students in front of the class.

3.3 Suggestions for Reading

The participants offered several suggestions which they believed could improve their reading abilities. Just like any other classrooms, they believed that having sight word lists may improve their familiarity with English words. They also believed that giving enough number of words would help them recall words easily. They also suggested having activities to be done in small group. In this way, they could interact comprehensively with each other. A small group would mean having 3-4 members. Lastly, they suggested continuing with the video-story presentation.

Table 2: Themes and Core Ideas on the Best Strategies for **Writing** Module

| Theme | Frequency of Responses | Core Ideas |
|--|------------------------|--|
| Composition of letter | General Variant | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • composing friendly letter • connecting sentences using transitional words • describing a chart • drawing a word |
| Consideration of the best writing strategies | Variant | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • writing on the board • connecting the words with figures • drawing of events |
| Suggestions | Typical | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • more drawing activities • more board activities • giving more examples • more picture activities |

3.4 Composition of Letter

The participants generally believed that they learned much from writing a friendly letter. In writing letter to a friend from other countries, the participants found it interesting because they were able to express their thoughts and ideas. This indicated that the participants had inner desire to connect with others in writing through writing.

On the other hand, the participants claimed that they also learned in connecting phrases and clauses using conjunctions. Although they found describing a chart, some participants valued their learning. Interestingly, some participants also learned vocabulary by drawing a word. This way, they were able to challenge their spatial skills.

3.5 Consideration of the Best Writing Strategy

Compared with reading, the participants found more writing difficult. Hence, they had no general identified approach. It showed that they had different needs. Few considered writing on the board was the best approach because they could be able to see and copy the lesson. They found it easy because it helped them to recall the sample essays, instructions, quizzes, and answers to the quiz which were written on the board. On the other hand, some of them found connecting a word with the correct figure as the best. For them, they could easily comprehend the meaning of the word through association with figures. Further, others found drawing the plot of the story interesting because it challenged them to imagine the scenario.

3.6 Suggestions for Writing

Although special needs student considered writing as very challenging, they still wanted to learn it. In all writing activities, they need thorough guidance and attention. They suggested having more activities on drawing the sequence of the stories so that they could use their creativity in giving image to a certain situation. They also suggested having more board activities and providing more examples would allow them to grasp thoroughly the concepts. Lastly, they suggested that picture activities may continue to be used because it made them understand the word easily.

4. Discussions

This section further presents the results of the study in connection the theory used and with other pertinent literatures related to the topic.

Considering the theory of teaching, it is unfortunate in this research that the lecturer and shadow-teachers are not special education graduates. The lecturer has background in applied linguistics (PhD) and the two shadow-teachers have English translation backgrounds. Expectedly, their knowledge of teaching approaches or strategies are based on the mainstream students and not on special needs. Gage (1984) suggests that one's knowledge of teaching cannot serve the purpose of education. This implies that no matter how good a teacher teaches but he/she is put out of his/her field of specialization, then, his/her impact on students' learning would be less. Moreover, teachers will find it difficult to adjust in dealing with his/her learners. But despite these teachers' struggle, they take the challenge of teaching the special needs students to the best that they can do. In previous research of Meux and Smith (1964) point out that *"teacher behaviour consists of those acts that the teacher performs typically in the classroom to induce-learning"*. Thus, these non-special education teachers perform inter-act,

participate, get involve, take necessary research, and learn from their special needs learners.

Taking into account the psychological theory, the teachers formulate tasks based on their teaching experiences and insights. In four semesters of teaching the special needs students, they identify not only the learners' aptitudes and attitudes. However, through this research, they find the teaching approach best for the special needs learners. Teachers can now base their teaching approach(es) on their findings. Thus, they can map their learners' cognitive abilities concretely. Moreover, the contractual relationship among the teachers and special needs students is transformed into a meaningful interaction.

Considering the general theory of teaching, the teachers have transformed the teaching process into a mutual field. Teaching does not solely rely on teachers but also with students too. In this research, the students are asked what learning they gained from their English class; what approach they considered best and what suggestions they can offer to improve the teaching of the English class. Through this research, students' thoughts and opinions are considered; thus, change their views and behaviour regarding teaching. Reiser and Dempsey (2012) mention that the central objective of general theory of teaching is to influence the thoughts of the learners. Thus, making them involve in designing the teaching approaches.

4.1 Best Teaching Strategies for Reading

For the deaf and mute students, learning another language is an uphill struggle. Moreover, it is also a battle for an ESL teacher, who has no background on deaf and mute teaching. Thus, it is a challenge to for an ESL teacher to develop strategies on how he could deliver his lessons. San Jose University (2017) for deaf and mute learners educating themselves can be challenging; thus, teachers of these learners should make modifications on their traditional teaching methods and strategies.

It was found out in this research that the video-clip strategies for reading is well-appreciated by the deaf and mute students. San Jose and Galal (2016) mentioned in their earlier research that these type of learners 'found no or little difficulty in picture naming' because they can make associations. This goes true with the video-clip strategy. By watching a short video about a story, deaf and mute learners can imagine the events in the story. In the earlier researches of Shepard and Cooper (1982) and Mayer and Gallini (1990), they were convinced that visual clues had great connection with the person's memory and knowledge. Likewise, Camacho and Legare (2015) believed that the use of video could assist in the mastery of student's comprehension.

Thus, EFL teachers, who are thrown into deaf and mute students, need to realize that these learners are mostly visual. They can easily comprehend a story if presented

visually. They also need to understand that deaf and mute learners are phonologically deficits; hence, they have difficulty in recognizing words. A video-clip may be adopted as an instructional approach.

4.2 Best Teaching Strategies for Writing

In this study, the participants prefer that everything must be written on the board. This means that before a teacher can start his lesson, he needs to write first on the board what he is about to discuss. This way, the deaf and mute students can follow. American Scientific (2017) mentions that deaf and mute learners benefit so much if everything is written because non-hearing persons can remember them more compared with spoken words. Hoferková (2012) on the other hand says that deaf and mute people favor written language because they consider it as the main means of communication between deaf and mute people. Hence, whenever they ask a teacher about something, they can immediately pin point the word that they want to be clarified than making a pantomime or hand gestures. By writing the texts on the board, Power and Leigh (2000) argue that non-hearing can decipher their meanings because these learners rely heavily on graphic clues. Moreover, the participants also find connecting words with pictures and drawing the events of a story are other best approaches. By this, they can interactively show their understanding of the lesson. This scenario can be considered as whole language approach (Heald-Taylor, 1989) were learners can react to the situations relying only on their learned English vocabulary and syntax.

5. Conclusion

Learning another language for the deaf and mute learners is an uphill challenge. Several researchers had already been conducted on the appropriate approach for deaf and mute but success was not lasting. The question now is, should learners be fitted into the teachers' want or should the teacher be fitted to what the learners' want? This question remains debatable. The primary goal of this study is to determine the deaf and mute students' preference of approach in their study of English. Through the results, they have spoken and we have heard them what approach is best for them although we can't generalize the result of this study due to the limited number of students. But one thing is certain; let the special needs students be heard on what approach they prefer, for them to learn English better. Hence, special need teachers need to take advantage of knowing the deaf and mute students and understand their needs for an approach. In other word, the teachers need to suit his/her teaching approach to the learners and not endeavor to adapt the learners to the approach that he wants.

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