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Intervention Strategies for EFL Underachievers in Secondary Schools: A Mechanism-Oriented Synthesis

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Abstract. EFL underachievement in secondary schools has been a recurrent problem, especially when students do not have access to additional tutorial support or personal tutoring. This systematic review combines research on intervention strategies for low-achieving or struggling EFL learners in secondary schools. The search for articles was performed using PRISMA and searching with keywords related to academic underachievement, secondary school level, English as a foreign or second language learning, and teaching practice. The paper also extracts important information about the participants, intervention components, duration, implementation conditions, and outcomes. To make it easier to understand, the paper organizes the interventions using a framework based on capability, opportunity, and motivation. This allows the study to compare different designs. There are three categories, including capability-building instructional support (for example, scaffolding, differentiated instruction, strategy training), opportunity-enhancing learning environments (such as peer tutoring, structured interaction, family support), and motivation-focused socio-affective approaches (like goal setting, self-efficacy enhancement, anxiety reduction). In short, evidence shows that multi-component interventions which combine explicit instruction with timely feedback and supportive classroom routines are more often linked to improved achievement and engagement than single-component approaches. Implications for secondary EFL teaching and future research directions are further discussed.

Keywords: EFL underachievers, secondary schooling, intervention strategies, COM-B.

1. Introduction

Many students in the secondary education level experience problems learning English, which is considered their second or foreign language, due to limited vocabulary size and a lack of grammar comprehension. Furthermore, many show poor motivation toward the learning process and have negative feelings, such as foreign language anxiety. Moreover, they often do not have good self-learning methods. With continuous failure in academic performance, such students will progressively avoid studying English and invest less effort in it. This makes the gap between high-achieving and low-achieving students even bigger.

Using PISA 2018 data from 12,058 students in B-S-J-Z, China, Li and Ho show that high academic competence does not straightforwardly translate into higher well-being. This interpretation

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is consistent with the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) statistics from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), showing that only 59% of these students reported life satisfaction. Meanwhile, 78% worried about what others would think if they failed, compared with the OECD averages of 67% and 56%, respectively, despite their exceptionally strong academic performance [1]. These findings suggest that high-performing adolescents may study under considerable evaluative and academic pressure. At the same time, they are expected to improve their English skills [2].

A number of studies examined various pedagogical approaches, including Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) and feedback, learning strategies, support, and peer-assisted learning [3-6]. However, the results are mixed because of different teaching conditions or approaches used in each study. While some studies find a positive effect of the program on test scores, other research has focused more narrowly on how students respond to this new option: affective (i.e., motivation), emotions, and mental health. Without an overarching integration, this renders it difficult for teachers and researchers to understand what is working, for which students, under what conditions, and how it works.

This paper addresses three questions: (1) What methods have been used to help secondary-school underachievers taking English as a foreign language (EFL), and how can they be grouped? (2) What results are reported in terms of students' achievement and other learning-related things (like motivation, engagement, anxiety)? (3) What mechanisms and contextual conditions appear to shape intervention effectiveness?

To answer these questions is significant in three respects. First, theoretically, it contributes to the literature by offering a mechanism-oriented synthesis of intervention strategies for secondary-school EFL underachievers, rather than treating existing approaches as isolated teaching techniques. Second, practically, it provides teachers and school practitioners with an organized account of the kinds of support that may improve not only students' academic achievement but also their engagement, confidence, and emotional adjustment in learning English. Third, methodologically, by synthesizing findings on different contexts, types of studies, or outcome measures, our review will bring together a scattered body of information about these issues, as well as providing guidance towards more accurate, contextualised studies. Thus, the study can be considered to bridge the theory and practice of assisting learners from secondary education who are having difficulties in EFL.

2. Methods

The paper follows the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) and PRISMA-informed procedures for this systematic review. Moreover, it adopts a search strategy that combines terms. These terms are about four things. First, the target group includes underachievers, low-achieving students, and struggling learners. Second, the educational level, such as secondary school, junior high, and high school. Third, the language-learning context, which uses EFL/ESL or English as a second language. Fourth, intervention-related concepts, such as intervention, program, instructional strategy, scaffolding, feedback, peer tutoring, and self-regulated learning. The paper examines major educational institutions and interdisciplinary databases, such as ERIC, Web of Science, and Scopus. It also used Google Scholar to reduce publication bias, and it covers studies published from 2011 to 2024.

