

PILOT PROJECT
ON
ABILITY GROUP TEACHING
(1985)



QUEENSWAY SECONDARY SCHOOL

PILOT PROJECT ON ABILITY GROUP TEACHING

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FOREWORD

Educationists have often propounded the many ways of grouping pupils in classes for productive teaching, for example, banding, streaming and mixed-ability grouping.

The Curriculum Branch of MOE decided to try out a project on the effectiveness in classroom teaching with ability grouping method in Queensway Secondary School from August 1984. With the constant and zealous support from the two English Language Specialist Inspectors, Mrs Pearl Goh and Miss Chan Fong Kin, the project was systematically carried out by our teachers, Mr Kenneth Wee and Miss Low Ah Mai.

From the results of the various assessment tests conducted since the beginning of the project, it has been found that ability grouping in classroom teaching does show effective learning in our pupils.

It is hoped that other schools will try out similar projects so that more convincing results can be produced to substantiate the effectiveness of ability grouping in classroom teaching.

Mr Tan Chin Huat
Principal
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BACKGROUND

- 1 The project on ability grouping was initiated by Curriculum Branch, Ministry of Education, to assess its effectiveness in classroom teaching.
- 2 Queensway Secondary School was selected for the project in August, 1984. It was hoped that ability group teaching might prove to be a viable alternative to normal classroom teaching.
- 3 This project was closely monitored by Mrs Pearl Goh, then SIEL3 (from Aug-Nov 84) and Miss Chan Fong Kin, SIEL5 (from Jan-July 85) who provided advice, ideas, supplementary texts, etc. A grant of S\$2000 was obtained from the Ministry of Education.
- 4 One Sec 1 Express class of 38 EL1 pupils was selected to be the experimental group. Another Sec 1 Express class of 40 EL1 pupils served as the control group.
- 5 Throughout the project, the teacher was kept as the constant factor, with Mr Kenneth Wee instructing the experimental group and Miss Low Ah Mai teaching the control group. Class composition was generally the same except for 3 additional pupils* who joined the experimental class in January, 1985.

- * They were placed in the various groups according to their language abilities as reflected in their performances in the previous year's end-of-year examination.

OBJECTIVES

Since Queensway Secondary School was a poor EL1 centre, a great need was felt to look for more effective ELT strategies. Among other things, this project was aimed at satisfying the following needs:

- 1 This project was carried out in order to assess the effectiveness of ability grouping for ELT. It was hoped that this mode of teaching would be able to offset the disadvantages inherent in our large heterogeneous classes. Teachers have often found it extremely difficult to cope adequately with the varying needs of the various ability groups.
- 2 Besides the need to identify the advantages of ability grouping from the teacher's viewpoint, this project was also carried out in order to allow pupils of various ability levels within the class to learn at their own pace. This was aimed at eliminating pupils' frustrations as a result of their being either 'too slow' or 'too fast' for the class. It was felt that unless the pupils were psychologically at rest within themselves, they would not be able to perform at their optimum. Hence the need for the project.
- 3 This project was also aimed at achieving maximum learning of the English language. It was believed that if the pupils were allowed to work at their own pace, then, they would be able to learn more effectively.

- 4 This project was also meant to encourage maximum teacher-pupil and pupil-pupil interactions which were sadly lacking in our schools. In this way, learning/teaching would become more personally relevant and less of an impersonal chore.
- 5 In addition, this project also served the need to identify the advantages of innovative and communicative language teaching methods.
- 6 Also pressing was the necessity to convince other teachers and pupils that teaching and learning could be made more interesting and challenging.
- 7 Finally, it was crucial to develop all learning skills (particularly oral-aural) in an integrated programme.

IMPLEMENTATION

- 1 Pupils' language abilities were first assessed through a standardisation test comprising two cloze passages.
- 2 Based on the results of the first pre-test (Sec 1 level), pupils in the experimental group were put in the various groups in the following proportions:

Most-able	:	10 pupils
Average	:	20 pupils
Less-able	:	8 pupils
- 3 Pupils' progress was constantly monitored. A second pre-test (Sec 2 level) was administered in January, 1985.
- 4 Intergroup transfers were kept to a minimum. Based on the results of the end-of-year examination held in November, 1984, and the second pre-test, only three pupils were involved in the transfers.
- 5 Post-test (1) - Sec 1 level - was administered in March and post-test (2) is scheduled for September, 1985.
- 6 Throughout the project, at least 70% of ELT time was devoted to ability grouping, with the remaining time spent on core-instruction, remedial teaching etc. (Please see STRATEGIES)

STRATEGIES

1 Graded Exercises

Graded exercises were administered to the various groups after a period or two of core-instruction. Different exercises were given to the various groups, with the better pupils often receiving more challenging tasks. Sometimes, the same exercises were given to all pupils, but the weaker ones normally received more assistance.

