

# SCHOOL – BASED PROJECT

## Ability Grouping in ELT

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*This article is a follow-up to the article 'Ability Grouping' featured in TELL Vol 1 No. 1 1985. This project was first piloted by the writer in his school in August 1984.*

### 1 INTRODUCTION

This is a mode of instruction in which pupils are grouped according to their perceived levels of language ability and taught accordingly. Pupils in each group are allowed to work at their own pace, with relevant and appropriate worksheets guiding them through the learning process. The teacher's role is to ensure that all pupils become personally involved in learning the language in an organised and interesting way.

### 2 IMPLEMENTATION

2.1 Pupils' language abilities can first be assessed through a diagnostic test. A cloze format is preferred since it can examine the pupils on many aspects of the language. In this way, a more accurate assessment of each pupil's command of the language is obtained to facilitate proper grouping.

2.2 For ease of instruction and organization, three ability groups can be formed in the following (approximate) proportions:

Most able:	25%
Average:	50%
Less able:	25%

The number of pupils in the slow group must be kept fairly small in order to afford them greater teacher attention.

2.3 In order to assess the effectiveness of this mode of instruction, a post-test, comprising the same instrument, can be carried out at the close of the academic year or trial period.

### 3 STRATEGIES

#### 3.1 Graded Exercises.

Exercises are graded on the basis of difficulty and quantity of assistance rendered. In the first instance, different exercises are given to the various groups, with the most able pupils receiving the more challenging tasks and vice versa. On the other hand, the same exercises may be used for all groups but the quantity of assistance, in the form of additional hints etc., is made the variable factor:



pupils in the less-able group receive more assistance and vice versa. Towards the second half of the lesson, the pupils are made to present their answers to the class. The teacher then advises them on the appropriacy of their answers. As all pupils have received the complete set of worksheets used during the lesson, they are advised to correct their responses where necessary and to record in their respective worksheets the answers given by the other groups, in this phase of the lesson.

Pupils in the less-able group particularly benefit from this session as they are given greater exposure to the more intricate aspects of the language highlighted in these exercises. At the same time, the more advanced pupils will also find the lesson more interesting and "up to their standard."

#### 3.2 Regulated Workloads

The quantity of exercises (of comparable standards) meted out per group is varied such that the better pupils (ie those in the first and second groups) are expected to complete more exercises per period and vice versa.

This strategy is based on the assumption that the better pupils, having a greater command of the language, will be able to work more quickly. The additional workload ensures that the former pupils will be gainfully occupied throughout the lesson.

#### 3.3 Rotation System

Different groups receive different tasks at any one time. When the teacher is instructing one group, the other groups will be engaged in some other activities on their own. In this

way, closer teacher-pupil rapport is enhanced. This is by far the most difficult task to carry out since careful planning is required of the teacher in determining the schedule of activities for each group.

### 4 RELATED ACTIVITIES

#### 4.1 Project Work.

Pupils are allowed to organise themselves into interest groups to carry out research on topics of their choice within a specific time frame. The teacher ensures that the topics proposed by the pupils are, among other things, not too broad and are of educational value. Pupils are expected to produce write-ups of their respective topics and to present their projects orally to the class, with appropriate use of audio-visual aids like charts, photographs, slides, OHTs and videocassettes etc...

The rationale behind this is to allow the pupils to gain more exposure to the language in the following meaningful and enjoyable ways:

Speaking skills: asking for information;

speaking during class presentation;

Listening skills: listening for information;

listening during pupils' presentations;

Reading skills: reading books, pamphlets etc. for more information;

Writing skills: doing the write-ups for presentations and preparing simple questionnaires for the rest of the class to fill in, etc.

Besides, each pupil is allowed to work at his/her own pace and according to his/her own interest and ability. To provide more incentive, projects can be assessed and the marks can be included in the pupil's continual assessment.

Ideally, this project should be carried out during the December vacation or the first term vacation when the pupils are not troubled by preparations for an examination.

#### 4.2 Class Magazine

Pupils can also be asked to produce a class magazine. Again, the teacher serves as an advisor while the pupils,

organised into groups, produce the necessary articles and illustrations etc.. As in the preceding activity, the discussion and language activity which goes on is purposeful and hence, meaningful.

#### 4.3 Video Programmes

To add spice to the English language course, video programmes can be exploited to provide greater motivation. Suitable worksheets can be devised for the pupils' benefit, to guide them through the viewing of the videoclip, usually to highlight a particular aspect of the language. In the sample worksheet based on Blake Edward's *Curse of the Pink Panther*, the use of adverbs is highlighted in a creative way and in the spirit of ability grouping (see Appendix A).

As such worksheets are not available in the market, it is up to teachers to develop their own materials which may be pooled for general convenience. The teaching and learning of the language will certainly be more interesting and effective then.

