Inclusive Classrooms for Children with Different Language Learning Needs

Sonali Nag

Imagine the process of language learning to be like a long sentence with many words. Now imagine a hidden hand that changes or even drops some words in the sentence. Each such intervention would change the sentence in a subtle way, but some changes would cause a bigger shift in meaning than others. Dropping words like and or this may have a somewhat less dramatic effect on the sentence than changing the word need for deed or rhyme for rote. Now imagine each of these changes as the possible ways in which genes and brain mechanisms disrupt the process of language learning. The impact on language development is just as varied: some interruptions are small and easily repaired; others leave a big gap in language learning that stay with the child well beyond the school years. Biological endowments deeply shape the pathways to later skill and talent in using language.

But biology and inherent capacity are not the only hidden hands that shape the process of language learning. Imagine again interferences in the language learning process, but this time by the methods we use to teach our children. There are the little slips in teaching that are remedied by other spontaneous, perhaps even co-incidental, experiences. However, certain programmed language teaching methods have far-reaching effects because of the manner in which they interface with the learning process. As with the fate of the carelessly treated sentence, some lapses in teaching may only slightly alter meaning and purpose, but other interventions may be profoundly destructive. The expression of the child's complete language potential is influenced by the curriculum adopted at each stage of language learning.

This then is the age old tension between nature and nurture: the potential the child brings to the learning situation and the opportunity created for the expression of that potential. What seems almost certain however is that certain approaches to language teaching can move children's language learning to higher levels of sophistication and proficiency. Decades of intervention research show that this is true also for children with special educational needs. At the most basic level, an inclusive language learning environment can be such an environment. I will define what I think is an inclusive learning environment but first, who are the children with special needs?

Shades of Educational Needs

Children with developmental disorders of language, learning and cognition are perhaps the most easily recognised for their special needs in the classroom. Depending on their profile of difficulties, these children could carry a diagnosis of Dyslexia, Specific Language Impairment, Attention Deficit Disorder, Down's Syndrome or one of the Autism Spectrum Disorders. Some of them could struggle with simple reading and spelling, others could remain unable to engage with the written word at any level of complexity or depth. Several medical conditions can also cast a shadow on the language learning process. Epilepsy, neurofibromatosis and meningitis, for example, can make it difficult for children to attend to small language details. The sensory impairments of low vision and conductive hearing loss may also interfere. And finally, children whose social-emotional lives are a struggle may feel unable to engage with the communicative and interactive aspects of language learning. The list given above is not exhaustive but is a fair introduction to the range of special needs that demand classrooms that are inclusive in spirit and practice.

There also are other educational needs that are a legacy of our everyday classroom practices. A class in Jodhpur Park, in the heart of the throbbing metropolis that is Kolkata, reverberates with an everyday routine. A language lesson is in progress and children read out a Bangla essay in unison. However, the rise and fall of the

many voices cannot hide the flatness of engagement in the lesson. The same recitation echoes through city classrooms and becomes even louder in the rural heartlands. What this and other similar routines leave behind is an unimaginably large number of children struggling with reading and writing even though they began well and were ready for learning. These are the children who fail even to read their names in Class 3, who memorise every sentence before a language test in Class 5 and miss the subtleties of reading between the lines in Class 7. These are the children who may have begun their school career with no special needs but with every turn of the pages of their textbook have accumulated disadvantage.

It is against the backdrop of the overwhelming numbers of children with such diminished expression of their language potential that I would like to define the inclusive classroom: a teaching-learning environment that supports all levels of individual differences among children, whether these differences have emerged because of their medical or their educational histories.

Attending to the Variations

Arrays of cognitive processes contribute to a child's performance on language activities. These cognitive processes may be seen as the pathways through which the brain's so- called hard-wiring manifests itself in the classroom. These cognitive processes transform complex brain functions into everyday language expression from poetry recitation and dictation tests to story writing and book reviews. Should we assess a sufficient number of children on tasks that demand one of these cognitive processes, we will find a large group that performs in the average range, with a few who are exceptionally good and a few who are exceptionally poor. Placing the expression of these cognitive processes along a continuum would ensure that the assigning of a diagnosis does not become the starting point for special educational support. Rather, any child slipping down the continuum of skill may be a child to be concerned about.