The criteria for inclusion are as follows. First, the participants are secondary-school students (or students in equivalent grades). These students are identified as low-achieving, underperforming, or having difficulties in English. Second, the study reports an intervention. This intervention can be

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instructional, behavioural, socio-affective, or technology-supported. Third, the outcomes of the study include English achievement and/or variables related to learning. Fourth, the study reports empirical study designs. These designs can be quantitative, mixed-methods, or qualitative process evaluations. Research studies that look at all students in a school system but do not focus on low-achieving subgroups of students will be excluded. Further, theoretical arguments without any reference to the real world do not qualify as a source of knowledge.

The paper first screens the titles and abstracts. The second part consists of full-text screening, where we decide whether articles should be included. While extracting data, context of study (i.e., classroom-, grade-level-, school-, district-), interventionists, interventions, duration and intensity, participants (students, researchers, or peers), purpose/evaluation method / major results. The large heterogeneity of the implemented interventions, as well as the assessment strategies used, leads to a descriptive topic-based synthesis strategy for this review. To make it easier to present results, the analysis classifies educational methods based on a mechanism-oriented framework called Capability–Opportunity–Motivation-Behaviour (COM-B) [7]. The proposed conceptual framework shows how each technique can cover the student's abilities, learning environments, and emotional-cognitive aspects.

3. Results

3.1. Characteristics of included studies

The number of participants involved in the studies included in the review was very diverse, with interventions (short-term lessons to semester-long interventions) as well as study types (quasi-experiments, classroom-based action studies, and mixed methods). The intervention instruction was usually conducted in classrooms by teachers who received support from a researcher. The observed impacts were not limited to test scores in school. Other studies assessed language learning, grammar, reading comprehension, writing, and total English section scores along with behavioural data such as participation in classroom exercises, completion of homework assignments, and continued study habits [2,3,5].

In addition, the change in affect was measured through questionnaires and/or interviews related to learners' motivation, anxiety, confidence, and willingness to speak [1]. Some studies also used in-class observations or teacher reports to track changes in participation patterns and collaboration behaviours [4]. All together these studies show that intervention research is generally conducted aiming at measuring both learning outcomes as well as changes in student engagement or even psychological development.

3.2. Intervention taxonomy using a mechanism-oriented lens

Linguistic knowledge and learning skills were the main emphasis of the capabilities-building interventions. Commonly used methods included individual instruction (personalized materials), scaffolding (guided practice, modelling, gradual release), and strategy instruction (metacognitive planning, monitoring, vocabulary learning strategies) [5,6]. These studies generally recommended explicit instruction coupled with frequent practice. They suggested that underachievers can benefit from structured learning routines and less cognitive load when completing tasks [8].

Interventions that enhance opportunities focus on learning environments and resources. People often use peer tutoring and peer-assisted learning to increase meaningful exposure and interaction. Structured pair work, cooperative learning, and teacher-led interaction routines create more

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opportunities for low-achieving students to participate without too much performance pressure [6]. Some interventions offer support outside the classroom through family involvement or by providing learning resources. This kind of support may be especially useful for students who have limited learning support at home.

Motivation-focused and socio-affective interventions targeted learners' willingness to get involved and their emotional obstacles. Commonly reported methods included goal setting, self-confidence support, changing the way of attributing things, and techniques to reduce anxiety. In several studies, it was found that reducing the pressure of oral performance (like rehearsed speaking, getting helpful feedback, and participating in smaller groups) helped students start participating in classroom interactions again. Also, positive and timely feedback seemed to act as a motivating "signal" that encouraged students to keep going [4].

3.3. Reported outcomes

Across the studies reviewed, the paper reveals that achievement gains are reported more often when interventions combine multiple components. More specifically, explicit instruction, feedback, and structured practice seem to function as mutually reinforcing components. Explicit instruction establishes clarity by making linguistic knowledge, task expectations, and learning procedures visible to learners [9].

