

*Coping with student heterogeneity in the  
English Language Classrooms*  
A collaborative action research

A study conducted for the  
National Education Commission.

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## **Abstract**

The main purpose of this collaborative action research was to find out strategies to minimize the problems arising as a result of student heterogeneity in the Sri Lankan second language classrooms. In this research the principal researcher and the two assistant researchers from the Department of Humanities Education, University of Colombo collaborated with five practicing teachers and two RESC staff to carry out this collaborative action research. First, the activities in the Unit six of the Pupils textbook (Grade 7 and 10) were matched with the Competencies identified in the Teacher Instructional Manual. Later, 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 second term test. In the same class the three different levels of students were taught using the different activities. Even though, at the beginning the majority of the students were not in favour of the same ability grouping, at the end of the intervention majority of the students were happy about it. The students' marks at the end of the third term show an improvement. The teachers, the RESC staff as well as the University staff agree that teaching same ability groups using differentiated tasks was a success. Further, students' marks at the end of the year tests also show a positive improvement, especially among the less able students. Therefore, the findings of this study indicate that using 'same ability' groups with differential tasks is a possibility in minimizing student heterogeneity.

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# Chapter 1

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background to the study

A major social policy of successive governments in Sri Lanka since the early 1950s. has been the Teaching of English as a second language to all Sri Lankan school children irrespective of their social, economic or geographical background. English was made a compulsory second language to be taught in all schools through the recommendation of the Special Committee on Education, 1943 with the aim of providing “English for all”. This policy continues to be the declared government educational policy even today as the country’s need for citizens with English proficiency, in the context of increasing globalization and technological advancement, has come to be realized. Hence the year 2009 was declared in Sri Lanka as the year of English and IT.

One of the main goals of education in Sri Lanka is to equip students with the necessary knowledge and technical skills for the modern employment market and teaching of English is also considered an appropriate means of achieving this goal. “In the context of the increasingly important role of English in the national and global environment , it is necessary to work towards the goal of providing equal opportunity to all segments of the population to learn English and therefore “English should be continued to be taught as a compulsory subject in the curriculum” (National Education Commission, 2003 , p.xvii - xviii).

After more than half a century of teaching English in Sri Lanka and assuming that all students have learnt English for at least eight years of learning, the results are not satisfactory. To find the reasons for this situation one must examine the existing English language learning and teaching situation in relation to the type of English speakers the system has so far produced. According to The National Education Commission (2003) even after four decades of English teaching such an English

program has not enabled the vast majority of students to communicate in English effectively or to be equipped with language skills to explore the expanding world of learning, resulting in a decline in the quality of higher education and that it “continues to be an agent of social differentiation” ( p.176) and that “only children in Colombo and Kandy districts have acquired a satisfactory level of communication skills” ( p.50)

According to Karunaratne (2003) the effectiveness of the school English language program has been the research theme of many educationists, linguists and sociologists since the early 1950's. Researchers have pointed out that the program is only minimally successful compared to the large investments made on it. It has been pointed out that only a minority of the student population succeeds in achieving the desirable marks at the G.C.E (O/L) examination and that the majority of the Sri Lankan student population does not possess the required English proficiency to secure good positions in the competitive job market.

Student heterogeneity is the reality of the English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms in Sri Lanka. It is a problem teachers face in most classrooms. However, in the Sri Lankan ESL secondary classrooms this problem is compounded due to the students' prior experience or inexperience in the second language (L2). Students' prior and current experience of L2 beyond the school is extremely diverse. Some of the students come from English speaking background homes and can easily converse in English. Some have no experience of English other than at school. These groups are further differentiated by their access to English teaching in the primary school. Some of these students would have been taught English in the primary schools while the others would not have been taught. Thus, one of the problems identified in the ESL literature in Sri Lanka is the heterogeneity of the student population (De Lanerolle Commission Report, 1973; Jayasuriya, 1969; Karunaratne, 1990; Perera. 2002, Walatara, 1979).

## **1.2 Significance of the study**

Promoting “Equity” and “excellence” and reducing disparities in the education system in Sri Lanka has been the key theme identified by the National Education Commission (NEC) in its report in 2003 (Proposals for a National Policy Framework in General Education in Sri Lanka, 2003)

The NEC (2003) also recommends the need for planning at school level in order to reduce disparities among students in response to the needs identified. The Government of Sri Lanka has developed a comprehensive medium term. This “framework incorporates a blend of bottom - up and top – down supportive planning process for the development of the primary and secondary education system” (Pg.2) One of the Major areas identified in this Framework is “improving the quality of basic and secondary education” and “increasing equitable access to basic and secondary education” (p.2) This Framework further emphasizes that equitable access means that “each child can access an education appropriate to his /her individual learning potential and needs” (Pg.4)

The profile of the typical English classroom in the Sri Lankan school system is quite complicated by many factors. Students in one class may come from various backgrounds depending on the locality of the school. In urban areas especially the heterogeneity of the student population is very much felt. Due to nationalization of schools which enabled the access of school to everybody, students who had not studied English earlier and those who were not exposed to English at home were in the same class as those who knew English. There onwards the schools always had to face the problem of heterogeneity in the student population. In one class there maybe students who come from backgrounds where there is a good exposure to the English language, then there will be others coming from backgrounds where there is average or very limited access to the English language and then there will be those to whom English may be quite alien. (De Lanerolle Commission report, 1973)

Another factor which contributed towards the problem of student heterogeneity is the grade six scholarship scheme. “This problem is felt most acutely by teachers of

English in bigger schools which admit at this point large numbers of children from a variety of less well equipped feeder schools” (De Lanerolle Commission Report, 1973, p.66 ) Therefore in such classes there will be the successful or good language learners (those who are quite fluent in the language), the average language learners and the slow learners who are still trying to comprehend the basic grammar and vocabulary. While the good language learners are fluent in their second language, the unsuccessful learners have poor communicative skills and a low language competency. As Canagarajah (1993) notes these students are very often the targets of insults by students coming from “better backgrounds” who speak what is known as “educated Sri Lankan English” (p.616), making them feel disadvantaged and inferior. The teacher is faced with the impossible task of making a lesson meaningful to a class consisting of students in both these extremely different levels of language proficiency.

Even though student heterogeneity has been identified as major concern in the Sri Lankan ESL classrooms, there is little attention focused in teacher training or preparation of learning materials on how to cater to the different ability levels of the students. Nor are there any guidelines as to how to adapt the teaching procedures to cater for the different ability groups of students identified in Sri Lankan classrooms with regards to their English language proficiency (Karunaratne, 1990; Perera, 2002; Walatara, 1979).

At present this problem is further compounded as there is a mismatch between the Teacher Instructional Manuals (TIMS) and the text books. While the TIMS follow the 5E method the textbooks do not conform to this method. As a result the teacher and the students for whom the readily available resource is the textbook face a dilemma.

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 emphasised (Perera, 2002) there is a paucity of such research.

The only available study, a case study on homogeneous grouping for English language teaching has shown positive results. (Perera, 2007). Similarly two case studies of a large National school has indicated the heterogeneity of the ESL

classroom and the need to adapt the learning materials to suit the different language backgrounds (Perera, 2002; Rajapakshe, 2009)

This study attempts to cater to this need by trying to adapt material to suit the competencies identified in the TIMS as well as to cater to three different ability levels.

### **1.3 Definition of terminology**

The main aim of this study would therefore be to find out how problems related to student heterogeneity in the ESL classroom can be reduced through the adaptation of learning materials to cater to three different ability levels.

Students of different language abilities being grouped together can be defined as a *heterogeneous group*.

Students in a class grouped by ability are said to be *homogeneously grouped*.

The study would be based on the following objectives.

### **1.4 Objectives of the study**

- 1.4.1 Identify activities given in the textbooks that can cater to the competency levels identified in the TIMS (Teacher Instructional Manuals).
- 1.4.2 Adapt the identified activities to cater to three different ability levels of students.
- 1.4.3 Train teachers to conduct these activities in their classrooms.
- 1.4.4 Implement the activities
- 1.4.5 Analyze the implementation of the activities
- 1.4.6 Suggest how teachers can exploit the text books to cater to different language ability levels.

### **1.5 Summary**

Chapter one of this report discussed the background and the significance of the study.

Chapter two will elaborate the theoretical foundation and the review of pertinent literature.

## **Chapter 2**

### **2.0 REVIEW OF LITERATURE AND THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS**

#### **2.1 INTRODUCTION**

As discussed in chapter one, student heterogeneity is a problem both teachers and students face in most of our public school classrooms and has been a problem throughout the history of ESL teaching in Sri Lanka.

This chapter has three specific aims. The first aim is to identify and review the research literature relevant to the research questions posed in Chapter one, the second is to examine the existing Language Acquisition Theories and to establish and justify the theoretical basis for Ability Grouping and the third is to develop a theoretical model for ensuing an action research.

This literature review comprises of four main sections. Section 2.2 analyses the established Theoretical Foundations for Second language acquisition, mainly referring to Stephen Krashen's Monitor Model, Long's Interaction Hypothesis and Swain's Comprehensible Output Hypothesis. All three establish the most important factors which will facilitate effective second language acquisition, namely 'the comprehensible input', 'interaction' and 'the comprehensible output'.

Section 2.3 deals with the Review of literature on mixed ability grouping and same ability grouping for teaching English as a Second Language. It is important to understand how both mixed ability grouping and same ability grouping affect the students psychologically, academically and socially. Despite the benefits that have been attributed to both grouping systems, there is a lot of pointed criticism levelled against the two grouping systems as well. Attempt is made to probe into the effects of ability grouping in learners of English in order to minimize the problems caused by the student heterogeneity, that is present in our public school system.

Student heterogeneity is a problem both the teacher and the student encounter in our public school system especially in our Second Language class room. The Sri Lankan situation as discussed in chapter one, has paved the way for vast differences in the Second Language competencies and skills in our students and there are mild and acute cases of mixed ability depending on the locality of the school and the type of school found in Sri Lanka. Distinction can be made between specified levels of linguistic ability, between different skills, vocabulary, communication etc. Language learners in one given class have a variable rather than a uniform linguistic competence as every learner brings into the English language classroom a whole complex of personal characteristics which in turn influence their approach to what is happening in the classroom and will either help or hinder the acquisition of English as the second language. Other factors such as teacher's competency, the time available, the class size and the text books available make the learning and teaching task difficult in a heterogeneous classroom.

It is important to analyze the issue of student heterogeneity in the Sri Lankan classrooms in the light of the Second Language Acquisition Theories, in order to improve the learning and teaching of English as a second language and find ways to minimize problems caused by this factor (section 2.5). The teacher plays the critical role of providing the "comprehensible input", within a range that can be understood by all the members in the classroom, at the same time making sure that s/he does not provide either an 'insufficient quantity of input' or 'inappropriate quality of input' which will invariably lead to a cessation of progress or to 'fossilization'. It is also established that 'meaningful interaction' and 'negotiating for meaning' have to be facilitated in promoting second language acquisition. The learner has to interact with the teacher and negotiate for meaning by asking questions and clarify meanings in order to gain success in language acquisition. On the other hand it is also claimed that second language acquisition takes place only when learners are given more opportunity to produce the language, hence the 'the comprehensible output'. The heterogeneous classroom represents a threat to the learners' sense of identity and self esteem creating anxiety, thus forcing him/her to raise the 'affective filter' which hampers the 'comprehensible input' and 'output' as well as the 'meaningful interaction' and 'negotiation for meaning'. In this context, it is important to address the issue of student heterogeneity in our second language classrooms, in order to

improve the learning and teaching of English as a second language and to provide equal opportunities to all segments of the population to learn English.

