9 Teaching English to gifted children

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Objectives

This chapter provides a brief description of characteristics and peculiarities of gifted children and gifted education. There are two forms of educating gifted children: integrated in regular classes and segregated in special classes. There are certain tips concerning working with gifted children, what to do and what to avoid. Teaching English as a foreign language to gifted children also has its specifics and these are discussed, together with general tips, in this chapter.

Defining giftedness and identification characteristics

Silverman (2012) views giftedness as a psychological reality, which can be observed in young children and documented on measures of general intelligence.

Characteristics such as abstract thought, insightfulness, compassion, sensitivity, perfectionism, intensity, creative imagination, sophisticated sense of humour accompany gifted individuals throughout their lives. Giftedness needs early identification, intervention and accommodation to assure healthy development.

There is a common belief that gifted children make it on their own, that they do well by themselves without any special intervention. However, it is a myth, which should be avoided, as Silverman (ibid.) pointed out that most gifted children hide or underachieve. Jurašková (2003) added that gifted children do not develop their talents without the support of schools, families and society, because they stand out from average population in cognitive and emotional areas. According to Dočkal (1995, 2005) development of talent depends on the environment. The more stimulating the environment is, the higher is the chance of development of a talent. Renzulli (2011), one of the greatest scholars on gifted education, emphasised the necessity of special education for gifted children, as they exhibit specific needs. This idea is also supported by Milgram (1991) who claimed that gifted children cannot maximize their abilities in regular school programmes unless teaching is adjusted to their specific needs. According NAGC (2014), separate studies done in the last decades prove the need for gifted education and more importantly the benefits of special education of the gifted children. Very eloquent is an analogy is with developing sports talents. Even the greatest sportsmen would not have been so great if their specific talents had not been developed by specially trained coaches. In comparison, how do we expect gifted children to train themselves to be outstanding in science, languages, etc. if we do not develop their talents? As a result, we need special education for gifted children with special approach in order to develop their abilities to maximum.

Many gifted education programs around the world set as a minimum criterion an IQ score of 130 for admitting children to their special programs. Gifted individuals are further divided based on the IQ scored they achieve (Wasserman, 2003). Laznibatova (2007, 2012) adds that every gifted individual is unique and the population of the gifted does not form a homogenous group. Gifted individuals are a diverse group with various foundations and conditions for development. This diversity influences the process of development, which emerges in various levels and areas of giftedness. Even though the gifted children are a heterogeneous group, there are certain identification characteristics, which can apply to diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. It is not a simple task to identify gifted children, as many are hidden, or do not exhibit their talents. These are some of the common identification characteristics of gifted children (Laznibatová, 1996, 1998, 2001, 2008; Dočkal, 2005; Silverman, 2012):

- excellent memory,
- good reasoning,

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- extensive vocabulary,
- early reader,
- fast learning,
- long attention span (when interested),
- facility with numbers,
- mature judgement for the age,
- prefers older companions,
- compassion, concerned with justice,
- sensitivity (feels hurt easily),
- perfectionism, intensity,
- creative imagination,
- strongly curious,
- skilled with jigsaw puzzles,
- questions authorities
- humour, etc.

Silverman (2012) emphasised that although these characteristics can be helpful in showing the possibility of giftedness, that each gifted child is an individual with unique set of traits that might not confirm any suggested attributes. Therefore gifted children should be identified and assessed by professionally qualified people.

**Gifted education in Slovakia and a place of English language teaching in gifted education**

Slovakia has quite a unique system of educating children with general intellectual giftedness. There are two ways of educating gifted children:

- segregated education in special classes
- integrated education in regular classes.