Exercises provide a safe space in which to practice new knowledge with structured, controlled, and incremental activities [10], while assessments are how that progress is measured: identifying problems that need to be improved, and proposing changes required [4]. In this way, instruction provides direction, practice builds fluency and stability, and feedback supports monitoring and refinement. Their combined use may therefore be more effective than any single component alone, especially for learners who struggle with weak foundations, low confidence, and inconsistent self-regulation. Improvements in student engagement and interactivity are often linked with pedagogical methods involving more interaction and collaboration. Affective social advantages, such as reduced anxiety and enhanced confidence, are usually a consequence of positive feedback and incentives.

However, because of differences in the methodology used for measurement as well as differing lengths of time covered by various programs, it is difficult to make meaningful comparisons among alternative outcome indicators. Nevertheless, there are some indirect tendencies that one can still recognize. Programs with a rigorous design, implementation of program components, and measures for evaluating student achievement are likely to show higher gains in student learning outcomes, specific skills such as word learning and grammar. At the same time, affective-behavioural factors like students' motivation, confidence, participation level, or stress handling are usually evaluated in a much context-dependent manner, often using survey instruments, qualitative interviews, or classroom observations as opposed to standardized tests. This difference suggests that tracking academic achievement is easier and can be done in a uniform way, whereas social-emotional growth is often holistic, slow to develop, and context-dependent (i.e., based on particular contexts of learning). In other words, there is no conclusive evidence in the literature showing that one type of outcome is more important than another; rather, it indicates that different outcomes are captured with different levels of precision and through different forms of evidence.

4. Discussion

The study demonstrates the importance of appropriate alignment when it comes to the effectiveness of interventions for low-performing learners at second-level EFL classes. Learners who are not yet

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proficient need help in acquiring proficiency, coupled with continuous monitoring; while those who do not show a high level of motivation may benefit from more systematic group work arrangements, which allow them sufficient opportunities for practicing and getting feedback from others. On the other hand, students who are highly anxious benefit from a less threatening style of involvement and from a supportive mode of evaluation.

The paper's results have several implications. First, teachers could design a structured "intervention package" consisting of various tasks for which the teacher gives clear instructions. The intervention package should include regular monitoring, such as error logging and feedback, and group work (e.g., pair-share, peer teaching). Furthermore, schools might promote equality if they were to provide additional support as part of regular teaching, thus decreasing the students' reliance on outside help with coursework. Additionally, researchers should operationalize and report treatment dosage, implementation fidelity, and participant characteristics. Longitudinal evaluation instruments should also be used to determine the sustainability of results.

5. Conclusion

The present research is concerned with the use of corrective strategies to help high school EFL learners who have learning problems, in an orderly manner, systematically, using theory to guide the inquiry; identifying types of interventions and describing circumstances under which improved student performance occurs; finding evidence for the efficacy of combinations of in-classroom strategies. These holistic approaches not only develop language skills but also provide learning experiences that cater to student motivation and emotional factors as well. They have implications in terms of developing effective support tools and future research on providing better targeted and personalized help for language-related difficulties faced by English learners.

Some limitations of this work should be considered. Firstly, it is clear that there exists an abundance of methods used in the paper's sample: populations, intervention durations, outcome measures, etc., making comparison difficult and limiting generalisations in findings. Secondly, many education programs have shown conditional success and are adapted to local school contexts, suggesting that they are likely to work best under some local teaching conditions, teacher quality, and pupil composition. Even though using the COM-B framework as a systematic approach for organizing the results, some studies of interventions did not provide detailed information about implementation methods and individual differences among students, or contextual factors that prevented a clear identification of the relative effectiveness of strategies in different situations. In addition, evidence base is largely based on published research but does not necessarily include the relevant grey literature (unpublished or otherwise restricted circulation).

Future research should address several questions, including more methodologically sound prospective studies and meta-analyses examining effects beyond those related to education: not only the short-term effects, but also their long-term effect and heterogeneity among students. Researchers should also pay closer attention to the interaction among learner capability, learning opportunities, and motivational or emotional support, to better understand the mechanisms behind successful intervention. In addition, future studies could explore how technology-assisted feedback, adaptive learning tools, and data-informed teaching support can be integrated into classroom-based interventions for secondary-school EFL underachievers. A more detailed focus on contextual variables, such as school resources, teacher preparation, and family support, would also help build more nuanced, practical, and scalable intervention models.

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