The Sri Lankan situation as discussed in chapter one, has paved the way for vast differences in the second language competencies and skills in our students. Therefore every learner will bring into the language classroom a whole complex of personal characteristics which in turn influence their approach to what is happening in the classroom and will either help or hinder the acquisition of English as the second language.

## ***2.2 Theoretical Foundations for Second Language Acquisition***

The theoretical Framework for this study would be provided by the combination of three models. They are

1. Comprehensible input hypothesis (Krashen, 1982)
2. Interaction Hypothesis ( Long, 1983)
3. Comprehensible Output Hypothesis (Swain,1985)

### **2.2.1 Comprehensible Input Hypothesis**

Comprehensible Input Hypothesis (Krashen, 1982) is the central part of an overall theory of second language acquisition that consists of five hypotheses which are namely;

1. The Acquisition – Learning Hypothesis
2. The Natural Order Hypothesis
3. The Monitor Hypothesis
4. The Input Hypothesis
5. The Affective Filter Hypothesis.

Of the five hypothesis identified above this study would be utilizing only hypothesis four and five.

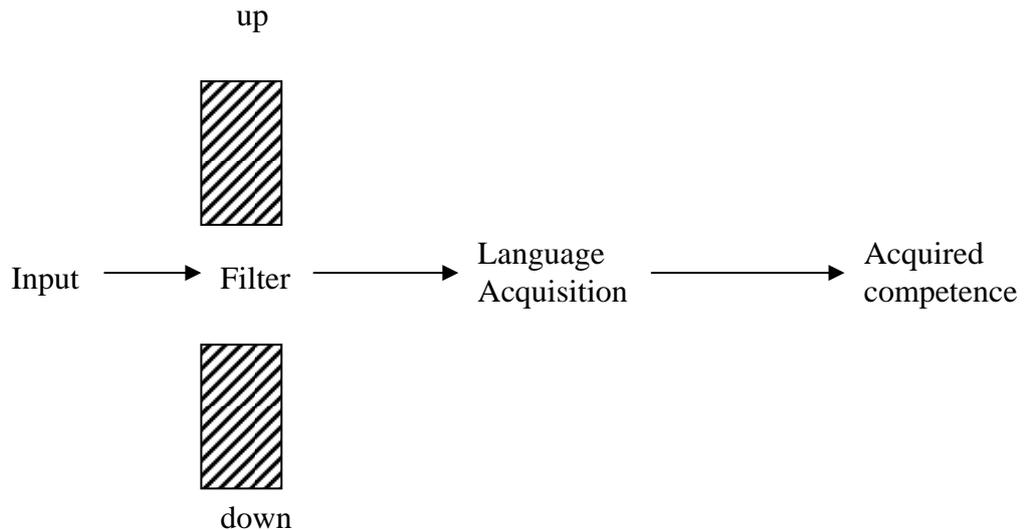
### **2.2.2.1 Input Hypothesis**

This hypothesis claims that we acquire language in only one way. That is by understanding messages, or by receiving “comprehensible input”. We progress along a natural order by understanding input that contains structures and forms a bit beyond our current level of competence. We move from  $i$  (our current level ) to  $i + 1$  ( the next level along the natural order) by understanding input containing  $i + 1$ . This hypothesis has two propositions;

- a. Speech is a result of acquisition, not its cause, and it emerges as a result of building competence through comprehensible input.
- b. If input is within the understanding of the learner and that there is sufficient input, the necessary grammar will be automatically provided, and the teacher does not need to teach the next structure. In other words “Input is the essential environmental ingredient” for language acquisition to take place.

### **2.2.2.2 The Affective Filter hypothesis**

Even though input is necessary for acquisition, it is not sufficient as the learner has to be open to the input. The filter controls how much input the learner is exposed to and acquired. It is affective because the factors which determine its strength have to do with the learner’s motivation, self confidence, or anxiety rate. A learner who has high motivation and high self confidence and low anxiety and not concerned about the possibility of being a failure in the language class, will have a low filter which will allow plenty of input thus enabling good language acquisition. But a learner with low motivation, lacking in self confidence and anxious and on the defensive as he considers his/her class to be a place where his/her weaknesses will be revealed will receive little input.



**Figure 2.1 -Operation of the Affective Filter based on Krashen 1982**

(Cited in Perera. 2007, p.20)

Only when the filter is ‘down’ or ‘low’ is input expected to reach the Language Acquisition Device and becomes acquired competence.

According to these hypotheses Second language acquisition relies on comprehensible input being available to the learner. The learner’s focus must be on meaningful input that contains language forms which are sure to be acquired next. And this input should be provided to the learner when his/her affective filter is down and is open for acquisition.

Nevertheless, comprehensible input alone is an insufficient condition for second language acquisition to take place. Input must become intake. Input is data that the second language learner hears and intake is “that portion of the L2 which is assimilated and fed into the interlanguage system” (Ellis, 1985, p.159). Therefore, comprehensible input needs to become intake for learners to develop in their second language.

Those learners who engage in the regular use of their second language and receive the greater quantity of input will most likely be able to use their second language without restriction. Long ( 1983) insists that input is made comprehensible through modifying interactional structures rather than through simplifying linguistic input.

### **2.2.3 Long's Interaction Hypothesis and Second Language Acquisition.**

Long (1983) proposed the Interaction Hypothesis to show the relationships among comprehensible input, interaction and language acquisition. According to Long (1983)

1. Access to comprehensible input is characteristic of all cases of successful acquisition
2. Greater quantities of comprehensible input result in better ( or at least faster ) acquisition
3. Lack of access to comprehensible input results in little or no acquisition.

And there are three ways to make input comprehensible:

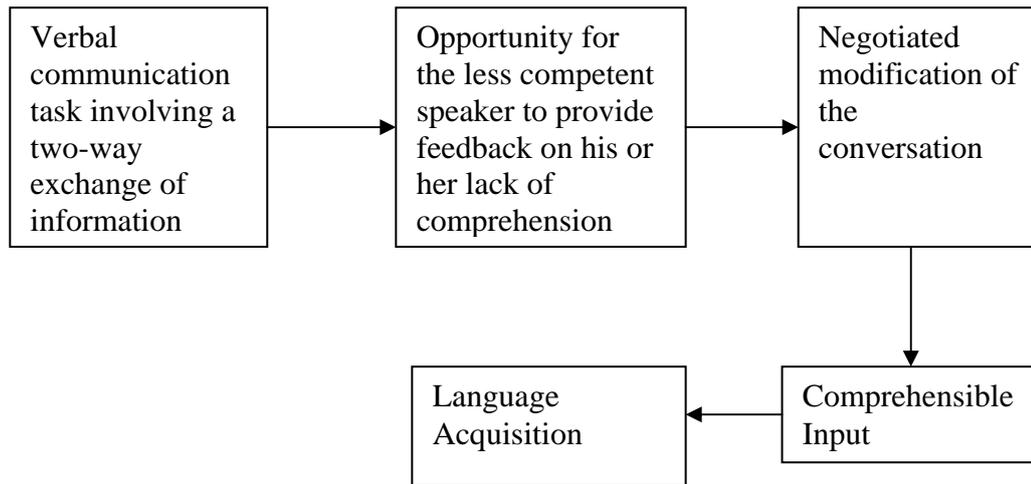
1. by means of input simplification;
2. through the use of linguistic and extra linguistic content; and
3. through modification of the interactional structures of conversation.

Of these, modification of interaction is considered as very important. Long (1983) identifies two kinds of negotiations .

- a. Negotiation aimed at avoiding conversational trouble and
- b. Negotiation aimed at repairing discourse when trouble occurs.

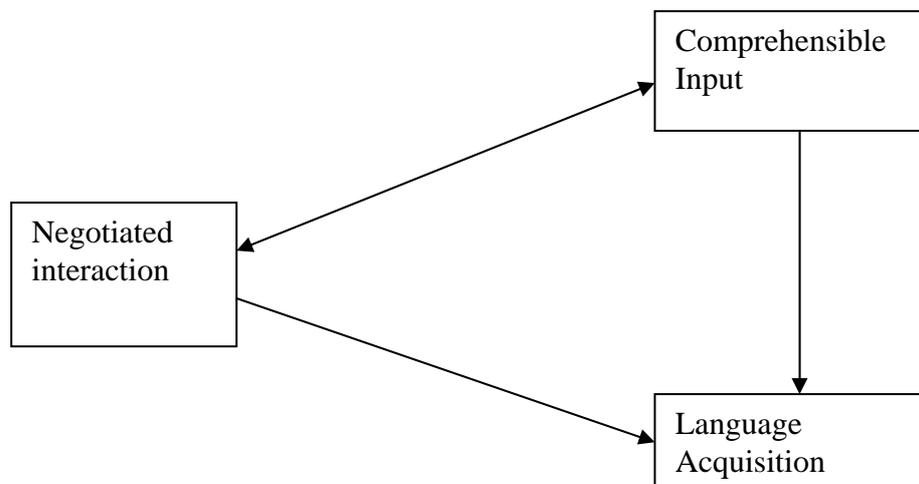
Negotiation for meaning involves the learner as well as the native speaker/teacher.

Figure 2.2 provides a model to account for the relationships between comprehensible input, negotiated interactions and languages acquisition.



**Figure 2.2 Long’s model of the relationship between type of conversational task and language acquisition (from Long 1983:21)**

Allwright and Bailey (1991) suggest the following alternative model of the relationship between negotiated interaction and language acquisition.



**Figure 2-3An alternative Model (cited in Perera,2007, p.22)**

“Comprehensible input” and “interactional modifications” are both needed for input to become intake. However, if learners do not use the language, acquisition will not take place. Hence, learner output is also very important in language acquisition as explained by Swain (1985 ; 1995)

## 2.2.4 Swain's Output Hypothesis and Second Language Acquisition

Swain (1985) has not proposed the output hypothesis as an alternative to the input/interaction hypotheses but as an addition. Swain argues that "comprehensible input" may well be important for second language learning, but is insufficient to ensure that native speaker levels of grammar accuracy are attained. The learner needs opportunity for meaningful use of his/her linguistic resources to achieve this. She attributes three roles to output:

1. The need to provide output in the process of negotiation for meaning that is precise, coherent and appropriate and which encourages the learner to develop the necessary grammatical resources. This is referred to as "pushed language use".
2. Output provides the learner with the opportunity to tryout hypotheses to see if they work.
3. Production, as opposed to comprehension, may help to force the learner to move from semantic to syntax processing. It is possible to comprehend a meaning without any syntactic analysis of the input it contains. Production is the trigger that forces the learner to pay attention to the meaning of expression.

