Teaching a University Student with Learning Disabilities who Qualifies for Regular English as a Foreign Language Course Placement: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the effects of applying multiple intelligence theory in the tutelage of students with learning disabilities in the field of English as a foreign language (EFL). EFL teachers are urged to incorporate topics that would be of interest to students with learning disabilities, thus encouraging these students to think more deeply and participate more actively in their EFL learning. In this study, the instructor used drawing as a medium to teach English and achieved favorable outcomes. An interview revealed that the participant developed new EFL learning strategies, a stronger EFL learning motivation, improved English-language ability, and even planned to attend future EFL courses. Classroom observation indicated that the participant exhibited greater learning autonomy, enhanced English and drawing ability, decreased anxiety, and an improved student–teacher relationship. Despite its limitations, this study presented a new approach along with the results of that approach to help enhance the EFL learning outcomes of university students with learning disabilities. This novel approach is thus highly recommended for EFL educators of students with learning disabilities to incorporate into their teaching practices.

Keywords: Students with Educational Disabilities, English as a Foreign Language (EFL), Multiple Intelligence Theory

1 Introduction

A learning disability can be defined as a neurological condition that interferes with a person's ability to store, process, or produce information and can affect a learner's ability to read, write, speak, spell, as well as their attention, memory, coordination, social skills, and emotional maturity (Burr et al., 2015). People with learning disabilities are not less intelligent (Root, 2004) or specially gifted (possessing some additional abilities) (Pirie, 2001). They view things differently, which sometimes obscures their intelligence because of a neurological short circuit or processing glitch; such students can be taught using compensatory strategies (Vail, 1987; Root, 2004). According to Schwarz (1997), English as a foreign language (EFL) learning can be an exceptionally stressful experience and challenge for students with learning disabilities. In fact, all activities involving students with learning disabilities are complicated, but such students being fairly and reasonably accommodated is most crucial (Schwarz, 1997).

Although the education literature on students with learning disabilities and their EFL acquisition is extensive, little is known regarding the strategies for teaching adult EFL students with learning disabilities,

especially those from a Taiwanese cultural background and studying in the Taiwanese school system. Considering cultural and contextual factors is essential (McCardle et al., 2005). Factors such as the quality of care provided to students with learning disabilities, placement standards, and cultural characteristics vary among countries. According to Root (2004), learning disabilities are not recognized or are recognized but not addressed in many countries. In Taiwan, learning disabilities are recognized and dealt with, but substantial scope for improvement remains.

EFL students with learning disabilities may fail to receive effective support if the educators do not pay adequate attention to their needs. The educators should ensure the students receive instruction of a sufficient quality to enable them to achieve the anticipated level of academic progress. The final goal is to direct the EFL students (who may have learning disabilities) to the instruction and assistance they require for scholastic success. Students with learning disabilities who receive instruction that is mismatched with their needs can be hampered in their academic performance (Burr et al., 2015). This study aimed to promote fresh educational ideas and thinking among EFL teachers, enriching their teaching practice and prompting a rethink of the current problems with students who have special needs.

2   Research Background

In Taiwan, university counseling centers are responsible for helping maintain the mental well-being of university staff and students. One of their duties is to provide services for the students with learning disabilities. Resource rooms are units managed by counseling centers, and they are directly responsible for supporting students with learning disabilities. When students are diagnosed as having a disability by a doctor and obtain written proof, they can apply for individualized support plans (ISPs) from the school they are enrolled in. After being approved, students become ISP members of a resource room. Resource rooms then initiate several procedures to help ISP students. The procedures may slightly vary among schools or at different times. The present study introduced a procedure that was applied by the participant's school. First, the resource room scheduled a meeting at the beginning of each semester, with the meeting attendees comprising the counseling center director, resource room staff, and the instructors and homeroom teacher of the ISP student (the participant). The purpose of the meeting was to promote awareness of the student's condition among the relevant instructors and homeroom teacher. The student was invited to attend the final part of the meeting to voice any concern about the upcoming courses or request for other assistance. Second, the resource room staff arranged counseling activities for the ISP student and maintained contact with the instructors and homeroom teacher throughout the semester. Third, the instructors and homeroom teacher were required to complete forms to evaluate the learning condition and life adaptation of the ISP student at the end of each semester.

The resource room provided some special classes for ISP students on certain subjects, such as physical education, employment education, and customer service. However, the school could not provide extensive courses exclusively for the ISP students. Therefore, for most subjects, the ISP students qualified for regular class placements. The word "qualify" does not imply that their performance was equivalent to that of other students in the class but that the ISP students were required to learn the content alongside other students and with the assistance of instructors.

