

A fair deal for all: Supporting native English speakers in the EFL classroom
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As English becomes a compulsory part of primary schools across central Europe, the question is often raised of what to do with children who speak English at home in these lessons. The purpose of this paper is to provide concrete practical ideas for allowing native-speaking children to benefit and develop their own language skills while working with the whole class as well as working independently.

Introduction

As in every subject taught in the public school system, children come to school with varying levels of prior knowledge in these different subjects. Moreover, there are always children who know more than their teacher about a specific topic, such as about a specific animal. There are numerous studies, especially from the 1970s, that look at individualisation in the foreign language classroom. More recently, Millrood (2002), for example, provides concrete characteristics of success-building classrooms with examples of how to foster learning within heterogeneous classes as a “whole class of individuals” (p. 128). Skehen (2002, p. 291) states ‘there is a need to build in opportunities for individualization of instruction, so that learners who are at different stages can profit in relation to the point which they have reached’.

At the moment, English is in the process of being introduced as a compulsory subject starting in the second or third grades (eight and nine-year-old children) into elementary schools in Eastern Switzerland. As this is a new subject, teachers often pose the question of what to do with stronger learners in their English classroom as the teachers simultaneously get familiar with teaching English and often even with teaching a foreign language in general. These “native” speakers leave them perhaps feeling a bit uncertain as they find their footing with the integration of this new subject. The purpose of this paper is to provide practical ideas for teachers and teacher trainers in allowing NS children to benefit and develop their own language skills in working with the whole class as well as working independently.

What are native speakers?

According to the latest Swiss census (2000), approximately 1% of the Swiss population is “native” English speaking. Moreover, English is defined to be the most important non-official language of the country. There are no official statistics about the number of “native” English speakers in Swiss public schools, but from the author’s experience in in-service and pre-service teacher training courses, there are anywhere from one to three ‘native’ English speaking children per group of twenty children. Moreover, many children starting third grade come to school with some higher level of English than expected for various reasons.

The question remains, then, as to what “native” is. “Native” here refers to learners who are more advanced because they receive more extensive exposure to the language. This article takes on the following three categories of learners to define “native”: children who speak English to one or both of their parents who is a native English speaker; those children whose parents communicate in English although neither parent is a native speaker; those children who have perhaps spent time in an English-speaking country and have gone to school there. That said, the following suggestions about integrating native speakers can be used to cater to the needs of any more advanced learners. Moreover, this article does not seek to imply that NS children in the English classroom are always stronger than their non-native peers in English language lessons – this article assumes the teacher has already diagnosed the class and identified that a certain child, be it the native speaker or not, needs more encouragement

Using native speakers so the whole class can profit

Discussions with teachers in the author's own experience in training courses invariably lead to the comment "I often use the native speaker as my helper though I know that this isn't always good". Teachers should keep in mind that while being a helper is a good lesson in diplomacy, learners should not be helping others at the sake of their own progress in English. Therefore, this use of the native speaker should be limited to cases where it is clear that the child can profit on a social level if not perhaps at the linguistic level. However, there are some ideas for integrating the native speaker into the class so the whole class can profit that will allow these children to make language progress as well.

First of all, there are activities that these children can independently work on during a lesson but at the same time are for the benefit the class. For example, they can be recorded. They can select a story or an article that is relevant to the content-point being taught and asked to record themselves retelling it or reading it out loud. Moreover, in a "community language approach" or a "task-based" manner, this recording can be transcribed and edited by the learner or the teacher. The final version can be used in class as a listening exercise for the other learners or as a comparison exercise for the other learners to evaluate their own production.

Secondly, writing production can be also used for the benefit of the whole class but at the same time the process provides native speaking children with valuable writing experience. Teachers can have these children write sentences with the target vocabulary that can be used with the rest of the class. They can prepare memory cards with full sentences for the others to use. They can, as well, write stories and poems that can be shared with the whole class.

Thirdly, cultural elements can be integrated. As these learners probably have experiences abroad or with mixed-cultures, language awareness and cultural activities can be integrated into the classroom in, for example, the form of sharing songs, games, stories, traditions from their own or experienced cultures. Ideal would be if every child led a game in the language they speak at home. Not to be forgotten is the role of the community in schools. In Switzerland at the moment, parental involvement is being highly encouraged. In some communities, one might see, for example, a South African father coming once a week to the English lessons and taking his child and a few more to another room to read them stories (longer ones, like the Beverly Cleary books).