Swain suggests that the learner's failure to achieve native speaker grammatical competence is not because he/she lacks comprehensible input, but because the learner has limited opportunities of speaking in the classroom and is "not pushed" in the output he has to produce. According to Swain "one function of the output is that it provides the opportunity for meaningful use of one's linguistic resources" (Swain, 1985, p.248) In other words he argues about the "comprehensible output": Learners must try to make themselves understood if they are to gain grammatical mastery of the target language.

### 2.2.5 Applicability of the models

In conclusion one could say that all three theorists have established the important factors influencing second language acquisition. It is also important to recognize the fact that these theories cannot be taken into account in isolation while considering the second language acquisition but rather be considered together, or be considered as interwoven, for positive and effective second language acquisition.

Krashen's theory holds these two critical ideas: the concept of 'comprehensible input' and the impact of the 'affective filter'. He believes that second languages are most readily acquired when the 'comprehensible input' is used in low stressed environment, and spoken and written language is slightly above what the learner already knows. Krashen states that an affective filter, which can be triggered off by emotions such as fear, anxiety and boredom, can hamper the acquisition of a second language.

While acknowledging the importance of the comprehensible input in second language acquisition, Long emphasizes the need for the learner to interact with the teacher and the importance of 'negotiating for meaning' by asking questions to clarify meanings, so that input can be made comprehensible for the learner.

Swain on the other hand claims that positive language acquisition is triggered off not only by receiving the 'comprehensible input' needed or by 'meaningful interaction' but also through 'comprehensible output', that is, opportunities provided for the learner for production of language. Therefore, the 'comprehensible output' is important as it stresses the importance of production while not denying the importance of 'input' and the 'interaction'. And even if all three factors were encouraged in the second language class, considerable attention has to be focused in making the learners' 'affective filter' lower as it will prevent the learners using the input, output or interaction for positive language acquisition.

In order to minimize some of the problems created by the heterogeneous factor very much present in the Sri Lankan second language classroom, it is important to analyze both the heterogeneous classroom (mixed ability) and the homogeneous classroom

(same ability) and establish to which grouping system are the above mentioned Second Language Acquisition theories most relevant.

### ***2.3 Review of Literature on Mixed Ability Grouping and Same Ability Grouping for Second Language Acquisition***

One of the features one can expect to find in our public school classrooms is the wide range of differences in the learners. The student population in most Sri Lankan school classrooms represent a diverse group of ability levels, cultures and socio-economic standings. It is also well known that children learn in different ways and at different speeds. It is necessary therefore, that teachers take account of these differences through appropriate lesson planning. Schools have sought to acknowledge these differences in pupils performances by grouping pupils in various ways such as Streaming (Homogeneous grouping by ability) and mixed ability classes (heterogeneous grouping). (Capel et al, 1995)

A considerable amount of research has been done on Grouping of students for effective Learning and Teaching. Many of these are complex and controversial. Certain research indicates that Homogenous grouping by ability has failed to improve the performance of low achievers (Eash, 1961). On the other hand, Research also indicate that Heterogeneous grouping, that is, mixed ability grouping, has not been successful unless it has small group methods that allowed students to proceed at their own space.

#### **2.3.1 Research based on Mixed Ability grouping (Heterogeneous grouping) for Teaching English as a Second Language**

“The term ‘Mixed Ability Grouping’ is frequently used synonymously with ‘Heterogeneous’ or ‘Unstreamed /Non streamed’ , ‘Natural or unselected groups’ ”(Reid et al, 1981, p.5) These classes are made up of groups reflecting the full range of ability in the school. Such classes may be grouped by following some apparently

arbitrary measure like simply dividing up an alphabetical list. However such a method will not always necessarily produce groups each of which contains the full range of ability represented in the student body as a whole. One important argument in support of mixed ability grouping is based on the principle of equal respect for each child as an individual because in homogeneous groups there is the tendency for the students to be treated as a block by the teachers. (Baily and Bridges, 1983)

In the context of the language class, a heterogeneous class or a mixed ability class, may be made up of students in many levels of linguistic ability and skills, and “a mix of successful and unsuccessful language learners.” (Skehen ,1998, p. 215-216). These classes are made up of students who differ in many ways. Distinction can be made between specified levels of linguistic ability and different skills, between phonology, structure and vocabulary, or between discourse and communication and there will be a variety of individual language needs (Miilrood, 2002 ).

Teachers often encounter difficulties in teaching when students of the same class exhibit a broad range of proficiency and experience in the English language. (Tsao, 2003) “The general impression of the heterogeneous class profile is that of greater symmetry in learner preferences. Such classes consist of ‘listeners’, ‘readers’, ‘writers’ and ‘speakers’ as well as learners with ‘attention’ and ‘thinking’ problems “ (Miilrood, 2002, p.130)

“One of the most common problems of the large mixed ability class is cohesion. The sheer disparity of the students’ language levels and interests can prove a strongly divisive influence. The larger the class, or more mixed the language competencies and skills of the students’ in it, the more easily the lessons will seem to disintegrate. Because of the different levels in a mixed ability group, it is difficult to keep the attention of all the students at the same time. What is interesting and challenging for one student may be boring or too easy for another. So while the teacher’s attention is fixed on one student on one side of the class, the others lose concentration and switch off and get increasingly noisy. This situation can be true of many a heterogeneous classes.” (Prodromau, 1994, p.12)

The problem of which teachers tend to be most aware when faced by a mixed ability class is that of providing challenging, useful activities for all class members simultaneously. The teacher will have to decide which activities will provide the best practice of the various skills the students need. (Bell, 1988)

In his 1994 study, Prodromau (pp.3-4) lists some views teachers of English have expressed about mixed ability classes expressing their view of their students;

‘Some of the students are advanced and lose interest in the class, and some of them hardly know any English at all and are forced to quit’

‘There are some students who always participate in the classroom, and others who seem totally indifferent’

‘Some of them are aggressive, and a domineering teacher can create an inferiority complex in weak students’

‘Weak students feel disappointed and don’t want to take part in the lesson’

Whether homogeneous classes or heterogeneous classes, each type has its own impact on many aspects involved in the English Language teaching situation, many aspects which have to be given consideration. The teacher and his role and the method of teaching, the learner, the teaching materials, evaluating methods are a few of such aspects to be taken into consideration. (Tsao, 2003)

Reid et al (1981, p.112) in their research identify the following as problems in mixed ability classes;

1. Disadvantages for students at the extremes of the ability ranges,  
The more able had a problem of reduced motivation and frustration at not being stretched and boredom resulting from waiting for the slower ones, the less able missing out and being left behind as the teacher always teaches for the average level of students.
2. Teacher’s difficulties in meeting pupil needs at the same time as he is the only mediating agent in the whole class.
3. The lack of stimulus material for a mixed ability class.
4. Problems of grading work in such a way as to maintain standards but avoid demotivating low achievers.

5. Difficulties relating to control and discipline which results from the difficulty of providing suitable activities for all pupils and of meeting demands for attention.

The role of the teacher is of utmost importance in handling large mixed ability classes. When analyzing the many classroom problems in such classes, the problem lies as much with teachers' attitudes as it does with students. Lack of motivation as they have lost faith in their students' desire to learn and also the loss of confidence in their own ability to motivate these students are the main factors which contribute towards the ineffectiveness of the teachers handling mixed ability classes. Some of the other weaknesses of many teachers are the Lack of confidence with the language and the lack training in techniques and methodology (Wright, 1987)

Despite many a negative attitude towards mixed ability classrooms, certain researchers are of the view that mixed ability classes are the best for teaching English, as they give weaker pupils positive models of achievement and every child a fair chance. Rather than considering heterogeneity as a problem that has to be managed, it should be looked upon as a feature of classroom life, which, if facilitated and supported by teacher and learners, can transform routine tasks into many layered language use (Shrubshall et al , 2004).

In the study conducted to find out the Effects of Ability Grouping (Ireson and Hallam, 1999) where both teachers and students of both mixed ability groups and ability groups were interviewed, it was also agreed that mixed ability grouping benefits all pupils in terms of social adjustment and self esteem. There was also no consensus that only very good teachers can teach mixed ability classes but there was strong agreement that developing appropriate teaching skills necessary to teach a mixed ability class, benefits all pupils. When questioned about the curriculum, the response suggested that less able pupils in mixed ability classes have greater access to the curriculum, participate in the same activities as their more able peers and are taught in the same way, thus giving them more room for achievement.

In another study (Oakes, 1985) it was argued that in Ability Group classes instruction in low groups was inferior and that high groups received more experience based learning and challenging problems, but with mixed ability grouping, all students will have access to the higher quality instruction. Oakes' argument is based on the assumption that what she has identified as 'quality' instruction will have the same beneficial results for both high and low achievers, and that only under this condition is equity achieved by providing the same instruction for all students.

The concept of 'differentiated instruction' is a way of responding to the various learner differences such as readiness levels, learning profiles and interests (Tomlinson, 1999). Differentiated instruction means creating and utilizing different instructional strategies to ensure that all students develop and learn to their fullest potential, regardless of their individual abilities, interests of learning styles. In short differentiated instruction includes students of all abilities, blending the whole class. It involves constant assessment of the varying abilities of individual students, while being able to plan best instructional practices for the entire class.

The emphasis on the pupil's individual development was also made by the majority of the English teachers interviewed in the 1981 study by Reid et al. The subject was seen as providing opportunity for the use of a variety of stimulus material to which the pupil could respond in an individual way, thus maintain the interest and enjoyment for pupils of different abilities. They were also of the view that the English class made a positive socializing role as many identified the English class as providing the ideal situation for the students' to develop their social skills and attitudes. For, the mixed ability class facilitated co-operative endeavour as teachers encouraged the students who had mastered a particular skill to aid those who were still struggling.

Altman (1980) specifies three important aspects that characterize individualized language teaching being

- a. A syllabus that meets that needs, abilities and interests of each learner.
- b. Personalized goals, means and expectations for learners
- c. Teaching methods tailored to the needs of the learners.

As Boaler et al (2000) suggested teaching can be done either by differentiation of tasks (different tasks are given to different students) or by differentiation of outcomes (all are given the same task but it can be attempted in a number of ways and levels of ability). In Silmani's (1987) study it was seen that the most proficient learners interacted more frequently than their less proficient classmates, and apparently participation was relatively profitable for them and for the less proficient learners it appeared that listening to other learners was more profitable than participating verbally themselves.

### **2.3.2 Research based on Ability Grouping ( Homogeneous grouping) for Teaching English as a Second Language**

Homogeneous Grouping, or grouping according to 'ability', or otherwise known as 'streaming', is defined in the Dictionary of Education as "the classification of pupils for the purpose of forming instructional groups having a relatively high degree of similarity in regard to certain factors that affect learning", therefore in the case of language learning the children are naturally distributed on some kind of hierarchy of their language competency level. (Tsao, 2003)

Scharer (1983, p.106) defines Homogeneous streaming as "division of pupils into classes in which the general attainment of pupils in a class is assumed to be higher than that in the class next below it in the list", that is pupils will be grouped according to their previous achievements and can be pushed on at a rate that is right for their level of attainment in a group with others whose pace of working is roughly similar.