3   The Framework

Conventional instruction methods may not be effective for students with learning disabilities because they fails to accommodate diverse learning needs and styles. The current study was based on the theoretical framework of multiple intelligence theory. Multiple intelligence theory was introduced by Gardner (1993) and emphasizes students' varied abilities and combined intelligences to improve learning outcomes.

Moreover, as Schwarz and Terrill (2000) reported, instructors must recognize and expand the strengths of learners with disabilities. Quillin and Thomas (2015) noted that a learner's affect is pivotal to academic success because the emotional state influences the student's motivation. Therefore, English teachers are urged to incorporate topics of interest to students with learning disabilities into their EFL learning. Notably, the participant in this study was passionate about drawing. Gardner (1993) presented eight types of intelligences, namely linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalist. Drawing ability is subsumed within spatial intelligence. Multiple intelligence theory provided a framework for integrating drawing and language skills to provide a rich and stimulating EFL learning environment for the participant. The theory also provided a basis for the professional development of EFL educators through its unique interpretation of the intelligences and their proper integration, particularly in the case of students with learning disabilities.

According to Quillin and Thomas (2015), drawing-to-learn assignments exhibit many potential advantages compared with traditional course materials, and can be used to help students better engage (motivation), see (observation skills), understand (lower-order cognitive skills), memorize content, problem solve (higher-order cognitive skills), and learn (student-centered goals) as well as helping instructors to harness students' personal interests in their learning (instructor-centered goal). Drawings are visual products that display visual meanings, and the drawer simultaneously constructs knowledge about a piece through the process of producing it (Guillemin, 2004). Guillemin (2004) asserted that drawing is a process of knowledge production and an insightful and valid research method. Shahnaei (2021) contended that drawing encourages a profound involvement in the task of learning among language students, and the information pertaining to individual words is processed at deeper mental levels (such that more information on a word is retained). Thus, to summarize, drawing is a useful learning tool and research method.

Further studies on adult EFL learners with learning disabilities in the Taiwanese setting are required to address the knowledge gap in relation to the harnessing the interests of such students to develop classroom educational activities that enhance their experience of EFL learning. Therefore, the current study incorporated drawing activities into the broader educational context and the EFL lesson, assessing whether this approach benefitted the participant's EFL learning.

4   Methods

The current study applied a qualitative approach because of its appropriateness in integrating drawing into EFL learning. A qualitative approach is based on the perspectives of participants; researchers interview the participants by using broad and general questions, collect data consisting largely of participant interview responses, analyze these responses to determine common themes, and conduct inquiry in a subjective manner (Creswell, 1998). According to Thomas (2021), a qualitative inquiry in the form of a case study can provide the clearest and most inspirational results. In the current case study, in-depth information regarding the integration of drawing in EFL learning was obtained. According to Yin (2009), a case study is an intensive report on a specific case that elucidates a noteworthy phenomenon, and using multiple evidence gathering strategies is crucial to understanding that phenomenon in a real-life context. The present study employed several sources for data collection, including information obtained from the school, classroom observation, and an interview (with notes and voice recording).

Data collected from these three key sources served distinct purposes. The data obtained from the school were used to obtain an initial understanding of the participant's general conditions. Classroom observation data provided detail of the teaching and learning situations, student–teacher interactions, and the student's behaviors in the EFL course. An interview was conducted after the course's completion. The student reaffirmed voluntary participation and consented to voice recording during the interview. The

purpose of the interview was to obtain details of the participant's experiences and thoughts regarding the individually tailored EFL course. These three data sources provided an overview of the participant's situation and the evidence underlying the current study's recommendations. Hence, the evidence presented in this study offers suggestions as to how EFL educators can employ multiple intelligence theory in teaching students with special needs and the benefits that such approach has on these students' EFL learning outcomes.

The participant was a female ISP student. Details of the participant's learning difficulties were obtained from the resource room records and classroom observations by the instructor. The author was the instructor in the case described in this manuscript. The instructor taught the participant the discussed EFL course for two semesters. The participant had a mild learning disability and an introverted personality; she was a fluent native language speaker. The learning disability affected the participant's ability to communicate and comprehend. She demonstrated proficiency with hands-on activities but lower initial levels of English proficiency compared with the level expected of similarly aged students. The participant required support to understand the course instructions. School staff requested the instructor to be especially patient and evaluate the participant's score based on multiple assessment measures. Despite qualifying for regular EFL course placement, the participant's performance standards and assessment criteria ultimately differed from those of other students in the same course.

