

Rui Manuel Cruse
rui@mercurio.unisinos.br

Streaming in the foreign language school

ABSTRACT – The school is a microcosm of society and the nature of the school will influence the nature of the foreign language learner in it. Language schools which fail to provide a stimulating learning atmosphere will fail to develop satisfactory patterns of emotional and intellectual behaviour in the learners. Language schools which put learners into different streams are likely to produce a less stimulating environment for the learners in the lower streams. Streaming also seems to accentuate the emotional problems of the learners in the lower classes. Schools which are not streamed have provided evidence which suggests that unstreaming alleviates some of the emotional and social difficulties of the lower stream learners. The main objective of this work, therefore, is to draw foreign language teachers' attention, through some practical comments/suggestions, on how to face the question of streaming and how to deal with it efficiently.

Key-words: streaming, emotional effect, foreign language school, learning.

RESUMO – A escola é um microcosmo da sociedade, e a essência ou a natureza dessa escola influenciará o aprendiz de língua estrangeira nela inserido. As escolas de línguas que não conseguem proporcionar uma atmosfera de aprendizagem estimulante não conseguirão desenvolver, de forma satisfatória, padrões de comportamento emocional e intelectual nos aprendizes. As escolas de línguas que nivelam seus alunos, segundo os dados apresentados neste artigo, produzem uma atmosfera menos estimuladora para os aprendizes de nível mais baixo. O nivelamento parece, também, acentuar os problemas emocionais dos aprendizes mais desfavorecidos. As escolas que não praticam o nivelamento conseguem evidenciar dados que sugerem que o não-nivelamento alivia as dificuldades emocionais e sociais dos aprendizes que pertencem aos níveis mais baixos. Assim, o principal objetivo deste trabalho é chamar a atenção dos professores de língua estrangeira, através de sugestões e comentários práticos, de como encarar o fenômeno do nivelamento e de como lidar com o mesmo de forma eficiente.

Palavras-chave: nivelamento, efeito emocional, escola de língua estrangeira, aprendizagem.

Introduction

A good number of foreign language teachers seem to be concerned chiefly with the effect of attitudes and feelings on learners' performance. In addition, however, it must be remembered that a class develops an intellectual energy as well. The bright questions of some members of the class draw out others. Recent research (Bachman and Cohen, 1998) suggests that the performance of individual foreign language learners is very open to influence by other learners in the group. This means, in other words, that learners in most contexts are more successful in learning a foreign language if they are integratively oriented:

Group work increases language practice opportunities, it improves the quality of student talk, it helps to individualize instruction, it promotes a positive affective climate and it

motivates learners to learn. In addition to these pedagogic arguments, a psycholinguistic justification has been advanced: group work provides the kind of input and opportunities for output that promote rapid L₂ acquisition (Ellis, 1996, p. 598).

Allocating learners for a special purpose

The practice of allocating foreign language students to different classes according to their ability is one very common practice which bears closely on our question. Streaming occurs in some language schools, nearly all secondary schools and even at universities. Until recent years the great majority of foreign language schools were streamed, and, indeed, the practice of streaming was recommended by the schools' board of Directors. And yet, if we consider the practice in the light of our discussions of foreign language learning, we can see that it is of doubtful

efficacy. In fact, for a variety of reasons, including the streaming which goes on in most language schools, social relations between members of different social levels are not being promoted.

Streaming does not promote achievement for average-and low-ability learners. Students in low ability classes suffer clear and consistent disadvantages from streaming. Streaming often appears to retard the academic progress of students identified as average or slow. Moreover, students often do not get better jobs as a result of their school placements (Goodlad and Keating, 1990, p. 196).

All the evidence we have gathered round throughout the years points to the fact that students' learning is closely dependent on their experience and particularly on their social experience. Contact with people in general is very important but so also is contact with other learners "...as learners introject patterns of control, by taking for themselves the attitudes which others have demonstrated by certain actions..." (Gregory, 1983, p. 66). As suggested by Molcan (1990), streaming is likely to produce a restricted social environment within the language school which mirrors the restricted cultural backgrounds of the learners. This has the effect of depressing the **general level** of achievement of students. As the report of the British Psychological Society in 1985 puts it:

... learners who are relegated to a low stream to suit their present level of ability, are likely to be taught at a slower pace; whereas the brighter streams, often under the better teachers, are encouraged to proceed more rapidly. Thus initial differences become exacerbated, and those duller learners, who happen to improve later, fall to far behind the brighter streams in attainments to be able to catch up, and lose the chance to show their merits (Vernon, 1985, p. 37-38).

The above argument has been substantiated by some researchers, among which, Romaine (1996), Frase and Tobin (1998), Hall (2002) and others. On the results of recent research into the question, therefore, it would seem highly probable that streaming works against the best interests of students at large and particularly of foreign language learners.