Ability grouping can be done between classes or within a class. Between class grouping refers to a school's practice of forming classrooms that contain students of similar ability. Within class grouping refers to a teacher's practice of forming groups of similar ability within an individual class. Ability grouping is designed to increase the pace and raise levels of instruction for high achievers and provide more individual attention, repetition and review for low achievers. And the high achievers benefit

from having to compete with one another, and the low achievers benefit from not having to compete with one another. (Hollifield , 1987 )

Slavin (1986) concludes that such an approach can be instructionally effective, particularly when;

- it is done for only one or two subjects and students remain in heterogeneous classes for the rest of the day
- it greatly reduces student heterogeneity in a specific way
- group assignments are frequently reassessed
- teachers vary the level and pace of instruction according to student need.

However Ability Grouping raises certain issues such as;

- Is ability grouping an efficient way to handle differences in student abilities?
- Does such grading benefit them or does it unfairly label them?
- Does it increase student achievement by allowing the teacher to focus his instruction to the appropriate level and allow the teacher to adjust the pace of instruction? –eg; teacher might instruct at a slower pace with more repetition and reinforcement with a group of slow learners than he would with a group of successful learners (Slavin, 1986).

Many of the issues concerning grouping remain unresolved and most of the questions are still unanswered despite seventy to eighty years of practice and many a studies conducted on this issue. A great deal of sentiment, in support of and against, about the merits of ability grouping for teaching and learning of English as a second language has been recorded in the literature over a period of forty years or more.

The idea of ability grouping stems from the logical root that students have innate differences in ability and thus their educational experiences should be taken into account (Lou et al, 2000). It does not therefore seem morally wrong to create homogeneous groups which enable teachers to provide a suitable level of teaching for the whole group. Furthermore students within homogeneous groups should be able to benefit from corporation, mutual facilitation and studying at a suitable pace. (Cheung and Rudowicz, 2003)

A survey by Hallam (1999) indicated that nearly two thirds of all primary schools were adopting ability grouping of some kind, largely in an attempt to raise educational standard for English and Mathematics and that some secondary schools too used ability grouping for subjects such as English and mathematics and retained the mixed ability grouping for the other subjects.

Commenting on the many positive effects of ability grouping on these aspects Goldberg et al (1996 , p.151) have stated the following.

1. The average ability level of the class prompts the teacher to adjust materials and methods and to set appropriate expectations and standards. Thus, the ability of the children in large measure determines what is taught and how it is taught.
2. When the range is narrowed, the teacher can more readily adapt both content and method to the abilities of the children.
3. In the absence of ability extremes, which require special planning and instruction, each pupil can receive more teacher time and attention.
4. When the range is narrowed, the children are faced with more realistic criteria against which to measure themselves. They compete with their peers, so to speak, rather than having to compare their own achievement to that of far brighter or far duller pupils.

In an attempt to determine if homogenous grouping makes teaching more effective, a research involving 2,212 students was conducted in 1977 by Vella and Hilgers. These students were divided into four groups for a two hour placement examination. Out of these four groups students were randomly selected to form four more heterogeneous groups. At the end of the semester another test was administered to them along with questionnaires to students and teachers who had participated in homogenous groups. Although the differences between the end of course examination scores of the heterogeneous groups and the homogenous groups were not great enough to be statistically significant, a great majority of both teachers and students were convinced that homogenous grouping did make teaching in the courses more effective. Students

in classes of 15 or fewer had showed greater improvement than students in large classes.

Despite the perceived benefits, there are certain criticisms and concerns about ability grouping. According to Ireson , Hallam and Motimore's (1999) study ability grouping might cause negative psychological impact on students for unfairly categorizing or labeling them. In their study about the relationships between ability grouping and personal and social factors, it was shown that the teachers thought that grouping practices affected self esteem .

According to certain other researchers, ability grouping denies equal access to education by depriving low achieving students of the kinds of challenges that would provide optimal learning experiences (Bradock and Slavin,1993). Page (1992) charges that the higher achievers get more resources and are taught by better qualified teachers who are more enthusiastic and spend more time preparing for classes. In contrast the lower achievers do not have enough resources or qualified teachers and instruction tends to be fragmented with a dull curriculum and dwelling only on basic skills.

Goldberg et al (1966) concluded that ability grouping is neither good nor bad. Because its value depends upon the way in which it is used. When it is used without understanding the specific learning needs of the students concerned or when it is used without recognizing the fact that it must be used with carefully planned variations in curriculum, ability grouping could be ineffective and in fact harmful. Also ability grouping can become harmful if it makes the teachers and especially the students believe that because there is grouping the school is providing a different language program for pupils of varying levels of language ability. It becomes harmful if it leads the teacher to under estimate the 'slow' language learner. It also can become very damaging if it does not provide channels for moving children from the low achieving groups to the higher ability groups.

But on the other hand there are many a research which supports ability grouping as positively reinforcing low ability students' self image and social adjustment. (Kulik, 1992 )

Both competitiveness and anxiety relate to a further factor, that is, self esteem; Language learning poses a threat to a person's self esteem, as would any task where success was not guaranteed and the probability of making a fool of oneself was so very high. In a classroom where all the other learners or the majority might be better than you, this may pose a threat to one's self esteem. This may be the case for many students in heterogeneous classes. Learners who started off with low self esteem scores, do very badly at learning languages. Even in a homogeneous class of low achievers this can be a relevant issue. Addressing this problem Nanda (1998) states that the Homogeneous groups of low achievers can be successful if adequate steps are taken to eliminate low expectation of stigmatization (students feeling that they can not learn because they are in a 'dummy' class) and related problems.

Addressing this problem, Tsao (2003) concludes that it is the responsibility of the teachers to provide more encouragement and create chances for student-student interaction to avoid a sense of segregation on the part of the students. To those students who experience difficulties and frustration due to the grouping policy, more consideration and communication is necessary so that the negative effects of grouping may be reduced to a minimum. Communication between teachers and students must always be kept open so that the teacher will always know what the students think. This will enable the teachers to improve on the areas where students have complaints. The students too will be able to understand fully the rationale behind the grouping policy and will be able to place his confidence in the system.

One conclusion that can be drawn from research on ability grouping is that unless teaching methods are systematically changed, or unless teachers use it to provide different instruction to different groups, ability grouping has little impact on student achievement. The success of it seems to depend less upon grouping itself than upon the differentiation in curriculum content, methods and the techniques of the teacher.

In this context there is a need to examine how grouping has an impact on the second language classroom in Sri Lanka.

## ***2.4 Research in the Second Language Classrooms in Sri Lanka***

In Sri Lanka English is learnt more like a “Foreign Language” rather than a “Second Language” since it is learnt only as an academic language in school, one period a day, by majority of the students in the country. For, in a Foreign Language teaching situation language teaching / learning takes place somewhere where the language being taught is not a normal part of the regular lives of the learners. On the other hand, in second language teaching by contrast, the teaching takes place in the target language community itself. Even though many of the students learn English as a second language after their mother tongue, our learning context is very much different to many other second language learning environments, as Canada, Britain, U.S.A or Australia where students learn through formal teaching accompanied by frequent interaction with the English language. (Mohan et al, 2001) Our situation is more closer to Dornyei’s (1990) definition of Foreign Language Learning, where most learner’s principal contact with the second language is in the classroom and where students learn English with an instrumental motivation of getting a job or going abroad or with a need for achievement as they have to do well in the Subject in order to keep the aggregate high.

The practice of grouping students of similar ability or achievement together for instruction is a common feature of schools worldwide. In Sri Lanka, on the other hand, age based and mixed ability settings have long been the norm in schools. Students are grouped into the same class according to their age, year of study. As a result, a class of students at varying levels with vastly different needs are grouped into one class. And, very often these classes are quite large consisting of about 35 to 40 students.

In a study devolved to assess English teacher effectiveness Karunaratne (1993) describes a particular second language classroom in a school situated in the Colombo urban area. In that class there were children from the nearby slums ( about 10% ) as well as children of past pupils of the school when it was a fee levying institution ( about 10%) and the rest were those who had entered school from feeder primary

schools. The strong influence of homes where English was spoken still permeated the school. These were the homes of the past pupils. The students who came from the near by slums and those who had come from feeder primary school were very weak in English. This is the true picture of the majority of second language classrooms in many schools in urban areas. “The presence of advanced pupils in beginners classes creates problems of class management” (De Lanerolle commission, 1973, p. 68 )

In investigating the role of classroom interaction in second language learning using four case studies Perera (2002) found four second language levels in the same classroom. In a large popular National school in Colombo she found four levels of second language ability. Perera found that heterogeneity in the class varied according to the school type. She claimed that very little effort was made to accommodate the learning needs of the less proficient learners. Therefore the English communication was minimum in the four classrooms observed and even if it does take place , the better students always dominated the situation, thus leaving out the less able students. Perera claims that ironically there was less interaction in the so called ‘prestigious “school where as there was more interaction in the most disadvantageous school, however, it was mostly in the First Language. ( Perera,2002)

Another important factor to be considered in the process of learning and teaching are the text books available. Since there is only one text available for each grade, the classroom heterogeneity makes it very difficult to meet the language requirements of all the students in the class, with the limited material made available to our teachers (National Education Commission, 2004). Poole ( 2003) too comments on the lack of appropriate instructional materials and the limited resources for English language teaching. Classroom heterogeneity is an important factor that should be taken into consideration when planning Syllabuses, text books and teachers guides. The texts should be designed to cater to a range of abilities and contain tasks catering to different levels. Teachers should be trained in the task of selective teaching. (Cumaranatunge, 2004; Perera, 2002).

The only effective way to handle a heterogeneous class room is to adapt the instruction and the materials to suit the various levels of students’ linguistic competencies. However, in the Sri Lankan context it does not happen. Perera (2002)

claims that in the four classrooms that she observed using the same textbook with all the students did not help in language learning. Through her findings Perera (2002) challenges the assumption that using the same textbook with all the students in all classrooms can provide equal opportunities to learn English or “English for all”. In a subsequent study (Perera, 2003) she has claimed that in the most disadvantaged school she used in the study, the teacher was able to adapt the material to suit the level of the learners. She elaborates how students who could not even read one word in the text book were motivated to attain at least a basic level in the English Language.

A study to find out the feasibility of using same ability grouping to minimize the problems of student heterogeneity in learning and teaching of English language was conducted by Perera (2007). Problems relating to student heterogeneity were identified through questionnaire administered to teachers and students of mixed ability classes. It was found that 81% of the sample of teachers claimed that they were teaching mixed ability classes. Of them 92% said that teaching such classes was a problem to them. On the other hand, only 14% had any training in handling such classes. Through the case study of a school which carried out a policy of grouping, for the purpose of teaching English the researcher was able to find out how such an approach affected the students psychologically, academically and socially and whether they accept and value such a system as beneficial. The findings revealed that most students were appreciative of their ability grouping even though many were concerned about the labelling. Even the less proficient learners were comfortable and were free to interact in their groups. The results also indicated positive language acquisition. The teachers too were of the opinion that ability grouping could solve some of their problems as they were free to adapt material and instruction according to the levels of the students.