Finally, in terms of cooperative learning structures, native speakers can be used in many ways to their own benefit and the benefit of the group. When thinking of roles in cooperative settings, they can be the "writer" as they should be expected and encouraged to write more. They can be the mediator, as this requires a more formal English, and use of language such as "Yes, that's right, however...". They can be in charge of materials, other students have to come up and ask for things, in a shop-like setting. They can be responsible for the whole group speaking in the target language (captain) and they can be the resource person with the dictionary.

Allowing native speakers to work (with the class) at their own rhythm

The above ideas fully integrated the native speakers into the class for the benefit of all. The following ideas are more to the benefit of the individual and not so much to the benefit of the group, though the child still belongs to and can work alongside the group. The first practical suggestion is that of handout preparation: it is useful and relatively simple to prepare at least two versions. For the native speakers, the language support (model sentences, word banks) can be taken off of the handout. Moreover, create handouts where spelling and writing are more of a focus. This can include, for example, giving the same handout to the other learners, but including more gaps for the native speakers or an additional section where they have to write up what they did or take the activity or activity reflection one step further. Just having extra worksheets from language arts classrooms in English-speaking countries (from <http://www.abcteach.com>, for example) kept in a special binder can be used as a supplement.

Organizationally, have the native speakers sit where they are not facing the language support on the blackboard or on the word wall. Like this, they have to look extra hard and don't have the information right at their fingertips. Furthermore, have English-English dictionaries or ask the children to bring one in while the other children use English-German ones – this assumes that the child's German competence is on par with his or her peers. Depending on the situation, it might be useful for the native speaking child to develop his or her local language skills.

The public school aims at not only teaching content but social skills and skills for life, so the ideas listed above help to support language development as well as social development. However, depending on the child – some may need more social development than content development, others not - integrating the native speaker into the obligatory three lessons a week might come at the price of their language development. Therefore the following ideas might be used for one lesson a week for those learners who can work more independently.

As Garrett (1991) mentions, computer work can help native speakers set their own pace in language learning activities. Moreover, computer work allows these children to keep up with the typical language development of their native-speaking peers and allow for independent work. There are numerous sites - www.funbrain.com, www.discoverykids.com, www.pbskids.com, or search under "Language arts" software – which offer educationally relevant and challenging materials for independent work. Furthermore, letting children read books of interest in English and write a report of some sort can support skills in their mother-tongue and in German as well. Letting them choose an independent project (a poster about the US state they're from) can help promote cultural and linguistic knowledge and can lead to a product that can be shared though the process is independent.

While the normal textbook used with the rest of the class can be followed, choosing another textbook for independent work can be an advantage as well. Publishers including Teacher Created Materials and Scholastic offer a wide range of textbooks for children in English speaking countries. If the parents have enough money, they can be asked to purchase an E-book of interest for their child that can be printed out and used in class. Teachers with native speakers in their class should perhaps take the time to find a language arts curriculum from the country their child is from, such as <http://www.doe.mass.edu/frameworks/ela/0601.pdf> or <http://www.ncpublicschools.org/curriculum/languagearts/scos/>.

Conclusion

Lourdes Eckstein (2006) provides the following tips:

I have the native speaker become my assistant in many ways. Perhaps I will dictate things for him/her to put on the board instead of writing them myself. ... When we do vocabulary quizzes; the native student writes complete sentences with the vocabulary. Instead of reading a simple story and answering questions, perhaps I will have them read a book over a couple of weeks and prepare some material as they go through (last year one of my native students read Harry Potter). I test them on the same vocabulary but in a different manner (more essays, etc). (Nandu Listserv...)

The necessity of having a repertoire of ideas for working with native speakers in the foreign language classroom is not just shown through teachers' questions in training courses and workshops, but is also a topic in many educational listservs and forums, as seen above. Hopefully this article has sparked some creative ideas for differentiation in the foreign-language classroom that can benefit all children. Every language in the classroom should be recognized, shared and children of all language backgrounds should be provided opportunities to improve their mother-tongue competence within and outside the classroom. As French and English are relatively prestigious languages in Switzerland because they are integrated into the official curriculum, there is a lot of effort being made so native speaking children are challenged and not bored. However, the question that remains is that of justice: how are children who are overtaxed with so many languages in the primary school being supported

and how are children who speak other languages being shown their languages and cultures are valued as well?

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