

On English Teaching by the Division of Freshman Classes According to English Ability (I)

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This paper is a preliminary report of investigations relating to the English ability of the students of a college to which the writer belongs and on English teaching by means of dividing freshman classes according to their English ability. Permit me a digression to give a little background as to why we are undertaking this particular project of introducing a means of purposive class division to English teaching on a college level. It should firstly be noted that the students of our college are, by the very nature of the college, not English majors but primarily to be trained in physical education.

In regard to English teaching, however, many problems the students have presented are quite similar to the reported problems of most of the postwar Japanese universities. Some of the problems may be given below:

1. As a whole, students come into the college with no fundamental knowledge of English. It is surprising to find how poor their English knowledge is in spite of their six years of study in English through junior and senior high schools. The only feasible way of eliminating such students may be the screening by competitive entrance examinations. But this does not give a solution. Because, however high the standards of the English examination may be made, if the applicant obtains good marks in other subjects and thus raises the total of her marks to the passing level, the college cannot refuse her to come in, however deficient she may be in her knowledge of English. The applicants naturally exceed in the subjects required for the pursuit of physical education and get very high points in them, which occasionally makes even unreasonably low marks in English pass. Besides, a system of admission by recommendation is employed so that the students who proved to be excellent in athletic merits may be admitted with no entrance examination. Accordingly, the English knowledge of the students thus admitted could sometimes be pretty good but sometimes be very poor, the latter being the more likely.
2. In addition to the lack of basic knowledge of English, the disparity in English ability among the students is so keen that the undesirable situations tend to be created. Advanced learners have to wait for slow-learners patiently so long that the former often lose their interest in the subject with disappointed feeling towards the classwork, assuming a

scornful attitude with snickers to the latter. Slow learners are not happy either. They suffer the disadvantages of being relegated to inferiority. They become taciturn and laconic in the class without initiative, easily labeled "impossible". This is not a desirable atmosphere for either of the group. Both have lost initiative and their achievement scores seemed to show a general decline.

3. Students are not too much interested in mastering or being drilled in English. Since college education is based on a system of credits, they are only concerned with the accumulation of credits. This is the attitudes also common to non-English major students in many universities.
4. Too many students in a class has made it difficult to conduct the drilling of English effectively. The number of the students in a class should be limited to less, but often a class has as many as 80 students. In such a class, English could at best be explained, but not drilled.
5. Students lack in the more practical aspects of language-study, such as hearing, speaking and writing. It is a recognized view that competence in a second language consists not in knowing about that language nor in performing verbatim translation back to the native language but rather in proficient manipulation of the four language skills; listening, speaking, reading and writing. Society demands that college graduates have a practical command of English. In view of the fact that the people in the field of sports and athletics are increasing their international associations with the people of the same line all over the world through their exchange of ideas, skills, experience and human sentiments, the students of this college may have to be trained in more practical language. In order to attain that purpose, however, the foregoing problems should first be solved, and more than the present one class period should be given to English teaching in a week.

Of the above, the disparity in English ability among the students as in (2) was most keenly felt as problematic by the instructors of English. For improvement of the problems, something had to be done.

Teaching by Dividing Classes Based on Ability.

Teaching of any kind, not English teaching in particular, should be planned and programmed with the premise that the individual difference in ability of the learners is fully taken into consideration. Varieties of experiences in English teaching by classifying the students based on their English ability have been reported so far at levels up to high schools. The purposive classification as a means of English teaching have invited pros and cons.

Those who agree fully or partially to the division of classes according to English ability give the following reasons for agreement;

1. Education based on individual differences in ability is ideal from a democratic principle that individuals are respected.
2. Learning together in a mixed group of excellent and poor students is not advantageous to either group.
3. Teaching according to the ability of individuals is more effective to both teacher and students.

Those who disagree to the division of classes according to ability state that

1. Inferiority complex is fostered by those students who are put into a poor class.
2. Parents will also have inferiority complex and may resist.
3. Teachers themselves may possibly disregard the students in poor classes, notwithstanding that the less ability in English has nothing to do with a person as a whole personality.

There have been many examples known of schools at secondary education level which adopted the method of English teaching by dividing the classes according to the language ability and yet many examples ended in failure. Most of the failures were due to complexity in regulating the schedule, the number of teaching staff to be increased, and resistance by parents, etc. At college level, few universities have practiced the method. With the above mentioned approval and disapproval taken into our consideration and balanced expectations of success and failure, we have launched a new project of dividing freshman classes according to English ability aiming at the effective teaching in English course.

The test used for measurement of English ability for the purpose of classification of freshmen was originally formulated at our college to test the fundamental knowledge of English, say, of 10th grade. Subsequent to the student enrollment, and in the course of orientation, the test was given to all the freshmen enrolled.