The role of the teacher in streaming procedures

The most important part of the learner's environment whether in school or university is, of course, the teacher. If the teacher is of the opinion that foreign language learners in the bottom stream

are in some way limited by nature to a very low level of attainment, he or she is likely to assume the attitude that "you can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear". The teacher who holds such an attitude is unlikely to work consistently and systematically to raise the level of the students' ability to develop their command in a specific foreign language school. The teacher will tend to be satisfied with a low level of achievement. Provided that there is no 'hidden streaming' by grouping in the unstreamed, however, the teacher must adopt a very different approach to the learners. He will probably give more thought to the planning of his work in order to keep the class moving along together. He will probably be more likely to look for means of bringing up to scratch those students who are behind because of the factors we must always bear in mind: such things as absence, change of schools and, therefore, change of teaching methods, ill health, or poor home background. If the foreign language learner cannot be 'sent down' to the bottom class some means will have to be devised for keeping him as nearly as possible at the level of the other learners. In fact, it is through the students contacts with other learners that they gain valuable social experiences in a setting less restricted than the family, but more sheltered than the world at large.

The experience of unstreamed schools suggests that there is in fact a different attitude among the teachers. There being no A, B or C streams, there are no A, B or C teachers. In streamed language schools it is not uncommon for the lower streams to be unpopular with teachers so than newcomers to the staff, often straight from universities, and part-time or substituting teachers, even unqualified teachers, are given these classes. In a discussion of this practice, Gregory (1983) reports the case of an A teacher who resigned after she had been given a C stream class to teach. A discussion of teachers' attitudes towards streaming may also be found in the Symposium on the Foreign Language Schools.

Goodlad and Keating (1990) have referred to streaming as 'an education system in miniature'. Many years ago, streaming has been an essential element in the total organization of the school system; learners have been selected for particular schools according to their general intelligence and ability, as well as attainment; and in most schools and even universities, there has also been some internal form of streaming and/or setting. With the advent of the comprehensive system, particularly in the United Kingdom and its colonies spread throughout the

world, the streaming of learners for different types of school must necessarily be decreasing, but there may still, of course, be some form of streaming within all types of schools including language schools. It is interesting to note, however, that even within those schools which claim that their classes include learners of all ranges of ability, there may still exist forms of grouping and setting which make the tacit admission that there are limits to the teaching together of learners of widely varying abilities. Molcan (1990) has argued that the teachers concerned usually know that the system of streaming is best for their own schools if the system is efficient at all. Whatever ideological commitment teachers may have they are still largely in agreement that it is easier, if not also more efficient, to teach generally homogeneous groups. And even where classes are of mixed ability, if any real progress is to be made there must be some sort of mutual influence or contact amongst the learners themselves. If any language school is truly comprehensive, it must deal effectively with the really 'high-flyer'. If 'equality of opportunity' means anything at all in the context of the organization of the school, it signifies that each foreign language learner has an equal opportunity with **every other learner** of maximizing his own potential.

When both a teacher and peers speak the target language, learners have been observed to prefer the latter as models for themselves (...) after four years in the program, the children still made grammatical errors in Spanish which were characteristic of the younger learners in the beginning grades (...) the outcome seems to be directly attributable to the preference these children have for their peers as speech models (...) there is no question that the first dialect of English these young immigrant children learn is the dialect of their peers. (Dulay *et al.*, 1982, p. 30-31).

A learner with a very high level of intelligence could easily become frustrated and difficult in a mixed-ability situation in which there was little scope for his particular capacities, or for the fullest expression of his powers. Provided, however, one accepts these limitations of the unstreamed situation, one can go ahead and develop the means for dealing with the difficult and the brilliant; and in certain areas, with certain provisos, the technological aids programmed texts and teaching machines have a great deal to offer. Team teaching and the employment of teacher's aids may also do much to mitigate some of the problems and weaknesses of mixed-ability classes. Therefore, if language teachers are aware of the problems the learner will meet, and take steps

to anticipate them, starting a language school can be an exciting and enriching time.

The emotional effect of streaming

The emotional effects of streaming should also be borne in mind. The importance of the emotional domain has been recently stressed in most of the literature on foreign language teaching methods and techniques (Sala and Pascual, 1997; Berché *et al.*, 1998; Ellis, 2000 and Hall, 2002). Learners in the bottom streams are more likely to suffer from emotional disturbances than other learners mainly because they are more likely to come from unsatisfactory homes. The result is that lower streams will probably contain an unduly large proportion of these learners which in turn produce a less healthy psychological atmosphere than exists in other classes. There is therefore a tendency for an emotional vicious circle to be set up which is very difficult for the teacher to break. The position is made worse by the fact that the learners are generally aware that they are in the 'bottom' class. Traditionally, being bottom is associated with rejection. We no longer use the 'dunce's cap' but the social attitudes it symbolizes are still with us. Rejection evokes complex affective states which act to inhibit learning besides contributing to the mental unhealth of the learner.

Evidence that learners in the lower classes of streamed language schools are less well adjusted psychologically than learners in unstreamed schools is provided by a number of studies among which Gregory (1983) who found that there was a strong tendency, in some cases, for the learner in unstreamed classes to be superior in social adjustment and superior in social attitudes to learners in streamed classes.