During the first class, the instructor observed and interacted with the participant to fully understand the participant's learning conditions before developing an individually tailored teaching plan based on multiple intelligence theory. The participant had difficulty understanding instructions as well as the content of the EFL course. The instructor conversed with the participant after class and discovered the student's passion for drawing. According to Quillin and Thomas (2015), drawing is a process skill that aids in the visualization and interpretation of data. Therefore, for the participant drawing represented a potentially effective means of learning English through visualization and interpretation of vocabulary and English sentences. The aforementioned learning plan for the participant involved using drawing as a tool for her to learn English. This was to ensure that the she acquired the fundamental knowledge in an integrated manner and could absorb the key EFL course information and skills in an engaging and useful manner. The integration of drawing activities enhanced the participant's learning by providing a pressure-free environment, stimulating exploration and enjoyable learning that encouraged her active engagement in EFL course work.

The procedures were as follows. The participant was required to approach the lectern before each class, textbook in hand. The instructor then informed the participant of the highlights of that day's course content. The course content was the same as that of other students, but the participant could select a part to draw within the scope defined by the instructor and learned the content at a self-defined pace. Hence, the participant focused on a certain element of the daily course content without insistence from the instructor to learn every element. The participant's drawings were merely required to reflect key points outlined by the instructor. In each drawing session, the participant was also obliged to provide a relevant annotation. The drawing was to be submitted immediately after the lesson was dismissed. The style of the drawing had to meet the instructor's specifications, drawn in the style of realism so that the instructor could assess the participant's learning. The use of color was not the focus of the method—hence, the participant could use a pen or pencil to draw without coloring the drawing. The instructor gradually increased the task difficulty each time through the use of appropriate scaffolding and feedback. According to Ashraf et al. (2014), vocabulary is the core and the basis of learning any language. Shahnaei (2021) also stated that internalizing vocabulary is the most pivotal step in language learning. Therefore, at the beginning, the instructor taught the participant some vocabulary from the course content as the lesson highlights. Later, the instructor provided the student with some sentences from the course content as key lesson points. The

core concepts of the course content were presented first in concrete terms, then in the abstract. The purpose was to gradually increase the lesson difficulty and encourage the participant to learn something new and be challenged but not overwhelmed. Thus, she would develop a sense of accomplishment. The participant was required to listen to the lecture carefully to understand the content's meaning, especially that of the highlights provided by the instructor each lesson. She was permitted to use a dictionary whenever necessary. With the exception of the first day of the course, holidays, midterm and final exam days, sick leave on the part of the participant, and special events, a total of 22 lessons (2 hours per lesson) were offered to the participant to learn the course content through drawing pictures.

At the end of the second semester, an interview was conducted. Before the interview, the participant signed and dated an informed consent document, which summarized the key elements of the research study and what participation would involve including a brief introduction to the study procedures, risks, benefits, rights, and the contact information of the study author. The informed consent document as well as all the related data, materials, and forms are confidential and securely stored. A semistructured interview lasting approximately 30 minutes was conducted by the instructor to collect data. The participant was provided with a list of the themes that were to be explored in advance. The instructor recorded the interview and made shorthand notes as it was being conducted.

5   Findings and Discussion

The present study investigated the effects of applying multiple intelligence theory in the tutelage of students with learning disabilities in the field of EFL. The main focus of this case study was address two research agendas: (1) the perspectives of the participant on integrating a personal interest (i.e., drawing) into EFL course activities and the benefits involved and (2) the observations of the instructor about the participant who undertook this individually tailored course.

The interview-derived perspectives of the participant informed the following five findings. The first finding relates to the learning strategies developed by the participant. After the instructor indicated the scope of learning content before each class, the participant initially attempted to translate all the materials into her native language, Mandarin. The participant listened to aural instructions and course material to determine the Mandarin translation, occasionally using a dictionary to simplify this process. Subsequently, she considered which vocabulary or sentences could be drawn and organized the drawing's composition. Some abstract concepts would require a longer time to comprehend. Finally, the participant completed the drawing with an explanation in English (an annotation alongside each picture). These four steps (translating, selecting, organizing, and integrating) suggested that the participant formed a personal learning strategy for the EFL course content. The second finding relates to the participant's improved learning motivation for EFL course work. She spoke of looking forward to each EFL class because it was the only course that allowed her to pursue her personal interest in drawing. Thus, the level of the participant's learning motivation for EFL course work increased. Moreover, the participant hoped to continue this learning method in the context of other EFL courses in the future.