Segregated education has been in existence for more than 20 years. These days, there are 28 schools in Slovakia that offer segregated education for gifted children (Laznibatová, 1996, 1998, 2001, 2008; Dočkal, 2005). The School Act 245/2008 § 2 letter j) and q) specifies gifted children (pupils) as children with specific educational needs. Children with special educational needs have to be identified by centres of pedagogical-psychological advisory services. The national curriculum § 103 (1) letter a) number 1 specifies the key stages, core subjects, expected standards of pupils’ performance for pupils with general intellectual giftedness. The key competences, which pupils have to acquire, are the same as for the regular pupils. The reason is the compatibility of all schools, which is necessary in the case when pupils change schools (VÚDPaP, 2009). Apart from the minimum requirements set in the national curriculum, there are certain modifications concerning the contents (enriching, additional and widening contents, additional books, elaboration of projects, etc.).

Concerning foreign language teaching in gifted education in Slovakia, there are two foreign languages recommended with English being the first foreign language which is taught from the first grade of primary school. English language is recommended as the first foreign language because it is a global language and a language of science and ICT (VÚDPaP, 2009). In the curriculum there are not any specific recommendations on how to teach foreign languages to gifted children. It is all left to the schools and individual teachers on how to deal with peculiarities of gifted pupils. Even though there are additional books for gifted pupils for some subjects, there is none for foreign languages. Therefore it appears that foreign language education for gifted pupils is not given sufficient attention. In order to make teaching English to gifted pupils more efficient, there should be a manual or English language learning books created specifically for gifted pupils (Reid, 2014).
Principles for nurturing gifted pupils

Certain principles should be always kept in mind in dealing with, nurturing and educating gifted children. Nurturing environment and positive attitude towards giftedness should be present as gifted children’s behaviour can be demanding, wearing and even disruptive. Gifted children require time, attention and patience and therefore careful time management and priority setting is a need for successful education (Bevan-Brown & Taylor, 2008). The following tips can be applied to teaching gifted children in general, including English language education.

Developing creativity, divergent thinking and high level thinking skills

Already Renzulli (2011) emphasised the importance of creativity in giftedness. Skills like fluency, flexibility, originality, elaboration, curiosity, complexity, risk taking and imagination are needed for development of creativity. Creative skills can be developed by asking open-ended questions, challenging questions, various games, activities and everyday events that children go through.

In English classes creativity is mainly manifested through productive skills: speaking and writing. Gifted children should be encouraged to talk freely about various topics, such as their experiences, troubles, ideas, dreams, etc. Pair work, group work, role plays, simulations, finishing unfinished stories, etc. would be suitable techniques for practicing speaking activities. For practicing writing, children could write self-invented stories, poems, plans, inventions, etc. Elaboration of projects is an excellent technique for developing creativity and high level thinking. Certainly age and level of proficiency must be considered.

Facilitating learning study skills

Study skills such as taking notes, knowing how to use library efficiently, listening carefully, organizing time efficiently, constructing effective questions, debating well, observing carefully, evaluating own and others’ work critically, etc. are often assumed to be natural to gifted children. This is not necessarily true. Gifted children need to be taught the missing skills in order to develop their talents by establishing regular homework routine, encouraging them to make a working plan for various activities, encouraging them to suggest solutions for problems, discussing, praising and giving feedback to children’s work, etc. (Dalton & Smith, 1986).

In English classes, it is recommended to have extra activities prepared as gifted pupils are often very fast and manage more than regular pupils in the same time. Teachers should always be prepared for such cases, so games, quizzes or role plays should fill the spare time. Gifted children require rather challenging activities than a great number of easy exercises. Teachers can push the boundaries with challenging exercises using more difficult grammar, vocabulary or topics and let gifted pupils to work them out.

Attending personal qualities, attitudes, values and feelings

Many gifted children are more sensitive than their peers, having interest in social, moral, and philosophical topics. Emotional giftedness can be developed by discussing controversial news items, resolving peer conflicts, examining moral issues on TV programmes, expressing opinions on games, books and movies, etc. In ordinary classes where gifted children are integrated, they can be “leaders/organizers” of a group work in making projects, etc. Also activities dealing with moral dilemmas can be practiced in role plays, socio-dramas, mock trials, simulations, etc. with the aim to develop decision-making skills, spiritual sensitivity, ability to manage own thoughts, feelings and behaviour (Bevan-Brown & Taylor, 2008).