Molcan (1990) found that classes composed of friendship groups suffered less from the 'ordinary frustrations of adolescence' than did learners in streamed classes. He also found a sense of failure in the lower streams of streamed schools and considered a decline in morale, effort and attainment "inevitable". The learner achieves some sense of identification with a society-wide peer-group by associating himself with the movements he believes represent his generation: "as we know, emotional dimensions are equally important in creating effectual communities of learners. These include feelings of group affiliation and solidarity as well as confidence" (Hall, 2002, p. 96).

Although more evidence is needed to prove conclusively that unstreamed classes are superior to streamed classes, there is a growing body of research information which suggests this. There is, on the other hand, virtually none to indicate the opposite. In fact, cooperation amongst learners has been found to be more effective for scholastic achievement and in the generation of a satisfactory emotional atmosphere.

Pedagogical implications of streaming

Modern educational developments may well lead to changes in school organization. Such developments are likely to introduce a much more fluid grouping of learners allowing for large groups for some activities, very small groups for other activities, and individual work for both supervised and unsupervised. The accent will then be placed more heavily on the learners' learning than the teacher's teaching and this means that instead of thinking in terms of 'homogeneous groups' of learners, the teacher's attention will be focused more clearly on the needs of the individual learner.

Much that has been said about streaming in language schools can in fact be said about selection for different types of schools in general. By dividing learners into categories and giving them different educational experiences, we tend to create differences among them:

The degree to which a learner can fully utilize the personal function of his second language in conversation will depend on the total group dynamics and the interaction of personalities in the group (Brown, 1980, p. 198)

This has not always been appreciated by educationists who have occasionally confused cause and effect. An example of this may be seen in the views put forward in the Norwood Report of 1980, The United Kingdom. The argument was that there are three different types of learners: the academic type, at home with the use of books and learning best by abstract thinking; the technical type, learners with a mechanical bent; and the rest, that is, learners who lacked these attributes and learned in practical ways. This typology was a direct reflection of the situation existing at that time. There were, in fact, three types of language school catering for learners. The education provided by these schools precisely matched the three types of learners

mentioned above. Since the three kinds of schools had educated learners in three different ways, it was not surprising that the investigators found differences among the learners from different schools. Now, the question is, what has been the effect of this division of language schools into three strands? Much has been said and written for and against such a division but there is little reported research into the comparative merits of a selective or a non-selective language school system. From what has been said earlier the reader will realize that the methods of selection are now considered to be less efficacious than was once thought. He might wonder whether foreign language learners in non-selective education fare better or worse educationally than learners in selective language schools.

One research carried out by Goodlad and Keating (1990) was able to show that non-selective schools did indeed help to overcome the problem of disparity of esteem for the different types of foreign language education. They found also that compared with selective schools, the non-streamed school offers a kind of language education which is more purposeful, and which encouraged the learners to stay on longer at school. The beneficial effects of the non-streamed school for the **modern foreign language learner**, may, he suggests, be due among other things "to be the stimulus afforded by the presence of the more able learners and the fact that the school is held in high esteem by the community".

The non-streamed school also, it seems, may well contribute to an improvement in general cultural standards. The general effect seems to be a levelling up rather than a levelling down. With regard to the question as to whether the non-streamed school contributed to the promotion of social unity, little evidence one way or the other was produced. Finally, the point was made that not all non-selective language schools are equally effective with respect to the findings outlined. Gregory (1983) stresses that unstreaming was one part of the total approach to making a language school a more friendly, cooperative place calculated to build up the learner's confidence and to encourage their personal effort as good in itself, rather than a good to the extent to which it was better than other learner's:

Activities whose primary purpose is interactional are directed toward the establishment and maintenance of interpersonal relationships. Included here are activities whose purpose is to

establish mutual acquaintanceship, such as encounters with class mates or colleagues... the two goal orientations of interpersonal activities constitute a two-dimensional continuum along which all activities can be placed (Hall, 2002, p. 137).

Conclusion

The streaming of learners into different types of foreign language schools, then, was originally closely linked with the view that there were, psychologically speaking, three types of learners. This view is no longer held and there is more flexibility in language school organization nowadays. A comparison with different types of schools showed that when it comes to non-streamed schools: “morale, interest and sense of ‘belonging’ are all enhanced in the academically less able language learners... without lowering the feeling and standards of the abler learners” (Molcan, 1990, p. 122).

Indeed, contractivist theory brings to light the significance of social-cognitive interaction, cooperation and collaboration of the language teaching-learning context. Cooperative learning amongst students brings to the school a different learning organization in which a language classroom is structured into cooperative teams of learners, thus making learning together a way of life (Frase and Tobim, 1998). Furthermore, in an integrative atmosphere – learner’s interaction – students tutor each other, conduct group projects, practice mutual assistance by sharing and exchanging information, and create a collaborative-cooperative learning environment. At its best implementation, cooperative

learning interweaves cognitive academic behaviours with social skills such as active listening, mutual respect, sharing behaviours, positive-social interaction which seem to be present in most nonstreamed foreign language schools.

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Rui Manuel Cruse

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