## **2.5 Summary**

This chapter elaborated the theoretical framework of the study. As discussed the study would be based on a combination of the concepts of “comprehensible input”, “affective Filter”, “negotiation of meaning” and “pushed output”. In a mixed ability classroom the students will not be able to get comprehensible input as the students current levels would be different. They would be hindered by many affective factors

as they would be shy to make mistakes in front of their able peers. Nor will they be comfortable to negotiate for meaning or get opportunities to produce language. Hence, adapting materials to suit at least three different levels and grouping students accordingly may facilitate language acquisition better.

The research findings elaborated above also confirm the view that material adaptation and grouping may be a feasible option for Sri Lankan second language classrooms.

Chapter three will elaborate the methodology of the study based on this theoretical framework.

# Chapter 3

## 3.0 METHODOLOGY

### 3.1 Introduction

Chapter 2 elaborated the theoretical background of the study and indicated the gap that exists in the Sri Lankan ESL classrooms with regards to the use of ability grouping. This chapter discusses the methodology adopted in the study in using ability grouping.

### 3.2 Research Design

The research design adopted in this study was the Collaborative action research model.

#### 3.2.1 Action Research

The integration between teaching, researching and learning requires a type of research that assists reflection and self-examination in teachers. Such an integration, it has been claimed requires a type of research in which teachers can search for solutions to everyday, real problems experienced in classrooms, or look for ways to improve instruction and increase student achievement (Finch, 2005). These requirements, are provided through the use of action research.

Action Research is the systematic, reflective study of one's actions and the effects of these actions in a workplace context. As such, it involves deep inquiry into one's professional action.

(Riel, 2007, p.45)

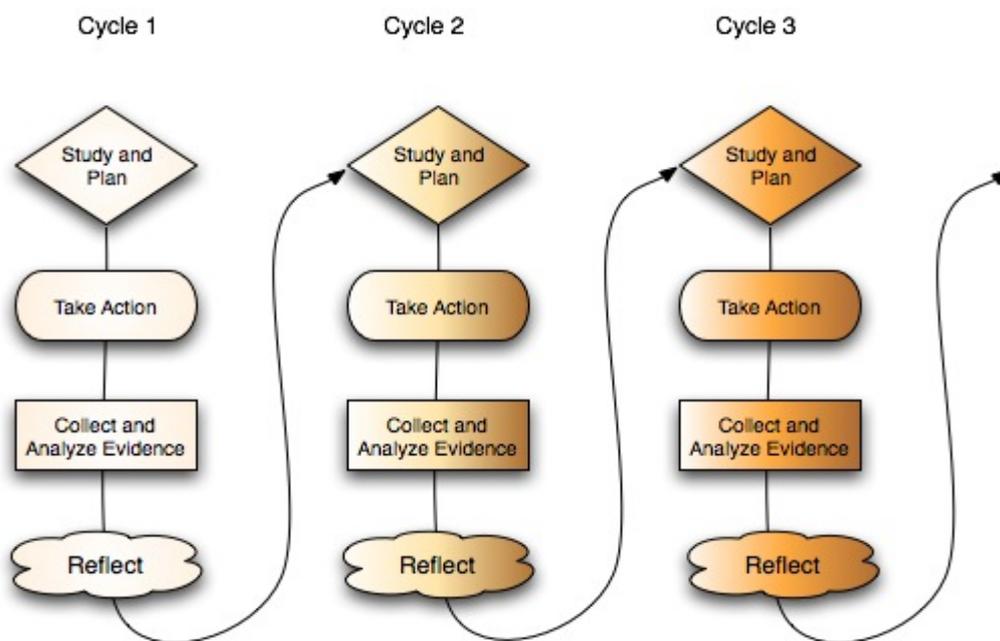
There is no single model for action research. Different researchers use different models. However, all adopt methodical and iterative sequences of research. These sequences are meant to offer a systematic approach to introducing innovations in

teaching and learning. They seek to do this by putting the teacher in the role of producer of educational theory and user of this theory. The process of researching in action research (AR) brings theory and practice together. According to Madrid (2000, p. 22), there are four classic developmental phases of AR:

- Phase 1: Develop a plan of action to a) improve what is already happening or b) identify and examine a "puzzle" or problem area in your teaching;
- Phase 2: Act to implement the plan;
- Phase 3: Observe the effects of action in the context in which it occurs, and
- Phase 4: Reflect on these effects.

These basic phases can be seen in the following diagram:

### Action Research Cycle



Progressive Problem Solving with Action Research

This form of research then is an iterative, cyclical process of reflecting on practice, taking an action, reflecting, and taking further action. Therefore, the research takes shape as it is being performed. Better understanding from each cycle points the way to improved actions.

While the design of action research can originate with an individual, social actions taken without the collaborative participation of others are often less effective. To be successful, the action researchers have to plan in such a way as to draw an ever widening group of stakeholders into the arena of action. The goal is to work towards a better understanding of their situation in order to affect a positive personal and social change (Riel, 2007).

### **3.2.2 Collaborative action Research**

Collaborative action research may include as few as two teachers or a group of several teachers and others interested in addressing a classroom or department issue. This issue may involve one classroom or a common problem shared by many classrooms. These teachers may be supported by individuals outside of the school, such as a university or community partner (Ferrance, 2000)

In the present research the main researcher together with two assistant researchers worked in collaboration with five practicing teachers and two Regional English Support Centre (RESC ) staff to conduct an action research. The two assistant researchers were lecturers from the Faculty of Education teaching in the Post Graduate Diploma in Education (Teaching of English as a Second Language). They together with the two RESC staff members acted as “mentors” to the practicing teachers. The action research was based on the following objectives.

## **3.3 Objectives**

3.3.1 Identify activities given in the textbooks that can cater to the competency levels identified in the TIMS (Teacher Instructional Manuals).

3.3.2 Adapt the identified activities to cater to three different ability levels of students.

3.3.3 Train teachers to conduct these activities in their classrooms.

3.3.4 Implement the activities.

3.3.5 Analyze the implementation of the activities.

3.3.6 Suggest how teachers can exploit the text books to cater to different language ability levels.

### **3.4 The Context**

The context in which the action research took place was two schools, one from Colombo and the other from Gampaha District.

Originally it was proposed to take one of the leading National Girls' schools from Colombo as one of the sites. However, due to the tight schedule of completing syllabuses before the end of year examinations coinciding with the time of the research, it was not possible to conduct this study in that particular school. Hence another Girls' school from Colombo was selected for the study. Since this school also had the Tamil medium, and a teacher was willing to implement the action research, one class selected was from the Tamil medium.

Five classes, three from the Colombo school and two from the Gampaha school were selected on the basis of the willingness of the teachers to be participants of the study.

Originally it was planned to select two classes each from grade 7 and 10 from the Colombo school and one class each from the Gampaha school. The selection was purposive as the teachers had to be agreeable to be participants in the study.

The final sample selected was as follows;

Colombo school	Grade 10	two classes
	Grade 07	one class
Gampaha school	Grade 10	one class
	Grade 07	one class

Selecting a school from Gampaha was once again due to the willingness of the teacher to be a participant. Further, the school is close to the RESC centre from which the two RESC staff members were willing to assist the team.

### **3.5 Methodology**

In the first cycle of planning the principal researcher together with the research team planned how to achieve objectives 3-3.1 -3.3.3

Next the five teachers (three teaching in grade 10 and two teachers teaching in grade 7) implemented the activities prepared for one unit.

During six sessions, the research team first tried to match the activities given in the unit five of the textbook with the expected competencies identified in the syllabus.

It was found that there were mismatches between the activities and competencies. Hence it was necessary to find different activities or look for a competency that matched with the activity.

Nex, the research team tried to adapt the activities to suit three different levels. Initially it was expected to prepare activities and for both schools to implement the same activities. However, during the discussions it was felt that the same activities may not be suitable for both schools. Thus the teachers were given the freedom to adapt the activities to suit the levels of their students.

The teachers were advised to divide the class in to three groups based on the first term marks and maintain a log book where they recorded reflections of activities conducted. In order to reduce the psychological impact of being in the lowest group it was decided to have both same ability grouping as well as occasionally to have mixed group or whole class participation.

When the collaborative teachers implemented the activities, the two research assistants and the two RESC staff members observed the lessons and conducted focus group interviews with the teachers.

After the first three lessons the principle researcher had discussions with the team. It was found that the students' performance in the Gampaha school which consisted mainly of scholarship holders was better than in the Colombo school. However, the teachers both at Gampaha and Colombo felt that they needed to simplify the activities further. The teachers were given the freedom to do so to cater to the level of their students.

At the end of the unit, the principal researcher, the practicing teachers, and two RESC staff members had a post intervention discussion. Based on the insights gained, the activities will be further adapted and refined to suit three different language levels.

Due to the time constraints as a result of the commencement of the research being delayed, only the first cycle of the action research could be implemented. However, the five practicing teachers will be empowered to continue to adapt the activities in the following year in their classes. The RESC staff members will be able to use this knowledge to train the teachers in their zones. Thus the cascade model of training will continue even after the study is over.

## **3.6 Research Instruments**

### **3.6.1 Documentary analysis**

The following documents were analysed, first to identify the competencies related to the unit

- Teacher Instructional Manuals
- Syllabuses
- Pupil's textbook and Workbook

Next, the activities in the Pupil's books were matched with the identified competencies.

### **3.6.2 Interviews**

Interviews were held with the practicing teachers to find out the units they were doing.

Once the intervention commenced they were interviewed to find out how students were grouped and the feasibility of the activities.

Finally both teachers and the RESC staff were interviewed for their feedback on the study.

### **3.6.3 Log books**

Teachers were asked to maintain a logbook in which they were expected to write their reflections on the implementation of the activities.

### **3.6.4 Observations**

Each teacher was observed three times during the intervention. The observers' comments were collected for triangulation of data.

### **3.6.5 Questionnaires**

Questionnaires were given to students to gather their feedback on the activities. The questionnaire provided valuable information regarding their English language needs, textbooks and activities done in classrooms.

The questionnaire was administered at the end of the intervention and after the third term test. The administration of the questionnaire was done by the class teacher and not by the English teachers who were involved in the intervention.

### **3.6.6 Pre test Post test marks**

Term test marks were used as pre test and post test to judge whether the students have improved.

### **3.7 Limitations of the study**

The study was planned for 6 months. However, due to administrative problems the duration of the research was curtailed to four months.

As a result the study was conducted during the third term in schools.

There were further limitations as most schools had to complete half of the unit 5 activities before commencing unit 6.