The mentioned issues on moral dilemmas, controversial issues, etc. can be addressed in English classes with more mature students having good command of English. Gifted children enjoy discussing controversial news and sensitive topics such as homelessness, immigration, etc. For discussing such issues, pupils need to have good command of English (at least B1).
Forms of educating gifted children

The most common forms for educating gifted pupils are:
- acceleration,
- enrichment,
- early entrance to primary school,
- skipping classes,
- absolving chosen subjects with higher grades,
- choice of more difficult optional subjects,
- creation of individual plans for subjects where the child is exceptional (Hribkova, 2009).

Among these, acceleration and enrichment are the most frequent. Acceleration is more spread in gifted education in many countries around the world. Enrichment is the preferred approach in Slovakia (Reid & Boettger, 2015). However, both varieties are often combined, as acceleration can be enriching and enrichment can lead to acceleration.

The problem with acceleration is that even though the gifted children can cope cognitively with older children, but they are at different levels of emotional maturity. Enrichment aims to deepen the contents of existing subjects. Enrichment can be carried out in both regular and segregated classes. In regular classes, gifted children can manage in the same time greater amount of work (deepening the topic) than other children. The key competences specified in the national curriculum are the same for regular and gifted pupils. The same standards should guarantee the compatibility of all schools (VÚDPaP, 2009). That is why enrichment is the more common and preferred way of educating gifted children in Slovakia.

Teaching techniques in gifted education

Teaching techniques for gifted children should lead to discovering, active searching, active acquiring and active formation of information, knowledge and skills. All techniques should connect learning to real life situations, experiences and humour should not be missing. Teaching gifted children should integrate multi disciplines into the area of study with the aim to get complex information, connect ideas, historical background, etc. CLIL (Content language integrated learning) would be a very suitable method for teaching gifted pupils as it promotes mixing mother language and foreign language in a lesson instead of teaching subjects’ contents only in one language (Pokrivčáková, 2013). Techniques such as drilling, application of many simple tasks, memorizing, application of rules and knowledge without knowing the background, application of non-creative and non-problematic tasks should be minimized or avoided (Jurašková, 2003; Lazenibatová, 2012; Bevan-Brown, Taylor, 2008). Here are some suggestions for working with gifted pupils:

1. Discovery techniques – teachers do not explain to pupils everything, but allow pupils to work out by themselves rules and solutions to the problem. Pupils are encouraged to create their own constructs and answers. For solving the problematic tasks, pupils need to apply previous knowledge, predict and elicit new rules, apply intuition and risk taking. Teachers should create such situation that would lead pupils to work out and acquire new rules, knowledge and skills.

   In English lessons, the discovery techniques could be used for example for teaching grammar (e.g. comparatives and superlatives “tall/taller/tallest”. Fourth graders know the word “tall”, but do not know the comparative and superlative forms. A teacher picks three pupils of a different height and asks the rest of pupils “Who is the tallest?” (A pupil is the tallest.) Even though the pupils do not know the form “tallest”, they can work out the meaning. The comparative form “taller” is also applied in comparison with the other two pupils (Is A pupil taller than B pupil? Is C pupil taller than B pupil? Are A and B pupils taller than C pupil?). With this technique pupils discover the grammatical rule and figure out the pattern for themselves. The teacher’s role is to guide pupils to their own discovery, not to give them information on the grammatical rule. Such
tasks satisfy the pupils' needs to discover and work out rules by themselves. With regular pupils, teacher arranges the pupils according to their height and explains “tall/taller/tallest” showing the differences in their height.

2. **Multi-stimulation techniques** – mechanical drilling is reduced to minimum. These techniques integrate cognitive, affective, intuitive and physical components. Tasks for pupils are prepared by teachers with the aim to stimulate their intellectual potential and satisfy their needs for variety. This can be done by giving pupils ambiguous assignments, exceptions, assignments which require more rules or steps, puzzles, riddles, tongue twisters and brainteasers.

