

Walking the tight-rope with weak learners

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Teachers working with weak learners often find themselves engaged in a balancing act. Even if their classes are comparatively small, the different needs of the various students ensure that teachers are constantly balancing one thing against another in an attempt to provide solutions for everyone. For these teachers, a general syllabus for the whole class based on a common text book is an unattainable dream. Specific goals or benchmarks based on age or grade level are also out of place. They are expected to take into account the emotional, social, cognitive and academic needs of all their students. However, teachers simply do not have enough time to sit with each student separately and at times students' different needs can even negate each other, which leads to a situation where the teacher is in a constant dilemma regarding which students' needs get priority.

It is important that teachers, management and parents are aware of this dilemma and of the decisions a teacher has to make regarding the delicate situation in a class with weak learners. If teachers spend most of the time rushing from student to student, desperately trying to give each student individual teaching, there is the danger that nobody will get anything worthwhile. This may not be a 'politically correct' statement - teachers are expected to give all students personalized attention according to their needs – but it is the reality we have to deal with in Israeli schools. It is simply impossible to teach reading on five minutes 'stolen' time twice a week, or to provide four years' worth of missed grammar by preparing differentiated worksheets. So, it is necessary to define and articulate the dilemmas in the classroom, accept that it is necessary and legitimate for a teacher to make decisions and prioritize and then teach accordingly. Like a tight-rope walker, progress can only be made if the teacher moves in a clear direction, without continually swaying from side to side.

Teachers' dilemmas are many and varied. Some examples of those particularly concerning weak learners are:

Level of Learning – Do you work on a high level to 'pull up' the students, but take the risk of it being too hard, or do you work on a lower level, which maybe will not push them enough?

Choice of Books – Do you use regular, grade appropriate books to make weak students feel more connected to the rest of the class, but which may be hard for them, or do you use low-level material which caters more to their level but they might find it boring or even insulting?

Teaching Style - Do you 'spoon feed' students to help them pass exams, or do you encourage them to develop work strategies of their own to become independent learners?

Feedback – Do you give clear, objective feedback to students and parents regarding where they stand in comparison with grade level, or give only positive feedback relating to personal progress?

Classroom Atmosphere - Do you insist on a serious, work-oriented atmosphere to ensure optimum learning or do you allow for more relaxed fun and games to reduce pressure?

Regular or Special Treatment – Do you treat weak students as all the others, with the same rules and expectations, or treat them as special cases? Do you insist they complete all tasks or make allowances?

Reading - Do you put all your effort into teaching non-readers to decode, or use the time to develop their English grammar, vocabulary and communication skills?

Participation - Do you try for maximum participation, calling on students at random, despite the threat the weaker, more timid students often feel in this situation, or allow students to choose whether to participate or not by raising their hands?

These are just a few of the dilemmas teachers face, and all can affect students' progress. Even apparently trivial considerations can be decisive in helping or hindering weak students to succeed. There are no right or wrong answers here, only methods more or less suited to different students and classes. Whereas one weak student might desperately strive to keep up with the rest of the class and, with a bit of extra help, manage to do so, another weak student will be totally demoralized if he doesn't understand everything

and simply 'switch off'. Whereas in a special class where most are non-readers a teacher might decide to invest the first few months working intensively on phonic reading skills, in a class where the majority can read already there may be no other choice than to 'sacrifice the few for the many' and concentrate on developing other language skills.

It is not easy to make these decisions, especially since they may not provide the ideal solution for every student in a class, but there are some general steps that can help. These include :

- **Analyze** the class. Try and define the problems and needs to yourself.
- **Decide** on your priorities.
- **Think** of feasible solutions.
- **Reach a consensus** with English coordinator / Class teacher / Head teacher regarding expectations.
- **Don't** be ashamed to admit you CAN'T do something, or need help. (Remember, in a regular 1st Grade class kids learn to read in L1 with a teacher's aide in class to help. Where is yours?)
- **Report** on what you are doing and why.

When carrying out this process it is important to relate to each class separately, taking into account the individual students involved and also the basic situation – is it a regular or a special class? The different needs of weak learners cannot be related to in the same way when they sit in a regular heterogeneous class of 35 or in a special class of 10. Here are some tips for working with weak learners in both frameworks.

10 Tips for working with weak learners in regular classes

1. Make sure each child or group knows what they are expected to be doing.
2. Write the lesson plan on the board every lesson or, if you have several groups, prepare your lesson plans on A3 paper and pin up each group's plan separately, so pupils can refer to these instead of asking the perpetual "What do we need to do now?"
3. If they are sitting in the same classroom, keep weak learners connected with the topic of the main lesson as much as possible.
4. Give proper lessons to the weak group on a regular basis. One whole lesson a week or two 20 minute lessons. The others can read, do project work, workbook activities, etc during this lesson. Don't expect weak students to learn on 'stolen time' .
5. Work with the under-achievers at the BEGINNING of a lesson, not at the end.
6. Teach independent working skills and insist pupils use these when you are working with the weakies: dictionary use, peer help, etc. instead of disturbing your concentration with the special group. Don't break!
7. Have a selection of busywork activities available at all times and ensure pupils know where they are and how to do them:: Books, Newspaper articles, unseens, webquests if there is access to computers, etc. This will allow you more time for teaching and less time wasted on 'directing traffic'.
8. Be aware of the potential of pair-work when strong and weak pupils work together.

9. Plan the work the under-achievers will be doing, including exactly which workbook exercises they need to do before the lesson. Some exercises are more valuable than others and some are more suited to independent work than others.

10. Give different homework to solve some of the problems of heterogeneity.

Homework for weak pupils should consolidate the class work; finishing what they didn't complete in class or giving extra practice on a skill learned in class.

Homework for strong pupils should be challenging, encouraging them to develop and apply their new language skills to more complex tasks.

10 Tips for working with classes of weak learners

1. Define the needs of each student. List their strengths and weaknesses.
2. Help students to develop self-awareness regarding their language learning: 'What am I good at? What do I find difficult? What do I need to work on? What is my next goal? What do I like? How do I learn best?'
3. Try and provide for the needs of all, however if this is clearly impossible, prioritize. Choose a few main skills to work on and concentrate on these.
4. Make it clear to all involved if a particular student is not receiving what he/she needs and why. Think 'out of the box' to provide a solution.
5. Designate certain times - each at least once a month - when you will specifically sit with each pupil and formally mark down where they are and what they have to do next. Prepare and use official feedback forms for this and fill them in together with the pupil. Have the class doing busywork at these times.

6. Photocopy feedback forms and send copies to superiors and parents on the same day or at least the same week you make them.
7. Give several short exercises on the same topic rather than one long one.
8. Vary tasks types. If possible, provide TPR activities for those who need them.
9. Try and get access to the computer room on a regular basis. Encourage all (clean) computer-use in English, even if this is simply looking up football teams or pop stars. Prepare a webquest on a subject of their choice, or a topic that they are learning in their regular classes.
10. Aim for maximum participation. Find out how students prefer to take part in English lessons.

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