2 Regulated Workloads

The quantity of exercises was also varied for the respective groups, with the pupils of the top strata doing more work per period and vice versa. This was based on the assumption that the better pupils would finish their work more quickly than the rest. The additional workload of the better pupils came in the form of more exercises and/or more challenging tasks.

3 Rotation System

Different groups received different tasks at any one time. When the teacher was instructing one group, the other two groups would be engaged in some other activities on their own. The rationale behind this strategy was to provide closer teacher-pupil rapport. This mode of instruction also allowed each pupil more attention from the teacher.

4 Project Work (1)

Pupils were allowed to organise themselves into interest groups prior to the long vacation in November-December, 1984. The groups were instructed to carry out research on topics of their choice. The teacher ensured that the topics proposed by the pupils were, among other things, not too broad and of educational value. Pupils were told to do write-ups of their topics and to present their projects to the class after the vacation. Pupils' response was especially enthusiastic: during their presentations, each group came up with a vast array of audio-visual aids like charts, photographs, slides, OHTs, videocassettes etc. The rationale behind this was to allow the pupils to gain more exposure to the English language in the following meaningful and enjoyable way:

- Speaking skills : asking for information;
speaking during class presentation;
- Listening skills: listening for information;
listening during pupils' presentations;
- Reading skills : reading books, pamphlets, journals etc. for
more information;
- Writing skills : doing the write-ups and preparing
questionnaires for the audience.

Besides, each pupil was also allowed to work at his/her own pace and according to his/her own interest and ability. To provide more incentive, projects were assessed and these marks were included in the end-of-year examination results.

5 Project Work (2)

Pupils were organized into various working committees according to their perceived interests and abilities to produce a class magazine by Term 3. An editor-in-chief was nominated to take overall charge of the production process, with the teacher acting as an advisor. Two sub-editors were also nominated to take personal charge of coordinating the activities of the sub-committees in their respective charges. The rationale behind this activity was to provide the pupils with another opportunity at learning the English language the fun way, as in the preceding project.

RELATED ACTIVITIES

1 Video-Movies in ELT

Taking advantage of the pupils' love for interesting movies and television programmes, the teacher used them as highly effective teaching aids. Not only were the pupils excited about the movies, they were also more motivated to learn the language the creative way. Relevant worksheets were prepared to guide the pupils in their viewing, discussion and subsequent written work. When a written account of the story or movie was available, it was used to exploit the possibilities of video-teaching even further.

2 Popsongs in ELT

Going beyond the realm of vocabulary work as in BBC's Pedagogical Pop, selected popsongs were used to instil in the pupils the interest in learning the English language. Relevant worksheets were produced to highlight various grammatical issues. In addition to vocabulary work and a discussion of the grammar, popsongs were also used for listening comprehension exercises and follow-up written work.

FINDINGS

1 Pre-Test (1) : August, 1984

The control group did considerably better than the experimental group in the initial pre-test (Sec 1 level), with only three failures in the former and six failures in the latter. The highest score for an individual pupil - 78% - went to a pupil in the control group while the experimental group only managed to achieve 75% for highest individual score (Annex A, Table 1).

2 Post-Test (1) : March, 1985

The experimental group had 7 pupils with 80% and above whereas only 2 from the control group managed to achieve this. Nineteen pupils from the experimental group secured 70% and above compared to the 17 in the control group. On the whole, it can be seen that a greater proportion of pupils who managed to attain 65% and above came from the experimental group. The experimental group exceeded the control group by 5 average points (Annex A, Table 2).

3 Overall Progress : Pre-Test (1) - Post-Test (1)

During this period, the experimental group improved by 12.8 average points as compared to the control group's 6.7.

4 End-of-Year Examination, November, 1984

In the interim period between pre-test (1) and post-test (1), pupils from the experimental group again proved themselves with a 6.4 average point lead over those from the control group. 89.5% of the experimental group and only 70% of the control group scored 60% and above (Annex A, Table 3).

