



# English Language Education and Children with Intellectual Disabilities

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## Abstract

This article seeks to find out how teaching and learning of English Language is done in Yumba Special School for children with intellectual disabilities. Mainly a qualitative study, the data was collected through interviews of teachers, document analysis and observation of teachers and children during English Language instructional hours as well as observation of general discipline in the school. The results indicated that children with intellectual disabilities received instructions the same way as children in mainstream education. Teacher dominated methods of teaching are employed, teachers do not consider children's learning styles and multiple intelligence to enable them differentiate instruction nor individualize their teaching nor do they use adequate Teaching Learning Materials. The study recommends that stakeholders should consider providing TLMS, monitor and supervise their usage and organise in-service training to teachers on new and evolving ways of teaching English Language to children with intellectual disabilities.

**Keywords:** Children with Intellectual Disabilities; Teaching and Learning; English Language

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## **1. Introduction**

The significance of English Language in Ghana cannot be overemphasized. Not only is English Language a lingua franca of Ghana but also a medium of instruction in schools, colleges and universities. Owing to its immeasurable significance, it is studied as a compulsory subject right from kindergarten through to university (Owu-Ewie, 2013). A failure in English Language as a subject in Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE) means the child is not qualified to proceed to senior high school (Owu-Ewie, 2006; Torto, 2017) and a failure in English Language in West African Secondary School Certificate Examination (WASSCE) makes a student's chances of proceeding to tertiary level very slim. This means that success in education at all levels depends largely on the individual's competence in English (MOE, 2012). In this regard, teaching and learning of English language in all aspects of Ghana's education is very crucial.

However, teaching and learning of English in Ghana has been criticized by scholars of linguistics in the sense that children continue to perform poorly in English language in examinations (Owu-Ewie and Eshun, 2015). Many studies conducted in Ghana confirmed that the failure of students in learning the English language could be attributed to the current teaching methods being used in the classrooms today (Kraft, 2003). Bezanson and Hawkes (1972) as cited in Yeboah (2014), described the teaching methods of Ghana as being the traditional, whole-class, teacher-dominated type. The Visual, Aural, Read-Write and Kinesthetic (VARK) learning styles (Flemming, 2006) and Gardner's multiple intelligences (Gardner and Moran, 2006) of children are not taken into consideration in teaching English Language in Ghanaian schools and for that reason compounds the problem of poor performance.

Aside the general challenges faced by children in Ghana as far as learning of English language is concerned, the case of children with special needs, especially those with intellectual disabilities (ID) is worse (Slikker, 2009; Kuyini, 2015). This is because children with intellectual disabilities have serious challenges in language acquisition and development. It is a key symptom of their mental struggle and for that matter teaching them to acquire a second language becomes cumbersome (Klin et al., 2007). These students not only require extra time and patience but also, they demand specified education strategies in a well-structured atmosphere that augments and increases their learning prospective to create changes in the lives of these children. Sometimes the procedure of giving instructions to these children requires more than expected, and teachers feel that teaching children with intellectual disabilities is a boring and unpromising job. However, it is important to remember that students with special needs are not students who are disabled or unable to learn; They rather need differentiated instruction adapted to their distinctive learning skills (Anthony and Kwadade, 2006). The purpose of the study is to establish how teaching and learning is done at Yumba Special School for children with intellectual disabilities, which is a suburb of Tamale in the northern region of Ghana.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1. Intellectual disability and learning**

Intellectual disability is a term used when a person has definite limitations in intellectual function and in skills such as communication, personal care and social skills (Inclusion Ghana, 2011). These setbacks will make a

child to learn and develop slowly than a normal child. Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) defines general intellectual function as a significantly below average condition that exists in a child, making him to be lacking in adaptive behavior and manifestation during development and that adversely affects the child's educational performance (IDEA, 2004, Section 300.8, paragraph C (6)). Children with intellectual disabilities which is sometimes referred to as cognitive impairment or mental retardation can take longer to learn to speak, walk, and take care of their individual needs such as dressing or dining (Ozmen and Atbasi, 2016). They are likely to have problems learning at school. They will learn, but it takes them longer though there may be some things they cannot learn. As a group, students with intellectual disabilities exhibit difficulties in a wide range of academic skills, including acquiring basic academic skills such as literacy (Slikker, 2009).