Although it was originally planned to administer a pre test and a post test, this was not possible in most classes. Hence, term test marks were used. Even though this may not be a very robust instrument, since in testing language it is the skills that are tested and not subject matter this could still be considered a reliable measure as the both papers measured the same skills such as reading, writing and grammar.

### **3.8 Summary**

This chapter elaborated the research methodology used in the study. Chapter 4, will analyse the data.

# Chapter 04

## 4.0 Presentation and Analysis of Data

### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter analyses the data collected through various research instruments. This analysis will be based on the objectives of the research and in relation to the four main stages of the action research cycle identified in chapter 3.

### 4.2 Identify the activities in the Pupil's book that cater to the competency levels for the grades

The first activity in the planning cycle of the action research was to match activities in the Pupil's book and Work book with the competencies identified for the Grades in the Syllabus. Thus the Data collection was mainly through documentary analysis.

The competency levels identified for grade 7 and 10 are given in the Tables 1 & 2. These competency levels have been extracted from the syllabus given in Annexure1 & 2.

As can be seen, most competency levels could not be matched with the given activities. Therefore, the research team had to discuss and match activities with a suitable competency level corresponding to other grades.

## Grade 7

**Table 1: Activities & Competencies**

Activity	Competency Level
6.1	5.2
6.2	4.1
6.3	4.2
6.4	4.2
6.5	6.2
6.6	5.2
6.7	7.2*
6.8	5.5*
6.9	7.6*
6.10	5.6*
6.11	6.2
6.12	5.4*
6.13	5.4*
6.14	5.2
6.15	6.3
6.16	5.4*
<b>6.17</b>	<b>2.1*</b>

## Grade 10

**Table 2: Activities & competencies**

Activity	Competency Level
6.1	5.2*
6.2	5.5*
6.3	5.7
6.4	4.4*
6.5	6.2*
6.6	5.28
6.7	7.1,7.2*
6.8	5.2*
6.9	5.2*
6.10	5.8
6.11	6.2,*6.11
6.12	5.4*
6.13	7.7*, 7.11
6.14	5.2*
6.15	8.14
6.16	6.11, 6.10

The competency levels marked with an \* indicate that they are not competency levels identified for the particular grade.

It could also be noted that most of the activities in both grades relate to competency 4, 5, 6 & 7. This means that out of the eight competencies identified four have been neglected. These competencies are;

1. Identifies the sound system of English Language
2. Uses mechanics of writing with understanding
3. Engages in active listening and responds appropriately.
8. Communicates clearly, fluently and concisely

This analysis confirms that there is a mismatch between the activities and competency levels. Further, the given activities do not cater equally to the development of different language skills or competencies.

### **4.3 Adaptation of activities to suit different ability levels**

The second stage of the planning cycle is to act on the implementation plan. The research team discussed and adapted all the activities in unit 6 to suit three different ability levels. In the next section two samples each from the two grades would be illustrated.

#### **4.3.1 Examples of how the activities were adapted to suit the three levels – Grade 7**

When the research team perused the first activity in Unit 6 of the Grade 7 Pupil's book, all the members agreed that the given passage would be difficult for most students. Therefore, it was decided that the first Work Book activity should be done before the Reading activity given in the Pupil's Textbook. However, that activity also needed to be adapted to suit the three levels

Given below is the activity given in the Workbook p, 54.

#### **Work book Activity 6a**

##### **Reading /Writing**

##### **Read the passage on Kohomba Tree**

The Kohomba tree has medicinal value.

The Tamils call it 'Vempu'. The flowering season of the tree is between March and April.

Every part of this tree tasted bitter.

It has yellowish green fruits. It is used to make herbal oil. The seed is valuable as an insecticide. Some use the twigs of this tree

As a tooth brush. The green leaves are insect resistant.

They are kept in between the pages of books to prevent insects from destroying pages.

This tree is considered as one of the most precious trees in the world.

**Find the following information from the passage. Write**

1. Value of the tree .....
2. Flowering season .....
3. Taste .....
4. Colour of the fruit .....
5. Use of the fruit .....
6. Use of the twigs.....
7. Value of the seed .....
8. Value of the leaves.....

How the above activity was adapted to suit the three levels.

**Group A**

Competency level 5.2

Extract specific information and reconstruct the paragraph

This group was given a simplified paragraph and fill in the blanks.

They were asked to find the necessary words from the text given in the Work book.

The passage given to them

Kohomba is a valuable ..... Plant.  
Flowering season is from ..... To  
..... The leaves taste .....

Kohomba tree has ..... Fruits.  
The ..... are used as insecticides.  
Some uses twigs as ..... It is a very  
Valuable tree.

**Group B**

Competency level 5.2

Extract specific information and write the answers

Same activity as given in the Work Book

## Group C

This group would be asked to do both activity 6a and 6d as they are the highest ability group.

### Activity 6d

#### Writing

**Write a description of one of the important plants/tree in your area. Paste or draw a picture of it. (57)**

Since this group would be doing two different activities relating to reading and writing we had to look for a competency level related to writing.

Thus the competency levels identified are

Competency level 5.2 –

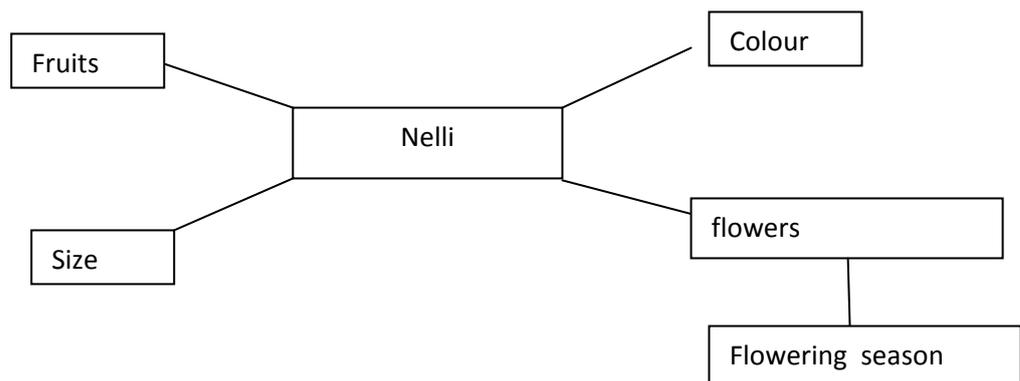
Extracts specific information

Competency level 7.2

Writes description of things

However, this competency is not listed in the syllabus for grade 7

In order to help the students to write the paragraph the following mind map was also given



The research team was of the opinion that the students would find it easier to do activity 1 given in the Pupil's book after doing the Work book activity, Hence, the passage was not adapted, but the activity was slightly altered to suit the three levels as shown below.

**Given below is the paragraph given in the Pupil's book**

**Wonders of Nature**

**Reading**

**You may have seen or heard that a small animal becomes the prey of a large animal. But have you ever seen a plant which catches insects? Don't you like to know about such plants? The pitcher plant is one of them.**

***Pitcher Plant***

Pitcher plant grows in shallow areas where soil is poor in nitrogen. This plant has large leaves which are twisted by themselves to form a pitch shaped vessel with a lid. It attracts by its pitcher shaped leaves in which rainwater can accumulate. Inside the wall of the pitcher there are hairs which are directed downwards so that when an insect goes into the pitcher it gets trapped inside. Although, it would struggle to come out, it has no escape. The hairs keep it entangled and the insect would die exhausted. Ultimately, the insect is digested and absorbed by the plant. This is how the plant catches insects.

**Activity 6.1 Comprehension**

**Reading/Writing**

- a.
  1. What is the name of the plant?
  2. Where does the plant hold water?
  3. What makes it difficult for the insects to come out?
  4. What else does the pitcher plant do to digest the insect?
  5. Name two other plants that you know which trap insects?
  
- b. Describe the process of trapping an insect by the plant to a friend.

### **Competency level 5.2 – Extracts specific information from a text**

The research team felt that the questions 3 & 4 were difficult for the students. Hence, they were adapted as follows.

3. What is inside it?
4. What happens to the insects when they fall inside?

Students in group A was asked to answer only questions 1-3

Group B – questions 1, 2, 3 & 5 (question 4 was optional)

Group C – All the questions given in the Pupil's book

As will be discussed in section 4.4, this is one of the lessons that was not very successful.

### **Example of a lesson adaptation in grade 10**

In Grade 10, unit 6 is on Science and Technology. The first activity is a reading/writing task.

#### **Activity 6.1**

#### **Reading /Writing**

Science and technology has helped people to gain control over nature. The first people had little control over nature. They had to depend on nature for their living. They had no permanent homes. Animal skins were their only protection against the cold. The sun was their only source of light. With the passage of time, people discovered how to make fire and learnt to raise animals and crops. With the development of farming, they began to build settlements. Then they discovered new methods to make their work easier and to increase their comforts. Through the ages technology has helped people to build a more comfortable way of life.

Industrial technology began with the invention of the steam engine. The work in factories became faster. The production increased. The working hours were reduced. The radio and the television changed their entertainment habits.

Technology helps people to live in greater comfort and security than in the past. Agriculture, medicine and transport technologies have brought many benefits to man.

Today machines do most of the work. Powered machines have increased production and given people more leisure. The needs of the people began to increase. The result is the creation of a world of modern science and technology.

## Activity 6.2 – Pair work

### Writing

Write five sentences describing how people lived before technological inventions.

Write five sentences describing how technology has helped people.

This is how the activity was adapted.

### Group A

#### Activity 1

**Read paragraph 1 and say whether the following sentences are true or false.**

1. In the past people used sciences and technology to control nature,
2. Nature was not important to the people in the past.
3. People used simple tools in the past.
4. People lived in temporary homes in the past.
5. People had good knowledge on farming.
6. Animal skins were their clothes.
7. People learnt to use fire little by little.
8. Now the people have a good way of life because of technology.

#### Activity 2

**Read the following sentences and match them with paragraphs 2, 3 or 4**

1. Now the people use different types of technology to have a better life than in the past

2. Today people use machines to increase their production.

3. People used industrial technology to work in factories.

## **Group B**

### **Activity 1**

**Match the following headings with the paragraphs**

<b>Heading</b>	<b>Paragraph No</b>
Machines and the modern science and Technology	.....
How life improved in the past	.....
Types of technology	.....
Use of industrial technology	.....

### **Activity 2**

**Work book activity 6e**

**Reading/writing**

**Read the passage titled “Technology” and complete the following flow chart.**

(Refer annexure 7 for the activity)

## **Group C**

### **Activity 1**

**Pupil’s Book activity 6.2 (What is given above)**

### **Activity 2**

**Work book activity 6e**

How a grammar activity given in the Pupil’s book was adapted to suit the different levels is illustrated below.

**Example 2**

**Activity 6.16**

**Grammar –Relative Clauses**

**Competency Level ;**

**Identifies the functions and positions of different word classes in a sentence**

**Group A**

Fill in the blanks with a suitable relative pronoun

That/which/who/whom/whose

1. The woman .....lives next door is a doctor.
2. Mala works for a company .....makes washing machines.
3. Kumar sold the car .....he was given by his parents.
4. I met a man .....sister know you.
5. he woman .....I wanted to see was away on holiday.