5 Pre-Test (2) : March 1985

Again, the pupils of the experimental group outshone those from the control group in their performance in the test. The former exceeded the latter by 13 average points. There were only 5 failures in the experimental group as compared to 29 pupils from the control group. The highest individual score for this test (pitched at Sec 2 level) - 79% - came from the experimental group while the control group only managed a feeble 65% in this category (Annex A, Table 4).

6 Closer Ties Forged

Closer ties have been forged among the pupils themselves and between the teacher and the pupils. There has been more cooperation and a greater sense of solidarity in the class. Teaching and learning has become more personally relevant and gratifying to both teacher and pupils.

7 Conclusion

As reflected in the available statistics (Annex A) and the above observation at [6], ability grouping has proved to be a viable and effective alternative to normal classroom teaching.

PROBLEMS

1 Noise

Due to the need for group discussions, some degree of noise was inevitable. The problem was further aggravated by the necessity to move the furniture before and after each lesson.

2 Inflexible ELT Programme

An inflexible ELT program^{me} was found to be inconducive for ability group teaching. For example, dependence upon a single basic text was found to be grossly inadequate.

3 Initial Lack of Supplementary Texts

In order to prepare suitable exercises for the various groups, the teacher had to have access to several texts. The initial lack of such texts proved to be an unnecessary source of hindrance to the progress of the project.

4 Heavy but Challenging Workload

Heavy ECA responsibilities sometimes tend to hamper the effectiveness of the teacher. Ability group teaching by itself is challenging in terms of selecting appropriate materials, lesson preparations and the checking of assignments.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1 Noise Reduction Measures

Pupils can be constantly reminded to keep their volume to acceptable levels. Regular proddings by the teacher are helpful. On the other hand, the teacher can also limit discussion time to ensure that no time can be spared for unnecessary talk. Perhaps a talk on work ethics can help the situation.

2 Flexible ELT Programme

Teaching is a personal art and the ability group teacher, more than any other teacher, needs a greater degree of freedom to exercise his sense of creativity: a great deal of thought as to how to teach 3 ability groups during each lesson is required. Unless the teacher finds it worthwhile to be creative and challenging to himself (and to his pupils), he will lead ability group teaching to its natural and inevitable end. Therefore, a flexible ELT programme is a must if ability grouping is to succeed. Rigid adherence to a prescribed text is not advisable. The teacher must be allowed to select materials relevant to his purpose from other sources as well, especially when the said materials are more interesting, if not more relevant.

3 Occasionally Upgraded Resource Centre

Interested schools must ensure that the teachers concerned have at their disposal a whole range of suitable texts to choose from. Individual teachers ought to be given more freedom to purchase texts relevant to their needs. Unless a whole range of suitable texts, aids etc is made easily available, the teachers' job and ability group teaching as a whole, will prove unavailing.

4 Class Committee

Pupils in the class-committee can be actively involved. They can perform mechanical tasks like group marking, drawing and putting up charts, preparing duty rosters and maintaining the class library.

5 Peer Teaching

Peer teaching can also be implemented by advising pupils in the most-able group to assist their less-able friends on matters of basic grammatical rules and corrections.

ANNEX ATABLE 1 : Pre-Test (1) - Marks Distribution, A Comparison

	80s	70s	60s	50s	40s	30s	*AS
Experimental Group	00	05(75)	18	09	06(45)	00	60.2
Control Group	00	05(78)	20	12	02	01(39)	61.3

TABLE 2 : Post-Test (1) - Marks Distribution, A Comparison

	80s	70s	60s	50s	40s	30s	*AS
Experimental Group	07(87)	19	15(65)	00	00	00	73
Control Group	02(82)	17	15	06(54)	00	00	68

TABLE 3 : End-of-Year Examination - Marks Distribution, A Comparison

	80s	70s	60s	50s	40s	30s	*AS
Experimental Group	02(83)	17	15	04(54)	00	00	68.6
Control Group	00	04(76)	24	12(50)	00	00	62.2

TABLE 4 : Pre-Test (2) - Marks Distribution, A Comparison

	80s	70s	60s	50s	40s	30s	*AS
Experimental Group	00	06(79)	09	21	05(41)	00	58.5
Control Group	00	00	02(65)	09	21	08(31)	45.5

*AS : Average Score

Note : Highest and lowest individual scores are placed within brackets.