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Inclusive Language Learning Project for Primary School Teachers with Highly Able Students

Abstract

This article presents insights that emerged from a research study conducted with primary-school teachers in schools in Malta and Italy on the use of inclusive pedagogies and strategies used in language classrooms to cater for the cognitive needs of students with advanced language skills. The aim of this mixed-method study was to explore teachers' perceptions of high language ability and giftedness, develop and implement training material for primary school teachers, and evaluate the effectiveness of these strategies. Findings indicate that adequate teacher training that happens over time rather than as a one-time training course may be instrumental in developing teacher confidence and effectiveness in creating stimulating learning opportunities for the highly able. This could also lead to the use of language strategies for the gifted in inclusive classrooms rather than pull-out programmes, raising achievement for all, thus creating more socially just practices. Finally, the level of motivation and engagement increases when rich and stimulating didactic activities are used inclusively to address the cognitive and affective needs of highly able learners.

Keywords

Giftedness, language learning, language teaching, highly able students.

1. Gifted students

The notions of high ability and giftedness in primary education have been widely researched, with definitions pointing to the multifaceted and heterogeneous nature of being 'gifted', the asynchronous development experienced by gifted students, the high level of understanding and faster pace of learning when compared to age peers, as well as the need for special provision that addresses the cognitive and socio-emotional needs of gifted individuals (Camilleri 2021, Porter 2005, Silverman 1997, Dai 2020). The literature provides an extensive range of indicators that educators are to look out for when teaching a language to learners who display advanced language abilities (Colangelo & Davis 2003, Eyre 2013). General characteristics include vast general knowledge, inquisitiveness, being highly interested in different areas of learning, a tendency to learn rapidly and in great depth, advanced reasoning skills, exceptional memory, originality of thought and creative thinking. Gifted students can easily grasp concepts and make generalisations, require minimum lev-

els of explanation, prefer novel and challenging tasks, are easily bored by repetitive and closed-ended activities, and are usually highly sensitive and overexcitable, particularly when it comes to aesthetic appreciation and a strong sense of fairness and justice. They may display a keen sense of humour, independence in their learning, good leadership skills, and a unique way of seeing and experiencing the world.

2. Gifted students and language learning

Regarding language acquisition, distinctive features have been observed in highly able students.

It is fundamental for teachers to know how gifted students learn a language as it can lead to creating an inclusive environment in the language classroom where students' abilities are not neglected but stimulated and enhanced.

The following list includes the main features of highly able students in language learning, and it can represent a useful tool for language teachers training project (Lowe 2002, Sousa 2003, Deveau 2006, Duchovicova 2007, Duchovicova, Babulicova 2010, Novello 2022).

Main features in students with advanced language skills

- A keen interest in language in general
- Ability to learn more than one language at a fast pace
- Ability to memorize and use words and phrases in foreign languages
- Use of a vast and rich vocabulary
- Ability to deduce and apply grammatical rules in context
- Ability to analyse models/rules within and across languages
- Curiosity about how a language functions
- Very good pronunciation
- Ability in speaking
- Ability to identify, memorise and reproduce sounds in words
- Creative use of language (spoken and written)
- Ability to make inferences
- Ability to codeswitch effectively between languages
- Use of specialized vocabulary to talk about language features
- Ease of use of both first and second language
- Avid and precocious reader
- Keen sense of humor
- Love of learning literature
- Desire to translate or explain meaning to others
- Openness to and empathy towards other cultures
- Awareness of the intercultural role of the language in a connected world
- A global sense of community and respect for cultural diversity

It is important for teachers to be aware of the features observed during the language acquisition process in order to take them into consideration while designing their lessons. Moreover, teachers need to be competent in the main aspects of teaching a language, like motivation, creativity, the use of authentic materials, the cognitive processes involved in language acquisition, the communicative competence models and language assessment.

To better design language activities Novello (2022) proposes the following list of the most suitable language activities for highly able students.