**Group B**

Complete the sentences. Choose the most suitable ending from the box and make it in to a relative clause.

Use the relative pronouns that/ which/ who/whom/whose to link the sentences.

1. The book is about a girl.....
2. What was the name of the horse .....
3. What has happened to the pictures .....
4. What is the name of the man .....
5. I do not know the name of the woman to.....

Were on the wall

I spoke on the phone

Runs away from home

Car you borrowed

## **Group C**

### **Activity 6.16 (given in the Pupil's book)**

That/which/who/whom/whose
---------------------------

Write five sentences with relative clauses.

Form relative clauses using the five relative pronouns given in the box.

Before the intervention the research team discussed and adapted the materials hoping to have uniformity in all the classes. The first nine lessons were adapted completely, while how the rest of the activities could be adapted were discussed, they were not completely adapted.

It was decided to meet one week after the implementation of the activities. The implementation of the intervention will be discussed in section 4.4

#### **4.3.2 Grouping of students**

The first activity the participating teachers agreed to do was to group the students of each class into three groups, based on the second term marks.

A surprising finding was that even though the team expected the Colombo school students to be better than the Gampaha students, it was not as we expected.

The bar graphs below display the disparity in language proficiency that exists among the different classes.

## Second Term mark distribution – Grade 10

Fig. 4.1a

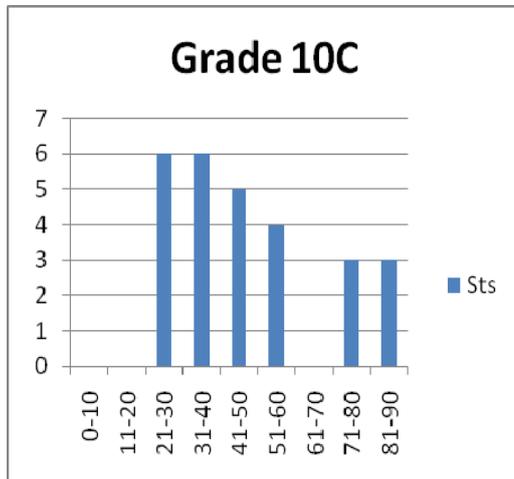


Fig 4.1b

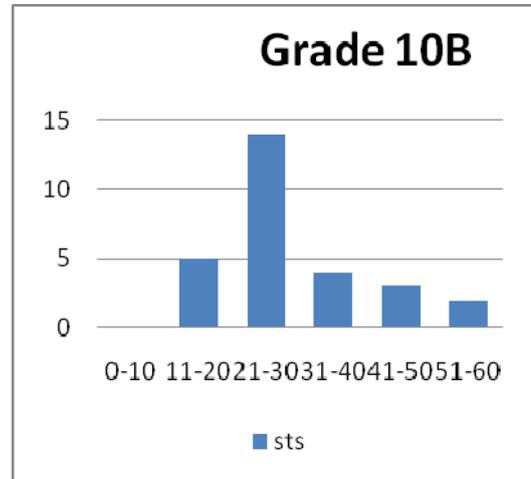


Fig. 4.1a (Grade 10 C) and Fig. 4.1b (Grade 10b) display the marks of the two grade 10 classes from the Colombo school. It could be seen that students' performance in the 10C class is better than the 10B class.

In both classes student heterogeneity can be seen quite prominently. While students' scores range from 20-90 in Grade 10C, in grade 10B it ranges from 0-60.

On the other hand, in grade 10 A, which is the Gampaha school students' performance was better with the lowest score being in the range of 40-50 However, the highest score was between 90-100 indicating that there still exists heterogeneity.

Fig. 4.1c

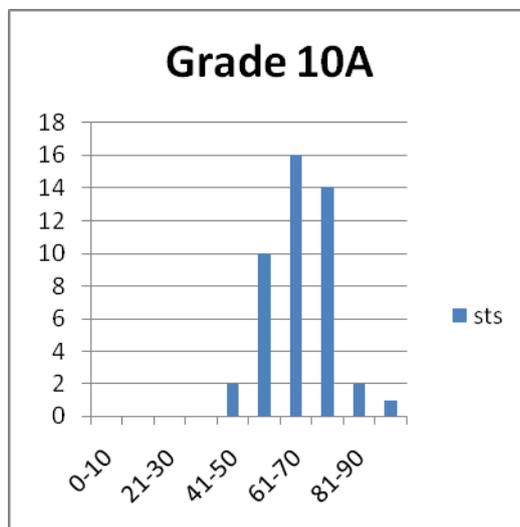
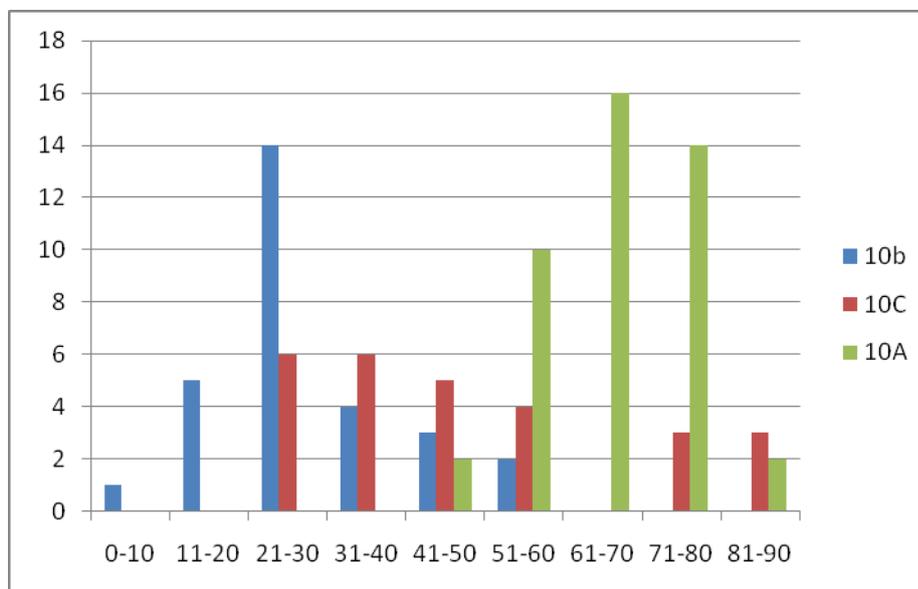


Figure 4.2 displays the mark ranges of all three classes.

**Fig. 4.2**

**A comparison of performance in the three classes**



From the analysis of the second term marks for English, it could be concluded that all three classes are mixed ability classes, confirming that student heterogeneity exists.

It was also found that it was difficult to decide on a common mark to divide the students into three groups.

Thus students in the three classes were grouped as follows.

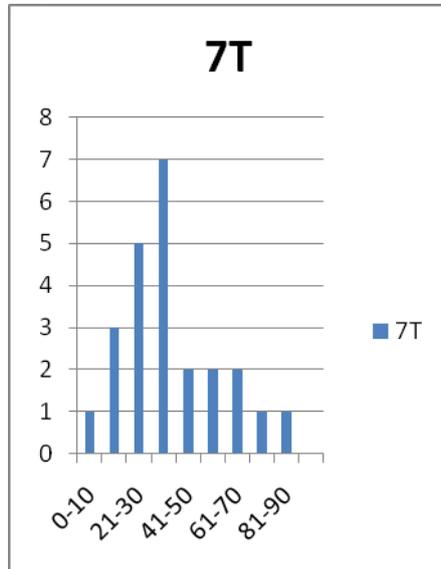
Table 4.1 – Grouping of students – Grade 10

Grade	marks		
	elementary	intermediate	advance
10B	0-25	26-40	41-60
10C	21-40	41-60	61-90
10A	40-60	61-75	76-100

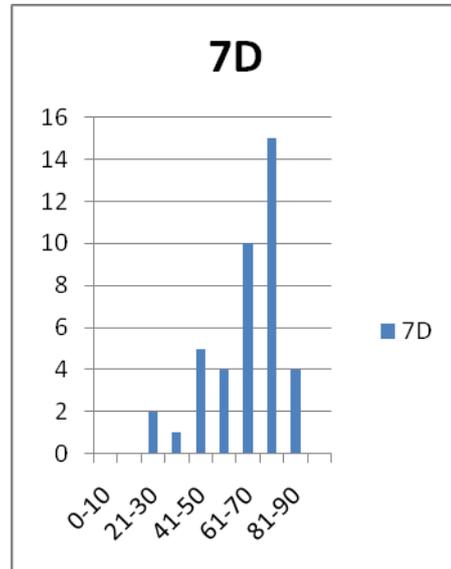
## Performance in Grade 7

The performances of grade 7 students of both schools are displayed in fig.4.3a and 4.3b.

**Fig. 4.3a**



**Fig. 4.3b**

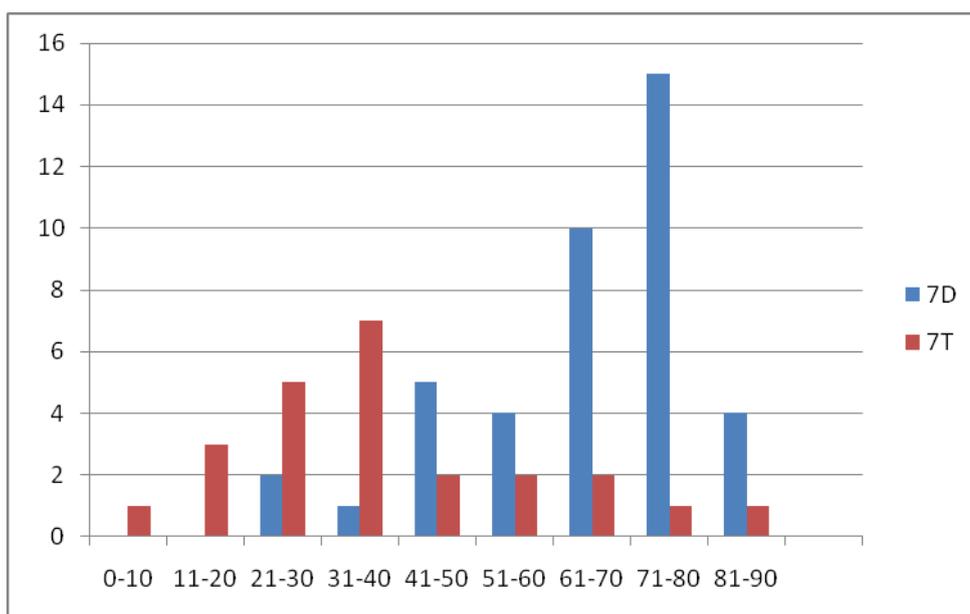


While 7T is the Colombo school, 7D is the Gampaha school. As displayed in the above figures, both classes comprise of heterogeneous group of students. While in the Colombo school the marks range from 05 -90, in the Gampaha school the marks ranges from 25-85

However, as in the performance of grade 10 students the Gampaha students' performance is better than the Colombo schools. While the most number of students in the Gampaha school had scored between 71-80, in the Colombo school the most number of students had scored between 31-40.