   In English lessons, for example, teaching grammar – comparatives and superlatives. Pupils apply the rule they worked out themselves on any adjectives they know (short, big, small, pretty, happy, sad, etc.) and show it on examples of items or mime the feelings. Irregular words “good/better/best” should be given as examples for pupils to work out the meaning and applications. TPR, group work, observing, touching/handling objects, elaboration of projects are suitable techniques requiring multi-stimulation and multi sensors. The aim is to stimulate gifted pupils to search, discover, acquire and apply. The regular pupils apply the learnt rules to given examples and forms.

3. **Self-learning techniques** – are convenient and effective ways of learning and they should maximize the pupils’ potential. Work sheets (including problem solving tasks, creative tasks) can be suitable for self-learning as pupils work their own speed and apply their own processes and solutions. Projects encourage pupils to work by themselves from start to the end. They search, analyse, evaluate, synthesize information and then present the outcome of their work in the class. Self-learning is very well supported by multimedia, as there are many internet activities, quizzes, tests, games, etc. (English grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, reading, listening comprehension activities for different age groups and proficiency levels) where pupils can learn and practice new knowledge and skills. These self-learning techniques are especially suitable in mixed classes with pupils of different abilities.

4. **Dialogue, discussion and argumentation techniques** – allow pupils to express their opinions, accept opinions of others, solve problems, practice functions as agreeing, disagreeing, negotiating, summarizing, putting forward and argument, etc. Such techniques are especially suitable for mature students.

   For example, a topic of housing can be discussed in an English class. The teacher creates an atmosphere by asking questions about living in the UK and Slovakia, types and standard of houses, furnishing, etc. Practicing is carried out by giving arguments, predicting or acting out the task – pupils discuss the known facts about housing in the UK. New information is given to pupils - pictures of differences: bathroom taps, carpets everywhere, thick curtains, small parts of windows that open, gardens, hedges, etc. Pupils are divided in groups and discuss advantages and disadvantages of British houses in comparison with Slovak houses (one group is the supporter of English houses and the other group is the supporter of Slovak houses). The groups should give arguments for and against and come to the solution which types of housing they prefer. The use of internet for more information is allowed. This kind of activity encourages pupils to discover, learn in greater depth about the topic, develops intercultural competences, but it also develops affective components such as accepting different opinions, self-reflection, tolerance and virtue.

**Twice exceptional children**

There are certain myths and beliefs about gifted children, which are not necessarily true, such as that gifted children should manage twice or three times as much as regular children, that they are gifted in every area of learning, that they are ambitious, self-confident, socially and emotionally stable, that they do not have learning difficulties and disorders, etc. (Laznibatová,
2012). However, it is not rare for gifted children to have learning difficulties, social, emotional and behavioural disturbance, or disorders such as Asperger syndrome or ADHD. These children are called twice exceptional and they are gifted and have disabilities at the same time (Silverman, 2012; Trail, 2010). Gifted children with learning difficulties may be often viewed as underachievers, or in a better case as average, because they use compensating strategies to hide their difficulties. In such cases, their abilities nor disabilities are recognized. Strategies for teaching children with learning difficulties, gifted children and gifted children with learning difficulties need challenges that can be built on the children’s interests and strengths and they require more support to overcome difficulties. The following strategies should be used (Bevan-Brown & Taylor, 2008):

- explicit teaching - thinking aloud, visualising, self-questioning,
- compensatory strategies – computer spellchecks, dictation recorders, reader/writer assistance, other aids,
- encouraging to develop coping strategies – working with a mentor, using relaxation techniques, finding out how others cope, developing escapes such as music, painting
- teaching multisensory approaches - looking for patterns in reading and spelling, making pictures of words and phrases, working with CDs, visualising, tracing, etc.
- encouraging reasonable expectations – doing less, giving more time, doing only what is important, prioritising things, etc.

Model activities

Two tips for an English class lesson developing fluency, creativity, originality and flexibility are given. Both activities are recommended for pupils to work in small groups. When taught in a regular class, there should be similar representation of pupils in each group with a gifted child in each group. In segregated classes, gifted children could work both, individually or in a group. Both activities are taken from online magazines for children (authentic print materials), which can bring reality and real language to the classroom.

