

## Gifted Education in Algeria: Challenges and Reforms

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### ABSTRACT

One of the most powerful aspects EFL teachers need to take into consideration is to meet the learning needs of all learners without exception. In Algeria, EFL teachers face the challenge of identifying, understanding, and coping with the exceptional needs of gifted learners (GLs) at middle schools. This genre of learners who demonstrate high abilities and special cognitive and intellectual qualifications need particular care and guidance from their teachers at school. Hence, the aim of this work is to see how the general education English teacher identifies, understands and deals with GLs in the Algerian EFL classroom. The purpose is to shed light on the qualities of GLs, the challenges they encounter inside the English session in addition to the mistakes committed by teachers when treating this kind of learners. The sample of this work is composed of 20 Algerian middle school teachers who had the experience of teaching GLs in their classes. Data were collected by means of a questionnaire and participant observation. The findings of the study show to what extent grade skipping, outdoor education and personalized learning (among other suggestions) can serve as effective methods to cope with the unique capabilities of GLs as well as to help them achieve their full potential and improve their academic performance more and more.

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### 1. Introduction

*The more we look, the more we find and the more we realize how complex the teacher's job is {...} Being a good classroom teacher means being alive to what goes on in the classroom, alive to the problems of sorting out what matters, moment by moment, from what does not. And that is what classroom research is all about: gaining a better understanding of what good researchers (and learners) do instinctively as a matter of course, so that ultimately all can benefit.*

Allwright and Bailey (1991) in Nunan (1994, 2-3)

Successful teaching requires teachers to be continually reflective in order to attain growth and gain professionalism in their own practice. In fact, teachers are considered to be the most active agents capable of creating fundamental change in language classrooms and promoting the success of the educational journey for their learners (Cooper, 2011). One of the most powerful aspects EFL teachers need to take into consideration is to meet the learning needs of *all* learners without exception. In Algeria, EFL teachers face the challenge of identifying, understanding, and coping with the exceptional needs of GLs at middle schools. This genre of learners who demonstrate high abilities and special cognitive and intellectual qualifications need particular care and guidance from their teachers at school.

Hence, the present paper pays special attention to the issue of gifted education with reference to the Algerian EFL classroom, and seeks to find ways on how to provide quality education for high-ability learners at middle schools, by figuring out the defining features of GLs, helping teachers be aware of the challenges these learners face and providing some key suggestions for better treatment and correct diagnosis. The paper goes on to pinpoint the significant value of grade-skipping, outdoor

learning approaches in addition to personalized learning programs on GLs' academic proficiency and skillfulness. Keeping these points in mind, this work attempts to address the following three research questions:

- a. Does the Algerian school play its required role to meet the demands of GLs?
- b. Are EFL teachers well-equipped with the necessary skills and competences to be successful gifted education practitioners? Or more precisely, what are the characteristics of a successful gifted education teacher?
- c. What kind of reforms and resolutions should be implemented inside the Algerian EFL classroom in order to ameliorate the condition of GLs?

Consequently, the findings have provided some practical recommendations and suggestions regarding the challenges faced by both teachers and learners as a result of the unsuitability of educational curricula with the GLs' high demands and aspirations, and the poor training of EFL teachers to communicate with them.

## **2. Literature Review: Some Thoughts on Giftedness**

Research has paid considerable attention to the issue of gifted education and the identification of gifted children. In this respect, several reasons make it imperative for both parents and teachers to be cognizant of the identification features and strategies that distinguish gifted children from normal ones. In a recent study, Eren et al. (2017) have tried to provide an account of what emotional and behavioral features gifted children are characterized with. Hence, the findings reported that for the sake of meeting the academic demands of GLs, there must be a need for an early identification and good, yet appropriate education according to their outstanding capabilities .

Empirical investigations about giftedness date back to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Debates on defining giftedness are problematic, since many different definitions and diverse conceptualizations exist. One central definition states that giftedness is no more than a well-scored IQ test. Yet, as Al-Hroub & El-Khoury (2018:32) points out, such a definition excludes fundamental factors such as motivation, self-esteem, and enthusiasm in addition to the social and communication skills.

In this study, what is really important is the identification mechanisms that allow teachers be aware of the defining features of GLs to diagnose their capabilities appropriately. Valdés (2003), for instance, states that giftedness implies a high performance at the intellectual and academic level, leadership, creative thinking and well-developed communicative skills.

## **3. Methodology**

### **3.1 Aim of the Study**

This paper attempts to sort out the distinctive features of Algerian EFL teachers that best cope with their GLs in the classroom. It also aims to discover the various educational tools and strategies used by teachers to improve the quality of GLs academic journey, and focuses intensely on the weaknesses of teachers and their mistakes with this category of learners. Finally, it sought to provide some practical suggestions and resolutions to better the condition of GLs.