Like other types of disabilities, intellectual disability has different levels. These levels provide a good indication of the amount of attendance students will need to reach their full potential. An average child of 4, 5 or 6 years old should be able to speak intelligibly, and should also be able to do the basic life activities without the assistance from an adult person (Kuyini, 2015). However, when that is not the case, an adult who has the intellectual abilities and adaptive behaviour skills of a ten (10) year old would be thought and considered to have a mild intellectual disability (ID).

There are two major diagnostic areas to be considered in dealing with ID.

- Intellectual Functioning: -i.e. the ability of a person's brain to learn, think, solve problems and make sense of the world as measured on an Intelligence Quotient (IQ) test with the average score of  $100 = MA/CA \times 100$ . A score of below 70 on the IQ measure implies that the person has limited intellectual functioning.
- ID Deficits in Adaptive Behaviour /Functioning: i.e. A person showing signs of limited capacity to apply the normal skills needed to live an independent life at the level acceptable for the age (e.g. daily living skills, communication skills, wear clothes, use toilet, or the ability to understand what is said, or to be understood by others and also what someone can do and be compared to what the other individual of his/her age can do).

Pupils with learning difficulties are those who demonstrate a significant difficulties, which is not the result of another weakening between academic performance and intellectual abilities in one or more areas of oral expression, listening, written expression, skills in basic reading, understanding, mathematical calculation, mathematical reasoning or spelling (Tahidu, 2014).

## 2.2. Multiple intelligences and learning styles in the classroom

Gardner and Hatch (1989) posits that people have multiple intelligences (MI) that they draw upon to learn. MI theory maintains that people can develop competency in each area. These intelligences include linguistic, logical-mathematical, musical, body kinaesthetic, spatial, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalistic. This theory by Gardner has found great acceptance in educational psychology cycles.

The MI theory suggests that no set of teaching strategies will work best for all students at all times. All children have different slopes in the eight intelligences so any particular strategy is likely to be extremely successful with a group of students and less success with other groups (Armstrong, 2009). For example,

teachers who use the strategy Rhythms, Songs, Raps and Hymns as an educational tool will likely find that students react musically, while non-music students relate passively. Similarly, the use of images is appropriate in teaching students who are more spatially oriented, but may not be appropriate in those who have a physical or verbal intelligence. Due to these individual differences among students, teachers are encouraged to use a wide range of teaching strategies with their students. Armstrong (2009) argues that as instructors change their intelligence focus from presentation to presentation, there will always be a moment during the period or day when a student has his / her developed intelligence (s) actively involved in learning.

Similarly, research tells us that stimulation of different pathways in the brain activates the memory of new material and therefore activates learning (Hiemstra and Sisco, 1990). The brain's ability to function simultaneously at many levels can be capitalized in the classroom by involving different senses in learning experience. Therefore, multiple sensory experiences must be used to encode information with vision, hearing, movement, etc. Hill et al. (2004) mention that we remember best when we are exposed to stimulation with multiple brain functions.

### 2.3. Multiple intelligences and learning styles in the classroom

There is a great necessity for efficient intervention approaches to solve academic difficulties in pupils (Shapiro and Waters, 2005). Teachers resolve on the significance of teaching academic skills through efficient approaches. The problem then is what constitute efficient teaching approaches for teaching students professional skills and knowledge, and more specifically what strategies have confirmed to be efficient when used with pupils with intellectual disabilities, which is the main emphasis of this research.

Teaching approaches or strategies that is efficient with pupils with high IQ will prove efficiency with pupils who have low IQ. The syllabus and methods that are efficient for pupils with superior IQs will also be efficient for pupils like Jacob, Carl and Rachel whose IQs are 44, 55 and 63 respectively (Allor et al., 2009).