Finishing a story

The first example is a fiction story from a Creative Kids magazine. The activity is suitable for a lower secondary grade gifted pupils (age 13-15), whose English is on A2 level. The title and a beginning of a story is given. Pupils work in groups and create a story based on given starting sentences. Pupils should be given sufficient time to write the story. The next lesson they should read their stories in front of the class. At the end the teacher presents them the full story that was written in the magazine. They discuss all the stories and vote for the best one. Further suggestions can be dramatizing and performing the best story.

The Monster in the Closet

Meet Jimmy. Jimmy just turned off his lights and tried to go to sleep. He fell asleep after about 20 minutes. When he woke up, it was about 1:30 in the morning. Something happened that night. Something Jimmy would never forget. Something . . . well, you’ll see what I mean . . .

(Source: http://www.ckmagazine.org/prose/2015/2/19/the-monster-in-the-closet.html)
Predicting a story

The second example is a factual article from the Time for Kids magazine. This magazine is children’s version of the Time magazine and it is full of serious and factual articles. The activity is suitable for secondary grade gifted pupils, whose English is on B1-B2 level. The title, starting sentence of the article and points for reference are given. Pupils work in groups and predict what could refer to the given points. Pupils should be given sufficient time to discuss and write their predictions. Groups present their predictions in front of the class and discuss them. The teacher presents pupils the full article from the magazine. They discuss the real information and their predictions.

The article is about children and technologies. Information in the article is based on research done on tweens (8-12 years old children) and teens (13-18 year old teenagers).

The Truth About Kids and Tech
A new study reveals some surprises about kids and technology...

The points of reference are: 1. How many hours a day children spend looking at screens. 2. Is reading affected by computers? 3. Connection between boys/girls and playing video games/social media. 4. Is watching TV and listening to music affected by technology? 5. Playing PC games and going out?
Mock Trial

The activity *Mock Trial* addresses pupils personal qualities, attitudes, values and feelings. The activity is suitable for secondary school students, whose command of English is B1-B2. Gifted students are sensitive and enjoy expressing opinions on moral and controversial issues. Mock trials give a chance for the whole class to get involved.

This activity takes more than one class. Students are taught needed vocabulary: court, judge, jury, trial, attorney, prosecution, defense, evidence, argument, cross examination, verdict, sentence, etc. They are divided into three groups (numbers in each group can vary depending on number of students): jury, prosecution group A defense group B and the judge. The groups are given information with their roles beforehand with the aim to prepare arguments for the court. The Mock trial lesson should be arranged as a court room - judge being in the middle, next to him a witness box, A and B groups being on opposing sides of a room facing the judge and the jury should be on the side. Both groups give their arguments defending their cases. Judge controls the discussions. Discussions should not take more than 30 minutes. After all the evidence is presented, the judge and jury leave the room (10 minutes before the end of the class) to decide on the verdict. Once the jury has decided which attorney group is innocent, the judge reads the verdict.

The best topics for Mock trials are known and contemporary criminal cases, which students are aware of from news, blogs, newspapers or magazines. The disadvantage of this activity is difficult preparation, which cannot be reused much, as the topics should always be contemporary. However, students always enjoy Mock trials especially if they are given props to help them to get into characters. Concerning English language learning, students develop fluency and public speaking skills in a foreign language.

![Figure 3: Courtroom (S.J. Quinney College of Law, n.d)](image)

To conclude, the above were mentioned principles, strategies, techniques and teaching tips can be followed and applied to teaching gifted children. However, gifted children are individuals who require individual approach and it is more the matter of approach rather than methods, techniques and activities when it comes to working with gifted pupils. Activities should arouse interest and challenge intellectual abilities of gifted children. Working with gifted children requires proficient teachers in language pedagogy with a high degree of tolerance, patience, flexibility to adjust to the fast and demanding pupils.
References