<i>Key Characteristics of Advanced Language Skills</i>	<i>Language Activities</i>
Easy deduction and application of grammatical rules; curiosity about language functioning	Problem-solving activities Semi-autonomous or independent reflection on language/ grammar rules Classification
Pattern recognition	Comprehension of authentic materials
Easy inferencing; flexible thinking	Explicit inferences (linguistic, pragmatic, cultural) Creative tasks for comprehensions
Unusual association of ideas	Sorting and grouping (lists of words, objects, symbols, etc...)
Vocabulary memorization	Frequent introduction of new vocabulary
Contrastive analysis skills	Comparison between different languages
Excellent pronunciation; ability to recall, reproduce and create sounds in words	Phonics games and activities (online and offline) Exposure to correct use of the language/s
Creative use of language/s	Creative writing/ production (stories, scripts, poems, diaries, jokes, dialogues, comic strips, idioms and proverbs, inventing endings to stories/films/jokes, creating questions to answers and vice versa) Practical labs Creating language games and activities Creative projects
Translation skills	Translation for help purposes
Interest in other cultures	Insights and discussions on different cultures
Speaking ability	Creation of debates, interviews, discussions, descriptions, role plays...
Use of compensatory strategies	Matching words and descriptions

<i>Key Characteristics of Advanced Language Skills</i>	<i>Language Activities</i>
Keen sense of humour	Watching, reading and responding to comedies Inventing and playing jokes and riddles Reading jokes and comics
Ease of use of more than one language; ability to codeswitch effectively	Writing and translation tasks for real-life events or to help others Language games built on codeswitching (eg. inventing own rules for a codeswitching game)
Independent learning, love of learning; multiple interests (subject areas)	Investigations and discovery learning Project-based learning Thinking skills Use of CLIL Giving children choices (eg. Selecting from a number of activities, working independently on a project of own choice)
Advanced problem solving avanzato; leadership; sens of justice; sensitivity; understanding cause and effect relationships; possession of ideals; concern for social and political issues	Problem solving (even in groups) relating to topics of interest related to real life and useful to society
Love of books and literature	Independent selection and reading of texts and books preceded by the formulation of hypothesis/ predictions (based on title, illustrations, author, historical period, genre etc...) and followed by creative activities for comprehension or creative production/ writing
Cognitive processes related to speaking	Brainstorming (generating ideas on different concepts, notions or topics) Organising ideas and building categories Hypothesising or predicting using key words Exercises with chunks Phonetic exercises
Cognitive processes related to listening	Selecting information Creating a hierarchy of information Making inferences (linguistic, pragmatic, cultural)
Cognitive processes related to reading	Making inferences (linguistic, pragmatic, cultural) Discussing topics and themes in the text Making links in terms of language, topics and culture within a text and across other texts

<i>Key Characteristics of Advanced Language Skills</i>	<i>Language Activities</i>
Cognitive processes related to writing	Following/ building written instructions in the given language Selecting and organising ideas Selecting information

3. *The study*

This mixed-method study aimed to explore teachers' perceptions of gifted students in primary classrooms in two countries – Malta and Italy, create and implement a teacher training programme over a period of time on inclusive practices in gifted provision for advanced language learners, and evaluate the effectiveness of inclusive strategies adopted by trained teachers to meet the academic and socio-emotional needs of students with advanced language abilities. Online questionnaires, live and recorded training sessions, and the use of focus groups for teachers constituted the methods of data collection used. The context and background for each country and participants differed. In Malta, two schools took part in the study with three classrooms and three teachers in each school – a total of six teachers teaching children aged 7 to 9 years. The Maltese context is a bilingual one, with Maltese and English being used interchangeably as the languages of instruction for different subject areas and activities. With regards to Italy, three teachers working with children aged between 8 to 10 years participated in the study. In this context, Italian is the first language of instruction in the participating schools. Some brief information about the procedures adopted in the Maltese and Italian context will be provided in the next section. Additionally, teachers' perceptions of high ability and giftedness in language learning classrooms will also be exposed.

The structure of the teacher training programme involved four online and/or face-to-face sessions as follows:

1st session: this initial session was held with the participants to explain the structure of the project and to initiate the discussion by focusing on definitions and models of high ability and giftedness, thus tackling the theoretical part of giftedness to equip teachers with an informed and shared understanding of what constitutes advanced skills and gifted behaviour in the classroom.