However, not all teaching methods or strategies that have proven to work with pupils with no disabilities may have the same efficiency with pupils with intellectual disabilities due to the particular characteristics of intellectually disabled pupils. Generally, children with intellectual disabilities are not effective in learning as compared to other children without disabilities. This kind of limitation on effectiveness in learning corresponds with the general level of IQ for pupils with intellectual disabilities (CEC, 2011). Pupils with intellectual disabilities can learn mathematics, English and science. However, they just need to be taught in a different way.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1. Participants

The participants for the study were teachers and pupils of Yumba Special School for children with intellectual disabilities, established in 2004 as the only school to cater for the intellectual disabled children in Northern region of Ghana. Yumba Special School has currently ten teachers and 166 students with intellectual

disabilities. Using purposive and convenience sampling, four teachers comprising two males and two females (one being the head-teacher) participated in the interview whereas thirty-eight pupils made up of 21 males and 17 females took part in the study.

### 3.2. Data collection

#### 3.2.1. Interviews

An unstructured interview was used to collect data pertinent to the study. Face to face interviews were conducted with all four teachers individually for a period of one hour. The themes of the interview were admission, qualifications and teaching experiences, teaching methods, strategies and dimensions of teaching. Researchers guided interviewees in the process whenever they stray from the main theme and enquiries were made to enrich the data until the data repeat themselves. The researchers conducted the interviews themselves by using tape recorder and then transcribing afterwards. In the case of the head-teacher, the interview was conducted in her office whereas the other three teachers were interviewed in their respective classrooms.

#### 3.2.2. Observation

With an observation checklist, pupils and teachers were observed while teaching and learning of English Language was in progress in the classroom. Teachers were monitored with regard to their introduction, delivery, reinforcement and classroom management. General discipline in the school as well as play in the playground during recess were also observed. Among the items in the checklist were children's attention, participation and understanding.

#### 3.2.3. Document analysis

Available documents like teachers' lesson plans, pupils' report cards and other relevant documents were analysed.

### 3.3. Data analysis

The data was transcribed and themes and categories were created. After reviewing the data, a logical analysis and interpretation was made based on the questions asked and the thematic categorization of the data. Triangulation of data from the observations, interviews and document analysis strengthened the reliability and validity of the data.

## 4. Findings

The following indicators were used to assess how teaching and learning of English language was done in Yumba Special School. Each indicator is treated as a subheading.

#### 4.1. How general discipline affects teaching and learning of English language

On attendance and general discipline, the researcher interviewed the head teacher and the other three teachers. With regard to truancy on the part of pupils, the head teacher noted,

*Some of the parents usually come to take their children for traditional treatment. They still hope that their children can still be cured of their intellectual disability so they often come to ask permission and take their wards to pastors or spiritualists they have been told are powerful and can deliver their children from their mental problem.*

A teacher also said, "Sometimes, some of the children, because of their mental problems, will just wake up and tell their parents they will not go to school and there is nothing a parent can do to convince such a child."

Another teacher disclosed,

*Sometimes, the driver does not reach far places to pick children who are over there. This is because, if the driver uses the bus for an occasion like wedding illegally and does not buy fuel, he wants to manage the fuel in order to last him the week.*

The researcher observed that teachers usually allow the pupils to wash their cars and motorbikes during instructional hours. The researcher also noticed that the school bus sometimes arrived late to school and that disrupted the instructional time. On such days, classes usually began at 9:45am, when it was almost time for first break because first break is 10:20am.

#### 4.2. Methodologies adopted in teaching and learning of English language

It was observed that teachers often introduce English language lessons, write examples on the board and ask pupils to recite after them. The teaching methods adopted were largely teacher centred as they do 70% percent of the talking in class. The teachers only stop at intervals to ask pupils to repeat after them. In most cases, teaching learning materials were not adopted aside chalkboard illustration. Again, teachers sometimes forgot they were teaching children with intellectual disabilities and for that matter they delivered lessons on a faster rate.