### **3.2 Data Collection Tools**

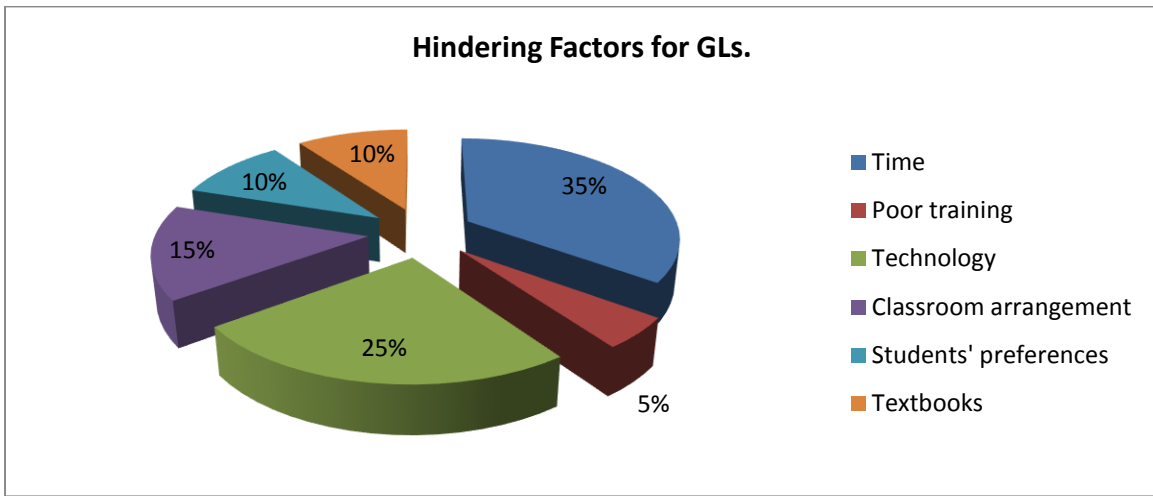
In the light of the aforementioned aims, the current study built on a questionnaire and classroom observation. As for the questionnaire, the whole sample involved consisted of 20 middle school teachers, 13 of whom were females and 7 males. They were teaching in different middle schools. As far as classroom observation was concerned, the aim was to identify the main traits of GLs teachers and their interactions throughout the EFL session. A considerable attention was paid to the teacher's verbal interaction, teaching actions and strategies implemented to support and encourage GLs. Therefore, four classes of 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grade learners have been subject to observation in a middle school for about one year and a half, along with some spontaneous interactions and discussions with some highly motivated and talented groups of learners after the English session.

## **4. Results and Discussion**

As mentioned earlier, the participants are 20 EFL teachers who have prior experience with 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grade learners. Teachers asserted that they had the chance to have gifted learners within their classroom members. Hence, the participants' results are summarized as follows:

### **4.1 Factors that hinder the success and growth of GLs**

When given the opportunity to appoint the most hindering factors, teachers reported that time is the most impeding factor that actually prevents them from paying more attention to their GLs and embracing their diversity. The following pie chart summarizes the teachers' choices:



The classroom physical environment plays a vital role in the learning process. Teachers reported that well-organized, decorated and attractive classrooms impact GLs’ attitudes towards the learning journey in a positive manner. This implies that this category of learners prefers special settings and get impressed easily if the classroom setup is distinctive and exceptional. Furthermore, learners’ lack of interest in the English language is regarded as a hindering factor where the teacher is required to do his best to engage the students and keep them on track. Several other reasons, such as the misuse or the absence of technology in the classroom, time insufficiency and the quality of activities proposed by the textbook which do not meet GLs goals and aspirations are all key-factors that challenge their success journey.

As for the observation process, both teachers’ and students’ behavior and interactions were under notice. However, the focus was more on the key features of a gifted education teacher. Two teachers were watched for about 25 hours. As mentioned above, the goal was to depict what features the EFL gifted education teacher is characterized with.

Furthermore, some discussions with talented students have revealed some complaints. Some students see that their teachers don’t design and present activities which fit their intellectual desires and academic expectations. They are either too easy or hard but boring which leads them to disengagement and boredom. The following table summarizes the findings by mentioning a list of gifted teachers’ traits in addition to some mistakes committed by these teachers when treating GLs.

| Positive Traits   | Common Mistakes   |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Respect toward students</li> <li>• Novelty and creativity</li> <li>• Credibility</li> <li>• Leadership</li> <li>• Encouragement and constant motivation</li> <li>• Patience and sympathy</li> <li>• Good classroom management strategies.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unconscious ignorance of GLs.</li> <li>• Mistreatment and discrimination.</li> <li>• Restricting GLs activity.</li> <li>• Lack of praise.</li> </ul> |

The abovementioned qualities and mistakes made by teachers when dealing with GLs are only a brief overview for what teachers should do and avoid in the classroom. The following section attempts to answer the third research question as it provides a set of suggestions and recommendations for EFL teachers.