2nd session: in this second training session, the key characteristics and indicators of giftedness together with the challenges one faces when dealing with gifted students in primary classrooms were addressed. Teachers were also introduced to the key principles of inclusive gifted provision to create an understanding and knowledge of those elements that are needed to embed novelty and challenge in teachers' pedagogy and practice.

3rd session: this was dedicated to the didactic activities as well as to assessing and evaluating the process of learning. This was also when participating teachers were encouraged to start experimenting with some of the strategies introduced, adapting

their own teaching to incorporate the skills they were acquiring over the course of the training programme.

4th session: this final session focused on sharing some ideas amongst the participating teachers in each school, and co-constructing lessons and strategies to provide challenge in their classrooms, thus seeking to meet the diverse needs of highly able language learners. Teachers also shared experiences in implementing some strategies over the past weeks, evaluated the programme and their participation in the research study.

4. The Maltese context

After gaining consent for conducting the study from our respective universities, the schools, and the teachers themselves, we had a preliminary meeting with the participants to explain further what their participation in the study entailed and we also used an online questionnaire to collect some data from the teachers. This was aimed at understanding where the teachers were positioned in relation to their conception and experiences of gifted students in their classrooms and the kind and extent of inclusive pedagogies they may already have been adopting prior to the training programme. The two participating schools were located in the central part of the main island of Malta. One school was an independent school with a mix of Maltese and non-Maltese students, whereas the other school was a church school with mostly Maltese students attending. None of the schools or teachers had previously implemented strategies specifically targeting gifted students.

Data collected in this preliminary phase indicated a generic and uncertain notion of giftedness using their own experiences with high potential and ability rather than an informed and shared understanding of what it means to be gifted. Participating teachers also expressed a difficulty to identify language strategies that could be suitable for gifted students, and an awareness of the crucial role of teachers in engaging and motivating students. Additionally, they discussed some of the challenges they regularly experienced when faced with advanced skills in language learning classrooms – pointing out issues with motivation, engagement, differentiation, and inclusion. All teachers showed a keen interest to find out more on gifted provision and inclusive practices, and to learn new strategies.

5. The Italian context

As in the Maltese context, a questionnaire has been given to the Italian teachers before starting the training. The participants were three primary school teachers, two of them with an experience in teaching between 6 and 10 years and one with an experience of more than 16 years. The teachers taught in the third year and in the fifth year of three primary schools in the North-East of Italy. Only one out of three schools had adopted an inclusive program for the gifted students.

When asked about their idea and beliefs about gifted students they stated that:

- *Is a student who has a notable range of extra-curricular experiences, who has a fast learning time and “original-personal” methods of acquiring knowledge*
- *He is a student who has predispositions for some subjects*
- *The gifted students is a student with strong interests in specific areas of knowledge, generally uncommon in primary school children. Furthermore, he has high abilities in different subjects or only in some of them. In the case of gifted students who also have other disorders such as autism spectrum, there may be some difficulties in the social and emotional spheres.*

Two of the teachers (the ones who experimented the activity) had in their three classes a highly able student. The three teachers were asked about the traits they considered peculiar in a verbally gifted student and the most chosen option were: possesses a rich vocabulary; has an inquisitive and curious mind; has advanced speaking and listening skills; followed by: advanced thinking/ reasoning skills, can easily deduce and apply grammatical rules in context; is a fluent and avid reader.

When ask if they felt their responsibility to provide adequately for the academic needs of gifted learners, the three teachers answered positively. When asked about their role in the education of gifted learners, the teachers declared:

- To respond to his/her times and curiosities, not make him/her bored at school, keep the motivation high
- Don't get him/her bored by always repeating the same things, support and involve him/her with new content and strategies
- As with the education of all students, the teacher's role is to support the growth and education of the child by offering him/her adequate stimulation for his/her development.

The teachers were unsure about their competences in gifted education, they stated that they didn't think to possess the right competences to answer to the cognitive needs of their highly able students. When asked how they provide for the needs of children with advanced language skills, the most chosen options were:

- Provision of more challenging tasks for gifted learners
- Encouraging them to reflect and think about their language learning processes (metacognition).
- Working collaboratively in small groups according to language competence and ability.

