

ENGLISH AND THE CASE FOR NON-STREAMING

Rosy Thiyagarajah

Most teachers react with enthusiasm or resignation on being given "A" or "F" classes respectively. Perhaps we are not so aware that teacher expectations, teaching styles and individual differences have much to do with the learning process and streaming. Teacher perceptions and attitudes towards "good" and "dull" classes (or competent and incompetent language learners) may be encouraging the existence of self-fulfilling prophecies. Rosenthal and Jacobson's (1968) experiment showed that if teachers believed a child to be "good" they will treat her differently. Three teachers of a school were chosen to be the subjects. The experimenters administered a test of general abilities to all pupils but informed the three teachers it was a special test to identify "late bloomers" (pupils who have not realised their potentials yet) who would be expected to perform very well later. The teachers were then told the test had identified a few students as "late bloomers" in each teacher's class when in fact they were selected at random. At the end of the year the experimenters gave the same test so that they could compare the "late bloomers" and the rest of their classmates. It showed that the "late bloomers" had outgained their classmates on this test. This implies teacher expectations (with its attendant favourable reactions in this case) had affected the "late bloomers" performances. Moreover these "late bloomers" were perceived by their teachers as being more likely to succeed in the future, more interesting, happier and more intellectually curious.

Besides labelling our students, the streaming procedure increases competition rather than co-operation, emphasizes the end product rather than the learning process and encourages the tendency to think all our pupils are the same. To remedy this, a different teaching learning situation has been suggested — mixed ability groups. Richard Mills thinks this will force teachers to observe the individual pupil in her group more closely and allow that pupil to develop her potential to the utmost. Mixed ability group work will also ensure the usual benefits of group work — more pupil talk, peer learning, catering for individual learning styles and affective learning. If the nature of the task and climate permits, exploratory talk, in which pupils while "thinking aloud" may be interpreting "new knowledge" in terms of what they already know, will be present.

Naturally problems will arise if mixed ability teaching is practised. The advantages to the bright or weak pupil being in the same group may be questioned. Research has shown that generally the weak child improves and the bright do as well in mixed ability groups. Materials will have to be specially prepared and be of a large variety ranging from resource kit SRA type to workcards, etc. Teachers will have to convince themselves of the virtues of this procedure, accept extra work, share materials with their colleagues or be involved in team-teaching. (Apparently liberal or progressive teachers, according to Neville Bennet, are more inclined towards non-streaming situations).

Below are a few suggestions for mixed ability group work. (The teacher should not tell the class the basis for membership selection). Of course sometimes one can group pupils with the same ability in a class and present them with the same task varying in complexity or entirely different tasks.

Reading

A set of readers accompanied by work sheets could be presented to a group sharing a common interest.

Writing

A language activity could take the form of expanding newspaper headlines – discussion will precede the writing. (Expansion exercises can also involve advertisements, cartoons, etc.)

Listening Comprehension

Interviews – taking notes on speeches from radio, T.V. programmes or from real life for another language activity.

Oral

A role-simulation could be designed for Form V pupils. A decision-making exercise could revolve round the alternatives town councillors are facing with a gift of a big piece of land from the Federal Government. Information can be presented by means of a map, a reading comprehension exercise about the town, role cards can supply details of individual town councillors, the confrontation or discussion of the task or problem and a written report could then follow. The last phase of the simulation i.e. feedback could be in the form of discussion of linguistic errors, assessment of learner's performance or immediate remedial work. Role simulation encourages a more emotional use of language unconsciously.

Theme/Topic Work

Themes like "Friends, gangs and enemies" or topic work resulting in an end product like a newspaper or radio programme would require many English periods.

References:

Mills, R., 1977, *Teaching English Across the Ability Range*, Ward Locke Educational.
Barnes, D., 1976, *From Communication to Curriculum*, Penguin.

Attention!
our association is
also known as the
Persatuan Pengajaran
Bahasa Inggeris

HELP!

Readers, please submit,
for publication, articles
on any of the following:

Teaching methods, suggestions on overcoming
problems areas in English language Teaching.
Case studies with regard to the implementation
of the English syllabus in your school.
Book reviews, Topics in Linguistics and letters
to the Editor. Send your articles to:

THE EDITOR
THE ENGLISH TEACHER
P. O. BOX 539.
KUALA LUMPUR.