## 5. Save Gifted Learners: Seven Practical Recommendations for EFL Teachers

In this section, and based on the questionnaire last section's finding, we provide seven actionable and practical suggestions and recommendations for Algerian EFL teachers to guide them on how to better the situation of GLs and foster their critical and creative thinking skills:

- **'Each child is Super Different'**

Teachers need to blindly take this assumption for granted and should act as if their effort really creates a difference in their students' lives. Teachers have the power to uncover their students' endowment and discover their super talents and amazing capabilities by simply believing in them. In this vein, Shrum and Glisan (2009: 350) affirm this reality by saying that "teachers should understand that *all* learners are unique in the ways in which they approach language learning". They must keep in mind that every child is to be treated differently to help them accept their uniqueness and appreciate diversity.

- **'Adopt the Engineering of Learning Philosophy'**

Along with the deep changes EFL classrooms have witnessed due to the influence of technology, Tchoshanov (2013) has called for a switch from traditional learning and teaching methods and strategies to a totally new paradigm called **'the engineering of learning'**. Following this, gifted education teachers are strongly recommended to make profit of all information communication technology aids and resources to support learners with high-abilities be more engaged in the classroom and maximize their efforts and performance.

- **Grade Skipping: your Fastest Way to Excellence**

For teachers, grade skipping is considered as an effective method to enable gifted learners meet their cognitive and academic needs. Within the same line of thought, Kuo and Lohman (2011) state that "when implemented successfully, acceleration helps match the level, complexity, and pace of the curriculum with the readiness and motivation of the student". 85% of teachers advocate the system of academic acceleration for exceptionally gifted learners to keep their passion and interest for learning high.

- **Individualized Learning**

'Watering down' the curriculum content might be the ideal solution EFL teachers resort to as an attempt to cope with the knowledge demands of some high-ability learners to encourage their varying goals, preferences and interests. In this sense, individualized learning doesn't require teachers to necessarily prepare different lesson plans for each classroom member (Grant & Basye, 2014), however, it would be functional if they link between their learners' own interests and the overall learning objectives of the curriculum. As a result, teachers should be as much reflective and adaptive as they could be. A fundamental feature of personalized learning has been stated by Gómez (2018) in which she reports that personalization involves students as 'content-creators' rather than merely 'passive-receptors' of knowledge, which means that the changing role of teachers and learners' in the EFL learning process is a key factor that determines the success and efficiency of their academic learning journey.

- **Academic Contests**

In an attempt to investigate the phenomenon of boredom and its negative influence on language learners, Pawlak and his colleagues (2020:10) stated that creating special opportunities to eliminate language learners' boredom can be considered as "a formidable challenge for teachers to encourage student engagement".

Teachers also, when asked about their proposals on how to help GLs become more active and motivated, couldn't deny the role of competitions, academic contests and intellectual workshops to elevate their learners' self-confidence, build their personalities and enrich their school experiences.

- **Have a Fair Image toward your Learners**

Teachers' attitudes towards GLs might either enhance or impede their learners' growth journey. Demanding too much from our learners can impact them negatively. Students need support, encouragement, motivation and challenge. However, we should remember that gifted children are no different than other learners who are certainly weak and untalented in so many subjects. Therefore, it is a duty not to assume unrealistic expectations and demands from our learners.

- **The Unhidden Secret: Get Learners Outdoor**

Research has proved the benefits of outdoor learning on children's intellectual, cognitive and social growth (Harris, 2017; Joyce, 2012; Hills & Thomas, 2019; Humberstone & Stan, 2012). It goes without saying that the perfect solution to aid gifted

learners become more engaged, enthusiastic and keen on learning is to offer them opportunities to learn outdoor. Teachers are highly encouraged to take such a step if they want to satisfy their high-ability learners and meet their aspirations. Well-structured outdoor activities do not only impact learners' academic and intellectual achievement. Rather, it goes beyond to develop their communication skills, sense of collaboration, enrich their vocabulary and expand their world.

## 6. Conclusion

Gifted education appears to be among the fundamental issues worth emphasizing. Gifted learners represent a considerable proportion that needs special care and attention. The present article addresses this issue with reference to the Algerian EFL classroom. It briefly describes the overall characteristics of GLs, and then sheds light on the special traits of their teachers. Research has proved that this category of learners confronts some serious challenges especially at the level of curriculum design which results in the lack of their motivation and engagement. To solve this problem, a set of sound resolutions and recommendations were proposed in order to enhance quality education for these learners. Results of this work show to what extent grade skipping, outdoor education and personalized learning can serve as effective methods to cope with the unique capabilities of GLs as well as to help them achieve their full potential and improve their academic performance. However, the door is still open for EFL teachers to conduct future action researches so as to provide new insights into this field of interest.

## About the author

**Ms. Fatima Zohra HEBBALI** is an Algerian doctoral researcher, option sociolinguistics and language variation. She has a modest experience of teaching English to young learners. She enjoys teamwork and seeks to know more about the challenges faced by both EFL teachers and their gifted learners in the Algerian classroom.

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