Furthermore, the teachers stated that in their opinion the favourite activities of advanced language students are:

- Doing research and collaborate
- Have the possibility to respond autonomously to their curiosities
- Activities where they can express their potential in a structured way but still respectful of their skills and knowledge.

Just one of the three teachers had attended a two-hour course about giftedness promoted by her school.

The one who had experience teaching to gifted students declared that the major challenge is to keep their attention high and that her wish was to include these students in the class group.

When asked about their expectations of their participation in this research studied the teachers declared:

understand if the student I work with is gifted, learn new strategies, receive information on the characteristics of gifted students (even in the case of comorbidities) for early recognition and know which teaching methodologies and techniques are most inclusive (also in reference to real experiences).

At the end of the training one teacher realized she had a gifted student in her class.

6. The learning units: Maltese classes

The target language for the learning unit constructed and implemented in the two schools in Malta was English as L2 for Maltese students or L1 for non-Maltese students. Following the third and fourth training session (see above), each participating school was encouraged to use the strategies shared to create their own didactic units. It was believed that rather than be prescriptive, teachers would benefit more from having the freedom to select strategies they found most intriguing and adequate for their respective contexts. The teachers in the first school chose to focus on a unit on poetry using English as a first/ second language in bilingual classrooms – the aim was to appreciate and produce poetry. In the second school, the focus was on an integrated approach to explore the notion of light through art and poetry, reflective writing, and researching using Van Gogh's work of art *The Starry Night* as an inspiration. Each teacher identified one or two potentially gifted students with advanced language skills (none of the students had been formally assessed for giftedness since it is not a normal educational practice to do so in Malta).

The didactic units involved the four language skills simultaneously i.e. speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Each unit lasted around five to seven hours of teaching and learning. Several inclusive strategies acquired during the teacher training programme were used – these included the use of Bloom's taxonomy to increase the level of complexity through the use of higher order questioning techniques, the use of mindfulness to facilitate concentration and focus, reflective writing to combine creative thinking skills, problem solving, inventiveness, comprehension and language structure. The activities also involved identification and categorisation of words, guided discussion, interpretation of images and works of art, making connections with other texts, and clarifying anaphoric reference/ meaning. Moreover, the use of different kinds of groupings meant that students were provided with multiple opportunities to work with peers based on various criteria, thus working with one or more students to maximize the notion of learning through social interaction.

Teachers felt more confident in adapting their teaching to meet the needs of potentially gifted students in more inclusive ways. They felt that the training programme together with the possibility to discuss concerns and challenges between one training session and the other were instrumental in helping them to develop more confidence in selecting appropriate strategies to provide novelty and challenge for gifted students.

Students identified as potentially gifted by the participating schools were said to be observed as experiencing higher and more consistent levels of motivation and engagement due to the rich and stimulating didactic activities that succeeded in addressing their cognitive and affective needs. Participation was extremely high with teachers stating that the learning unit/s managed to gain and maintain gifted students' attention and active participation throughout the process of learning. What the teachers found most intriguing was the higher level of participation for the whole class – indicating that having higher expectations and innovative pedagogical practices benefits not only the gifted students but the rest of the class. The elements of novelty, integration of different subject areas and skills, creative thinking, use of unusual resources and learning through social interaction seemed to have been those features that appealed mostly to the gifted students and, ultimately, to the successful implementation of the didactic units.

One interesting point that emerged during the teacher evaluation in the focus group discussion was the idea of teacher training that is delivered over a period of time – this is deemed to be more effective than a one-time training course. Teachers seemed to ascribe this to feeling more supported throughout the programme rather than feeling left to their own devices to address challenges encountered during the construction and implementation of the didactic units. They also felt that working with other teachers meant they could more easily move out of their comfort zone as pedagogues who could take up a challenge and adopt novel pedagogies and strategies.

7. The learning units: Italian classes

The target language for the learning unit created and tested in Italy was Italian as L1 and as L2 of second generation.