Children who carry the diagnosis of a clinical condition show deficits in some specific clusters of cognitive processes. Children with dyslexia, for example, have severe difficulties with picking out and playing with the sounds in a language. This leaves them struggling to map sounds to letters and akshara and this, in turn, causes repeated mistakes when reading and spelling. Shaky cognitive processes related to the grammar of the language and difficulties in acquiring the vocabulary to map the world with word-names, are defining features of children with specific language impairment (SLI). The weakness in these broader language skills leave the children poor in comprehension, both when they listen and when they read. In the attention deficit disorders (ADD) yet another cluster of cognitive processes play truant during language learning. A child with ADD, as the name of the disorder suggests, has severe difficulty with managing attention. This would mean not only an inability to focus on a learning task, but also a great reduction in the control needed to manage attention when there are distractors. With such a difficulty, a child with ADD may learn to read and spell better than a child with dyslexia and may comprehend better than a child with SLI, but may still make many more mistakes simply because of fluctuations in monitoring language work.

These thumbnail sketches of clinical conditions are meant to show the collection of cognitive processes that are involved in language learning and how impairments in any one of these areas can slow down learning. These sketches however, are of 'pure' cases, which are quite rare. Many children with difficulties have a profile of weaknesses that straddle diagnostic categories. What this means for an inclusive classroom is that it is best to approach children as learners who require all their skills stimulated and supported.

Some children who carry clinical diagnoses will most certainly need intensive support. Such individualized support is best offered through a pull-out programme in a resource room or assisted learning department. But establishing a pull-out programme in a school does not in any way reduce the need for an inclusive class. This is because it is only within a class full of children

with varied ability that new skills and ways of coping can be practiced. However, the inclusive classroom is not just another place where children have an opportunity to strengthen shaky skills. The inclusive classroom is indeed the only way in which a school can nurture the whole child without reducing the child to a set of learning deficits.

Practice Helps, Variety Helps More

What seems quite clear from decades of neuroscience research is that many of the cognitive pathways to new learning respond to teaching. New learning may be for decoding spellings, making out the rules of new word forms or forming inferences from unexpectedly complex passages. While there are several approaches to how these new situations may be mastered there is some consensus from intervention research that practice works best. The benefits of this simple axiom can, however, be lost when practice is equated with mechanical, repetitive exercises. Asking children to learn spelling by copying a word 25 times is one example of practice gone wrong. These are artificial routines that may begin with some gains in learning but in the long run, break the child's spontaneous wish to explore and play with language. The balance comes when innovative teachers take practice and embed practice within variety.

The inclusive language classroom is thus a teaching environment that is in tune with the strengths and difficulties that children bring to the task of language learning but, equally importantly, is also in tune with the child's emotions and motivations on a task.

Doing Things Inclusively

An inclusive classroom has flexibility built into its structure. These classrooms show openness in action, rather than a demand that all children must fit into a closed, pre-set plan. Openness in the following three areas can tangibly turn a classroom more inclusive.

1. The Right Worksheet for Every Child

When planning your lessons on a particular topic, go that extra mile and develop a variety of worksheets.

Introducing extra questions in a worksheet can challenge students who are faster than the rest of the group. Illustrated worksheets that give information through diagrams, flowcharts and mind-maps are helpful for children who get confused about how points in a passage connect to each other. Worksheets that give information in bulleted points are helpful for children who struggle to read long passages.

2. The Right Homework for Every Child

Children with special needs often end up working many more hours than other children. They tend to need more time to finish class work. They also tend to need more time to complete work sent home. Over time, the child is left with less and less free time. Teachers can help by ensuring that the length of home assignments matches the working speed of the child. When teachers monitor children's work in this manner, some children will have less homework than others.

3. The Right Test for Every Child

When written tests are the only method of assessment all children are not able to showcase their learning. Some children may perform better on an oral test. There are other children who perform poorly under the pressure of speed, but score better marks when the test is not timed. Assessments can be sensitive to the individual child's strengths and weaknesses for different testing situations. Teachers can offer children more chances to show their learning by developing a portfolio of their work. A portfolio collates children's performance in written and spoken tests; research-based work and hands-on experiential work, in self-paced tasks and timed situations.

Sonali Nag is a clinical psychologist with an interest in cognitive neuroscience. She is an Associate Director at The Promise Foundation, Bangalore and a Research Fellow at the Center for Reading and Language, University of York, UK. She can be contacted at sonalinag@t-p-f.org