### 5 PROBLEMS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### 5.1 Noise

Because of the need for group discussions, some degree of noise is inevitable. This problem can easily be countered by reminding pupils of proper work ethics and by limiting their discussion time so that not a moment can be spared for unnecessary talk.

#### 5.2 Flexibility of Programme

Rigid adherence to a single prescribed text is not advisable. The need to develop an extensive range of tasks to cater for the various groups per lesson, makes it imperative to plumb other sources for teaching materials, especially when the latter offer a wealth of more interesting, if not, more relevant ones.

#### 5.3 Resource Centre

The resource centre must be occasionally upgraded to ensure that the teacher has at his disposal a whole range of suitable texts and audio-visual aids etc.. The ability group teacher ought to be given more freedom to purchase relevant

materials (if not already available). Unless this situation holds true, the teacher's job and ability group teaching as a whole, will prove unavailing.

#### 5.4 Workload

Much more is required of the ability group teacher in terms of lesson preparation. He is required to cater for the needs of at least three ability groups per lesson as opposed to a single homogeneous unit.

In order to alleviate the problem of an excessive workload, pupil committees can be set up to carry out mechanical tasks like group-marking, drawing and putting up charts and posters, preparing duty rosters and maintaining the class library. Peer teaching can also be introduced by advising the abler pupils to assist their less-able friends in matters of basic grammatical rules and corrections. The teacher can then concentrate on solving the more difficult problems should they arise.

### 6 CONCLUSION

It is hoped that more teachers will take up the challenge of ability group teaching. Not only is it a viable and effective alternative to normal classroom teaching, it also offers challenging possibilities to both pupils and teachers alike.

#### Appendix A

##### CURSE OF THE PINK PANTHER

##### DIRECTIONS

Read the passage through and decide what you think the missing words (adverbs) should be. Refer to your respective worksheets for further hints.

(Detective Sergeant Clifton Sleigh, 11th Precinct, New York Police Department, was temporarily assigned to the Surete to assist the French Police in locating France's greatest detective, Chief Inspector Jacques Clouseau. Meanwhile, the French underworld was determined, at all costs, to prevent Officer Sleigh from accomplishing his task. The videoclip you are about to view shows Officer Sleigh at the airport before his departure for Paris, France.)

It was raining \_\_\_\_\_. The wind was blowing \_\_\_\_\_ when Officer Sleigh arrived at New York Airport in a cab. The cab stopped so \_\_\_\_\_ that it threw him off balance. He \_\_\_\_\_ paid the cab-driver his fare and \_\_\_\_\_ took out his luggage,

placing them on the wet pavement. He \_\_\_\_\_ opened his large, black umbrella, only to be blown \_\_\_\_\_ in the direction of the wind. \_\_\_\_\_, he regained his balance and struggled back to his bags. \_\_\_\_\_, he lugged his two heavy suitcases into the airport terminal. The latter's glass doors opened \_\_\_\_\_ as he did so.

\_\_\_\_\_, in the airport terminal, a hired killer was waiting \_\_\_\_\_ for Officer Sleigh's arrival. \_\_\_\_\_, his quarry had arrived. Officer Sleigh \_\_\_\_\_ tried to close his beat-up umbrella. \_\_\_\_\_, a gentle old lady approached him, and asked him where the "check-in" point was. The hit man was about to fire when the glass doors \_\_\_\_\_ opened. \_\_\_\_\_, Officer Sleigh's umbrella burst open. The wind was \_\_\_\_\_ strong that it \_\_\_\_\_ blew Officer Sleigh and the pleasant lady off their feet towards the reception counter. The wind, blowing \_\_\_\_\_, deflected off Officer Sleigh's umbrella, also caused the gunman to lose balance and to fall off the upper floor.

\_\_\_\_\_, another hired killer — this time, an expert with the knife — was waiting \_\_\_\_\_ for Officer Sleigh at the other end of the terminal. He had \_\_\_\_\_ damaged a boy's remote-controlled model car as he waited to fulfill his contract. Now that Officer Sleigh and Detective Sergeant Francois were in sight, he \_\_\_\_\_ got his stiletto in a state of readiness and followed the pair. The boy \_\_\_\_\_ sent his model car in the direction of the would-be assailant. \_\_\_\_\_, the hit-man stepped onto the model car and fell \_\_\_\_\_ on his back. \_\_\_\_\_, near the other entrance, Officer Sleigh also stepped onto the moving model car and was sent stumbling along, \_\_\_\_\_ bumping into the doorman.

Another killer, on contract to eliminate Officer Sleigh, was waiting for him \_\_\_\_\_. He fired \_\_\_\_\_ at the stumbling figure of Officer Sleigh but missed. \_\_\_\_\_, two uniformed policemen went after the gunman. The latter \_\_\_\_\_ fled in the opposite direction, only to run \_\_\_\_\_ into a pane of glass which was carried by two workmen.....