

CONCEPT

Group Teaching

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GROUP TEACHING is a method used by teachers to overcome problems inherent in large classes and also to deal with a wide range of abilities within a single class. It is often associated with **ABILITY GROUPING**. This method is more usually deployed in primary schools but it definitely has its place in EL teaching in secondary schools.

With group teaching the children are divided **by the teacher** into several groups on the basis of their academic attainment in the subject being taught. The wider application of this method is the broad concept of **streaming** although the latter is normally based on general ability which is embodied in our PSLE T-scores. With their broad streaming is experimental banding which is carried out by an increasing number of secondary schools usually for English or Mathematics or both. **Banding** is dividing a year group into a number of classes on the basis of attainment in a particular subject or in overall performance in an examination. A more ambitious form of banding is **setting** where a whole or part of a year group is timetabled as a block. There is allowance of movement of pupils between classes based on their progress usually measured at mid-year or end-of-year examinations. Normally group teaching is necessary in classes where there is mixed-ability or all-ability, that is, heterogeneous groups.

Heterogeneous classes pose a number of problems for the teacher who tries to cater to the full range of ability. The difficulties include:

- Provision of suitable resource materials
- Paying sufficient attention to individual needs and differences
- Planning and organising a suitable range of activities
- Coping with variation in motivation and interest
- Coping with variation in concentration/attention spans.

In our Singapore classes, the problems of heterogeneous classes are compounded by our large classes. In most EL situations, our teachers, in trying to resolve the problems teach to the mythical 'average' middle group. This has led to the following:

- Frustration and boredom among the higher ability group
- A sense of failure among the lower ability group
- Frustration, boredom and a sense of failure among the teachers because of greater demands in preparation, increased difficulty in teaching, marking and assessing.

To counter the negative effects of large heterogeneous classes, schools can either band, set or practise group teaching or ability grouping within the class. This is to be distinguished from group work, a notion often synonymously equated with communicative teaching and vice versa. First of all, group teaching is seen as 'formal group work'. The teacher groups the class into several groups (usually three) according to their ability (EL in this case) and deals with each **separately**. While he is explaining to/teaching one group, the other two groups may be getting on with some written work, conducting oral work and so on. Alternatively, all groups may be doing the same activity (eg written work) but the assignment for each group would differ according to the range of abilities. Meanwhile the teacher goes round the class giving his attention to individual pupils.

With group teaching, the groups may be more or less a permanent affair with few changes of members within the term or semester. Regrouping may be done minimally after the mid-year examination. Group work, on the other hand, is more flexible, and decided **by the pupil** according to subject interest or their sense of co-operation.

Group teaching calls for careful preparation and a good deal of mental agility on the teacher's part. The teacher's role here is an active one; he is responsible for the preparation and planning of the lesson, and for its direction and administration. Group work, on the other hand, allows for pupil direction and administration although the preparation and planning is still done by the teacher (except for very advanced interest groups working on specialised projects). The difference here is that group teaching is teacher-directed and group work pupil-directed to a large extent.

The main advantages of group teaching are: the teacher could concentrate on one group at a time as well as cater to the wide range of abilities by way of different approaches, methods, activities, stimulus materials, assignments and evaluation. There are a number of procedural systems that can be deployed. One is the rotation system mentioned earlier. Another is to do core-teaching followed by different follow-up activities or assignments for the three groups.

The basic premise behind group teaching or ability grouping is that abilities are **innate** and can be measured accurately. Modern psychologists tend to dispute this belief. The main aim of ability grouping is to increase teaching effectiveness and maximise the cost benefit of curriculum time.

*** A pilot project on ability grouping has been tried out at Queensway Secondary School. It was started in August 84 and is still being monitored.**