

“Three in one” - A collaborative Action Research

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Background

The assumption in Sri Lanka is that equal opportunities to learn English can be provided simply by using the same learning materials, based on the same teaching approach with all the students. Although this assumption has been challenged and the need for more classroom based ethnographic research to ease this problem has been emphasized, there is a paucity of such research.

Method

The main purpose of this collaborative action research was to find out whether ‘same ability grouping’ and ‘differential tasks’ could be used effectively in the Sri Lankan second language classrooms to minimize the problems in teaching English. University academics, Regional English Support Centre (RESC) staff and practicing teachers collaborated in this action research. First, the activities in one Unit of the Pupils textbook (Grade 7 and 10) were matched with the Competencies identified in the Teacher Instructional Manual. Next, the activities given were adapted to cater to three different ability levels. Students were grouped into three levels based on their marks obtained at the end of the second term test. Finally, different groups were taught using the different activities. Questionnaires to students, interviews with teachers and classroom observations, activity sheets and assessments were used as data gathering instruments.

Results

Even though, at the beginning most of the students were not in favour of the same ability grouping, at the end of the intervention majority of the students agreed that teaching same ability groups using differential tasks were a success.

The teachers, the RESC staff as well as the University staff agree that teaching same ability groups using differentiated tasks were effective. Further, students’ marks at the end of the year tests also show a positive improvement, especially among the less able students.

Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that ‘same ability’ groups with ‘differential tasks’ could be used as one way of minimizing problems in teaching English in large classes in Sri Lanka.