#### 4.3. Teaching learning materials in English language education

Responses from the interviews revealed that teachers were not using appropriate and adequate instructional materials because of insufficient funding and blamed Ghana Education Service (GES) for not providing them with adequate resources.

#### 4.4. Pupil's attention and participation during English language lessons

The researchers observed that close to 40% of the pupils do not pay attention in class during English Language teaching. For instance, in a class of 20 students, you will see about eight people not paying attention and either

lying on the floor or fidgeting and putting up impulsive behaviours. Clearly, the teachers usually found it difficult to make pupils pay attention because of these behaviours. The researchers observed that pupils' participation in English language learning was very poor. The learners neither paid attention nor participated actively in the learning of language skills because the teachers hijacked the instructional time by talking throughout the lessons. They used only audio-aural form in teaching and for that matter pupils only looked on because the teachers scarcely involved them.

#### 4.5. Knowledge and application of multiple intelligence in teaching English language

Among the four teachers interviewed, three have knowledge about multiple intelligence theory and learning styles. However, none applied multiple intelligence by way of differentiating instructions to meet learners' individual needs. When the researchers enquired why they do not differentiate their instructions, one of them had this to say,

*"You see, even though I was thought in school about multiple intelligence, lack of teaching resources coupled with time constraints is the reason why I feel reluctant in applying that knowledge".*

Another teacher opined that it was due to insufficient teachers to guide and control the class that necessitated his inability to vary his teaching to cater for all learning styles of pupils. He submits, "You know before you offer individualized teaching, you need some other teachers to be besides children in directing them as to what to do, that is the problem."

#### 4.6. Analysis of teacher's lesson notes and pupil's terminal report cards

The researchers analyzed the lesson note books of the three teachers and observed that all of them were prompt in their lesson notes preparation and were up to date by the time the researchers were there. However, the researchers noticed that in the activity column of the lesson note books, teachers did not give details by enumerating and elaborating the activities that would engage the students. When the researchers examined the pupils' terminal reports, they noticed that pupils' performance was below average.

### 5. Conclusion

The study sought to find out how English Language education is carried out in the Yumba Special School. The findings from how general discipline affects English Language education revealed lapses on the part of parents, teachers and drivers. Parents simply pick their wards from school for treatment believing they are possessed by supernatural forces and therefore seek all possible means to bring them to normalcy. These parents do not seem to be educated to know that the state of their wards are not linked to superstition as confirmed by Kuyini (2015). Teachers are culprits in the sense of being undisciplined since they make children miss classes because



of the chores they assign the pupils during instructional hours. The unlawful use of school resources for personal gains on the part of drivers and lateness also handicap the students since they miss classes because they are unable to make it to school on time. All these forms of indiscipline go a long way to impede effective teaching, not only in English Language but in other subjects as well.

In terms of methodologies adopted for English Language education, the fact that the teachers scarcely used teaching learning materials to teach confirm the findings of Obosu, Adu-Agyem and Opoku Asare (2013) where they observed that teachers in schools for the deaf do not use visual materials to facilitate teaching and learning. Particularly, the findings are in tandem with that of Obosu, Opoku-Asare and Deku (2016) who noted that pupils of school for the deaf write the same English language paper with children in the general population even though their teachers do not use visual learning strategies to teach them effectively to increase their understanding of English language skills.

The effectiveness of teaching-learning materials to promote academic achievement of students in education is undeniable, as it gives sensory experiences that students need to achieve effective and meaningful behavioural change. The use of instructional materials is even more crucial in intellectual disability environment because it aids in arresting and sustaining pupil's attention and facilitate their active participation since they have attention deficits disorder and some are hyperactive in nature. However, the findings which revealed that English language education is sometimes either done in vacuum without instructional materials or the materials being used are inadequate and inappropriate to make pupils grasp the skills being taught corroborate that of Arhin (2012) and Anang (2011), who noted that teachers do not use appropriate instructional materials in teaching in Ghanaian schools. Obosu et al. (2013) also confirm these findings when they indicated that teachers in schools for the deaf do not use visual materials to teach.