The unit was tested in three classes:

- Two third grades in both of which there was one student with very high abilities observed by the teacher
- A fifth grade in which there was a student with an evaluation of giftedness.

The communicative aim of the unit was: to be able to understand written texts and to participate in a discussion. The involved language abilities were: reading, speaking, writing.

The strategies used in the learning unit have been: brainstorming, invention of the end of the story, hypothesis of the title, reorder of the text, global comprehen-

sion questions, explication of anaphoras, inferencing, categorisation, guessing keywords, guided discussion, free discussion, comment of images, linking the text to other texts, problem solving.

The theme of the unit was: to reflect on peace and prepare an artwork with messages of peace, which the students did after reading some texts, listening to music, and watching and reasoning on some artworks. Carrying out the activities took approximately 7 hours in each class. The teachers were given an observation grid to record students' achievements and behaviours.

From the collected data emerged that the interest in the activity obtained the maximum score for all students, with the exception of the highly able girl in the third-class who had a score of 3 out of 4.

The interest in the activity compared to other reading and comprehension activities was greater for all students and the same for the above third-grade girl.

Participation in the activities was very high (4 out of 4) and greater than other similar activities for all students and the same for the two potentially gifted children in third grade.

The level of reading comprehension was high for all students (4 out of 4) and higher compared to other reading activities, it remained the same for the potentially gifted students in the third classes.

The qualitative level of participation in the discussion was very high for everyone (4 out of 4) and greater than in other similar activities, highlighting an improvement for the entire class group and a maintenance of quality in the gifted and potentially gifted students.

The teachers also reported that the students were very emotionally involved in the topic and that the high-ability students wrote the most profound thoughts in the final writing activity.

Teachers were also interviewed immediately after the testing of the activities. During the interview the teachers repeatedly underlined the total involvement of the classes in the activity.

The third-grade teacher reported how the highly able student was very involved in all phases of the activity that required a verbal exchange.

The fifth-grade teacher stated the importance of the initial brainstorming which stimulated a discussion characterized by involvement, sharing of knowledge and curiosity. She also said that her gifted student worked with a high level of creativity and of lexical choice, both in oral and written production.

As it can be seen from the above-mentioned data, the whole classes benefited of the activity, improving the level of comprehension and discussion.

At the end, students were so proud of their artworks that they wanted to show them to other students in the school and to their parents.

8. *Conclusions*

The project had positive feedback regarding both teacher knowledge of giftedness or students' results.

From the collected data from the teachers at the conclusion of the project emerged that the initial challenges have been satisfied as students can be engaged in language lessons and in the meantime, highly able students can avoid boredom. Teachers also stated that brainstorming and problem solving should be part of everyday learning as they motivate, engage, and develop students' abilities and also, they make teachers' aware of the capabilities of the students.

One of the most important results was teachers' awareness on the importance to propose a variety of activities that can satisfy different levels in the classroom and give the chance to gifted students to express their abilities.

As for the students, they all showed a deep interest in the activities along with a high level of engagement and motivation. They had excellent results in written comprehension and showed a high level of participation in speaking activities. Students also expressed great appreciation for creative activities.

Several implications for schools, for policy makers and for inclusive education in general were identified following the implementation of the ILLP project.

Adequate teacher training for gifted provision can lead to the use of language strategies for the gifted in inclusive classrooms rather than pull-out programmes as well as to the idea of possibilities to raise achievement not only for the highly able but for the whole classroom that benefits from such innovative practices. Furthermore, the level of motivation and engagement increases when rich and stimulating didactic activities are used that include specific strategies aimed to address the cognitive and affective needs of highly able learners.

As it was observed by the researchers and declared by the teachers, teacher training that is delivered over a period of time is deemed more effective than a one-time training course – teachers feel more supported throughout the programme rather than feel left alone. This helps them get out of the comfort zone.

The project showed that language strategies for gifted can be used in an inclusive way, paying attention to give the students the possibility to work according to their cognitive and language levels. The strategies and activities explained during the training allow students to work at their own pace and according to their own capabilities. Also, after the training teachers could use these types of tasks in a conscious and effective way.

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