The third finding concerns the participant's increased motivation for learning English. Because of the drawing activities, she reported an indifference to learning English (previously, the participant tended to slightly dislike learning English). Although this aspect of the participant's motivation only marginally increased, it represented a suitable starting point. The fourth finding relates to an improvement in the participant's English proficiency. She confirmed that the drawing aided her English learning. Although memorizing all the vocabulary and sentences was not possible, her knowledge expanded over the study period. In the process of drawing, the participant recited the vocabulary or sentences. After the completion of each drawing activity, the participant had a deeper understanding of the relevant course content. The

fifth finding concerns the future plans of the participant. She spoke of hoping for opportunities to draw in other EFL courses in the future. The initial plan was to experiment with myriad drawing styles. Thereafter, she hopes to illustrate a serial comic book. In the end, instead of finishing the drawing in class, the participant preferred to do the assignments as homework, which offered more time for contemplation.

The observations of the instructor led to the following three findings. The first finding is that the participant developed learning autonomy, perhaps because engaging in activities that interested her created a positive environment conducive to self-control. The participant regularly greeted the instructor with a smiling face and asked excitedly about the forthcoming lesson plan. The instructor could sense the happiness and expectation of the participant. The instructor was not required to remind or issue instructions to the participant regarding the need to submit each drawing, which suggests that the participant gradually became a more autonomous learner with personal responsibility for learning. The second finding relates to the improvement of the participant's English-language and drawing abilities. The integration of drawing into EFL learning enabled her to achieve learning objectives in English as well as arts and creativity. The in-class performance and test scores of the participant improved over the course of the EFL lessons. In the beginning, she drew simple pictures with an explanatory note on vocabulary. By the end of the EFL course, she could draw a series of pictures to convey abstract concepts or complex sentences. The third finding relates to the harmonious class atmosphere and improved student–teacher relationship. Through drawing, the anxiety of the participant about learning English was alleviated. At the time of first meeting the instructor, the participant could not understand instructions as intuitively as other similarly aged students and found class involvement difficult. After the drawing activities were introduced, the participant appeared more relaxed. With the negative feelings toward the class or the subject removed, learning proceeded appropriately. By listening and understanding the participant's needs and then adjusting lesson plans accordingly, the instructor developed a trustful relationship with the student.

The findings of this study present EFL educators with an overview and reference for harnessing the personal interests of students with learning disabilities in the English classroom. In this study, integrating drawing into EFL learning activities evidently enhanced learning in several respects such as drawing the participant's attention to the course content and encouraging a stress-free environment conducive to EFL learning. The current findings clearly demonstrate the potential of drawing activities for enhancing a student's EFL learning by inviting active student participation and engagement. From this case study, the need for EFL instructors to shift from conventional teaching styles (that are likely to result in passive participation and focus on one domain) to active, integrated teaching that engages students with learning disabilities by harnessing their interests to encourage them to internalize EFL knowledge.

6   Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations

Each student with learning disabilities has unique needs, and the educators who teach these students should identify those needs, especially when the students are placed in regular classes. Educators should develop individually tailored teaching plans based on the interests of individual students with special needs to encourage those students to engage in higher levels of thinking and participate more actively in class. In this study, the instructor used drawing activities as a medium for teaching English and achieved favorable outcomes. Although drawing was a useful tool for the student that was the focus of this case study, it may be unsuitable for others. As Schwarz (1997) noted, no single solution fits every student with learning disabilities. Thus, the educators are advised to engage in a sincere discussion with each student with special needs to develop a course plan that encourages those students' engagement with the course content and even strengthens their learning motivations.

This study presented a case involving a single course and may represent only a small step forward, but

its influence can potentially be far greater. When learning habits are formed, students can use the same previously successful learning approach in other courses, EFL or otherwise. Furthermore, success in EFL learning may promote self-confidence and self-efficacy in the student. However, further research is warranted to observe students in similar learning environments and over a longer period of time to assess changes in self-confidence or self-efficacy.

This study has several limitations. First, the previous education experience of the participant was unknown and may have influenced the participant's academic progress. Second, although identified as having learning disabilities before taking the EFL course, the participant may also have been a student with specific EFL learning disabilities, a concept distinct from that of mere students with learning disabilities who are attending an EFL course. An individual can belong to just one or, alternatively, both of these categories. Determining whether an English learner's academic difficulties are caused by a general learning disability, specific struggles with second-language acquisition, a combination of these two factors, or some other problem would have been ideal, but such a determination was difficult to achieve in the present case. Third, various standardized tests might have been employed to identify the learning disabilities of the participant in the past, but the current study had no access to such information and could only use the information provided by the resource room of the school and classroom observations as references. Despite these limitations, this study presents a new approach along with its results to help improve the EFL learning outcomes of university students with learning disabilities. Incorporation of this approach is highly recommended for EFL educators seeking to effectively teach students with learning disabilities.

7   Declarations

7.1   Conflict of Interest

The author declared that no conflict of interest exists in this publication.

7.2   Publisher's Note

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