The lack of attention that was shown during observation may be attributed to the fact that these children have intellectual disabilities and for that matter they may have a plethora of mental and emotional challenges such as Attention Deficits Hyperactive Disorders (ADHD), mood swings and temper tantrums (DSM-V, 2013). These conditions are reflected in having low attention span, inability to sit still or at one place and sometimes they have unusual outbursts while a teacher is teaching. As a result of these challenges, the researcher observed that as teachers were teaching, some of the pupils were fidgeting, lying on the floor or doing other things they feel like doing. The current trend of educational psychology require pupils to be actively involved in the learning process.

In terms of teaching strategies, instructional approach has moved from being teacher centred to learner centred because learner centred form of teaching and learning facilitates easy understanding of concepts, norms and skills being imparted to pupils, since they construct meaning on their own as they participate. In fact, Duckworth (2009) asserts that *teacher-centered* learning actually prevents students' educational growth. Poor pupils' participation as was observed in the study seemed to make the pupils just passive onlookers. For instance, in a lesson on "Nouns", a teacher only gave the definition of nouns, asked pupils to say after him and then listed examples of nouns on the board. Even though he showed them few examples of noun by pointing to such things, it would make much sense to pupils if they had been allowed to give their own examples and thus participated fully in the lesson.



It may be deduced from the reasons for the lack of the use of Multiple intelligence in English Language education in the said special school that teachers may not really want to put into practice what they know or they may simply not know the theories though they claimed they did since their excuses were lame. According to Allor et al. (2010), a teacher must do his or her best to vary or differentiate or individualize instruction irrespective of the challenges since it encourages participation and absorption of concepts and skills. UNICEF (2000) corroborates Allor et al's arguments by positing that a teacher must be tactful and skilful enough to control any class with varying methods of teaching in order to facilitate quality education of the child.

Findings from analysis of teachers' Lesson notes which mainly pointed out no proscribed activity for the pupils with each topic may have explained why their teaching was mainly teacher centred and they were not engaging the pupils in activities to increase their understanding of the subject matter. The findings confirm similar studies by Arhin (2012) and Obosu et al. (2013) who also noted similar trends.

Our study revealed that English Language education at Yumba Special School for children with intellectual disabilities does not seem to be very effective. Insufficient teaching and learning resources, insufficient knowledge on emerging theories of education for best practices and laxity of teachers with regard to strategizing their teaching to cater for the varied needs, lack of monitoring and supervision, are the key factors militating against effective teaching and learning of English Language. As such, during English lessons, children do not participate in the teaching and learning which probably fuels their not paying attention although those may be some characteristic features of some of the pupils who have varying degrees of mental retardation. The researchers recommend that Ghana Education Service provides the school with appropriate teaching resources and monitor the usage of such resources. Ghana Education Service should also strengthen supervision of teachers to put them on their toes in delivering their lessons effectively. Again, it is key that teachers in Yumba Special School be given in-service training every now and then to keep them abreast with evolving special education instructional strategies and best practices on teaching and learning of English Language, which is the means of global communication and endeavours across the globe (Roffman and Teitelbaum, 1997).

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## Appendix

### Observation Checklist Teaching and Learning of English Language

Teacher: \_\_\_\_\_ Class: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Time \_\_\_\_\_

Teaching and Learning Indicators	Yes	No	Description/Comments
1. <b>TEACHING METHODS</b> Were the choice of teaching methods appropriate for English Language in special school?			
2. <b>TEACHING LEARNING MATERIALS</b> Were adequate and appropriate instructional materials used in teaching and learning of English Language?			
3. <b>ATTENTION</b> Were pupils attention gained during English Language lessons?  Were pupils attention sustained during English Language lessons?			
4. <b>PARTICIPATION</b> Were pupils actively participating in English Language lessons?			
5. <b>DIFFERENTIATION</b> Did teachers differentiate instructions to meet the multiple intelligence and learning styles of pupils?			

**Overall impression of English Language teaching effectiveness:**