The comparison of the marks of the two classes are shown in Fig, 4.4

**Fig. 4.4**



According to the marks, the two teachers have grouped the students into three levels as shown in Table 4.2

**Table 4.2 - Grouping of students – grade 7**

Grade	marks		
	elementary	intermediate	advance
7T	0-30	31-50	51-90
7D	31-59	60-80	81-90

#### **4.4 Observe the effects of the action plan**

This section refers to the third stage of the action plan. In order to observe the effects of the action plan several modes were used.

##### **4.4.1 Implementation of the lessons**

The five teachers implemented the first lesson by doing the activities as adapted by the team. However, they found it difficult to implement them successfully. The teachers felt that the activities were still too advanced for the lowest ability group.

Some of the comments of the different teachers are given below.

### **Teacher Comments**

#### **Grade 7 D**

Lesson –*The Pitcher Plan (Lesson Plan – annexure 3)*

#### ***Teacher’s Observation***

*The students in group A did not pay attention to the lesson, when the lesson was read for the first time. However, they paid attention when the vocabulary item was introduced prior to reading.*

*When the others were engaged in the activity we (the students of Group A with the help of the teacher) re-read the paragraph and then they engaged in the assigned activity willingly.*

*However, the work done in their books showed that most of them only answered the third question, even after helping them with reading.*

#### ***Reflection***

*Although the paragraph was short, it had long, complex sentences where weaker students could lose their concentration. Therefore, it was decided to simplify the text, for them to use it effectively in the next lesson. It was also observed that some students in this group didn’t know the basic words like “grow”, “plant” and “large”*

#### **Grade 7T**

No group could finish within the given time.

#### **Reflection**

*I think the competency level is not suitable for them. We need to adapt the activities still further.*

## **Grade 10 A**

### ***Observation***

*Most of the students were unable to complete the task within the given time. It was quite difficult for them to write the names of instruments that are found in the school laboratory. When I went round the groups it was clearly seen. Some students wanted the translation by giving the Sinhala term.*

### ***Reflection***

*...I think before providing this activity, they should be given another activity a bit easier than this.*

## **Grade 10 D**

### ***Observation***

*I grouped them in to same ability groups today. They were not happy about it. The first step was a failure. They only knew Muralidaran. They were not familiar with other sports persons”*

### ***Reflection***

*I need to adapt the activity further*

Since each school had a different agenda it was difficult for all schools to commence the intervention on the same day. As a result I met the teachers of the two schools separately. We discussed the problems and came to the conclusion that each school can adapt the activities to suit the ability level of their students.

The ‘mentors’ from the RESC and the University were asked to help the teachers. Given below are some of the “mentor” comments.

## **Mentor Comments**

### **Mentor1**

*Your activity was good for the average students. But not for the students who are above and below average. The discussion done with the whole class was good.*

### **Mentor2**

*Your log entries should be a reflection on the different levels in the classroom. This will help you to adapt the activities to suit the levels of the students.*

Given below are some of the reflections of the teachers towards the end of the research.

### **Observation**

*I came to the conclusion that students can successfully complete a task if the answers are given. As they still have not acquired the expected level of proficiency, they cannot produce language on their own. They must be scaffolded due to lack of input.*

### **Reflection**

*I will keep on adapting activities to suit their needs.*

### **Mentor Comments towards the end of the intervention**

*Well done! You did a good lesson... The activities you have planned for the three levels were good and effective. You were able to get all the students involved in learning. ...You had planned different types of activities according to the levels of competencies.*

## **Some reflections of the teachers towards the end of the intervention**

### **10A**

#### **Observation**

*All have answered the questions accurately. They answered without any difficulty. They did not ask for help from the teacher.*

#### **Reflection**

*All were capable of answering the questions. So it can be said that they have reached up to the expected level.*

### **10C**

#### **Observation**

*Today's activity was also on creative writing. But I made the three different activities much simpler than the previous ones.*

*I noticed that students found it easier to complete the activity this time.*

## **Reflection**

*I came to the conclusion that giving three different activities is successful. I will continue to give three different activities to the three levels.*

## **Grade 7**

### **Observation**

*All the students said they liked the poem and all did the first activity, writing the verbs in the poem. Group B & C were asked to do the activity 6.11 and they were able to do it without much difficulty as they have already identified the verbs.*

### **Reflection**

*Poems also can be used to teach grammar successfully. Group A students were happy that they were able to do the same activity as the others.*

**(Refer annexures 4 & 6 for originals)**

## **Conclusion**

Teachers' reflections and mentor comments suggest that the intervention has been successful. However, both the teachers and the students had faced difficulties in the initial stages of the intervention.

Section 4.5 will analyze student questionnaire data to find out their feedback on the intervention.

### **4.4.2 Analysis of student questionnaire data**

At the end of the intervention a questionnaire was administered to the students in all five classes.

The purpose of the questionnaire was mainly to gather feedback on the intervention. However, it also gathered back ground information about the students (refer annexure 5)

## **Background Information**

It was found that majority of the students in the Colombo school is from Colombo where students are exposed to English. However, as mentioned before, the students' language ability as measured by the test was poor.

On the other hand, in the Gampaha school most of the students were travelling from in and around Gampaha. Yet, their performance in English was better.

When this aspect was discussed with the teachers they attributed the following reasons for the surprising finding.

Students in the Colombo school were more interested in learning to speak rather than read and write. On the contrary, in the Gampaha school the students were more keen to read and write as they were exam oriented.

Colombo students were not scholarship holders and were not very good generally in their studies. In the Gampaha school most students were scholarship holders and good in studies.

Majority of the students in the Colombo school are from low socio- economic backgrounds, even though they are from Colombo.

In spite of these variations in student performance in English, all the students in the sample agreed that they liked to learn English. In all five classes, the students have said "yes" to question number 4.1.

The reasons they have stated (the most common reasons) are listed below.

The thirst to learn  
As a future need  
As it is difficult to gain employment without English  
The most favourite subject  
As it is an important subject  
To improve knowledge  
As it is world's number one language.

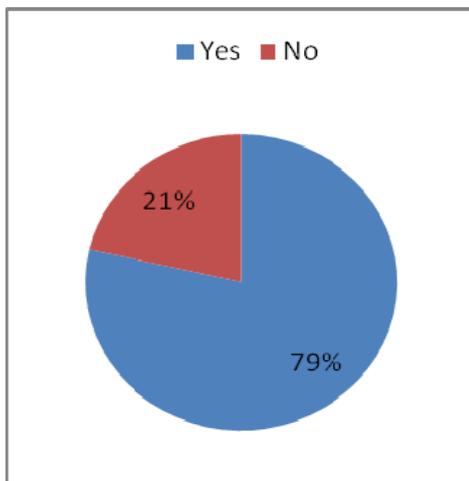
Responses to Question number 3ii were not analysed. The reason is that the students appear to have over rated themselves. Even the students who have got very low marks have rated themselves high in relation to their performance in the four skills.

### Students' views on the intervention

Question no 6.1 of the questionnaire asked the students whether they like to learn through the 'group method'. Responses of the students of all five classes are depicted in Figures 4.5a-e

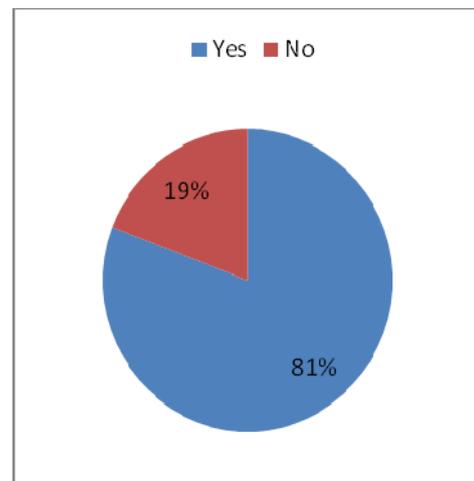
**Fig. 4.5a**

**Grade 10C**



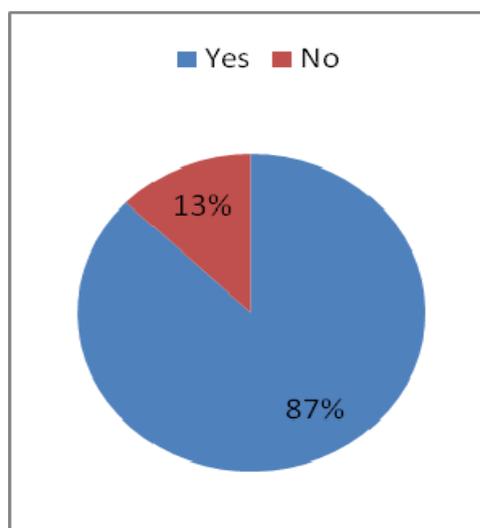
**Fig. 4.5b**

**Grade 10B**



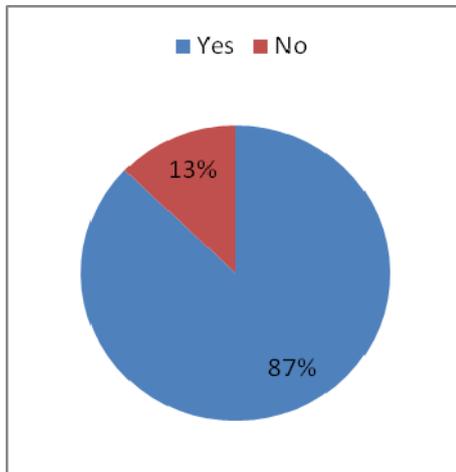
**Fig. 4.5c**

**Grade 10A**



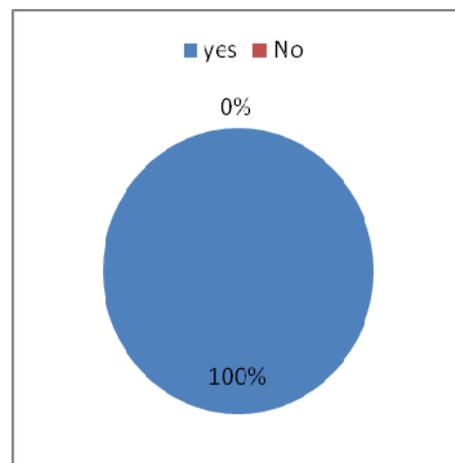
**Fig. 4.5d**

**Grade 7D**



**Fig. 4.5e**

**Grade 7T**



As the above figures indicate, majority of the students of grade 10 in both schools, like the newly introduced “group method” On the other hand, in grade 7 D while most students like this method, in the Tamil medium class all students like the method.

Although the students were asked to give reasons as to why they do not like the method, most of the students who have stated ”no” to this question, had not given a reason. The few reasons given are

Not enough room in the class to do group work

Only some are working in the group

Wastes lot of time

The best friend not being in the group and feeling that you are not good

The reasons given as to the majority liking group work are

Ability to work as a team

Ability to discuss with peers

Learning is easy

Can learn from others

Activities are easy

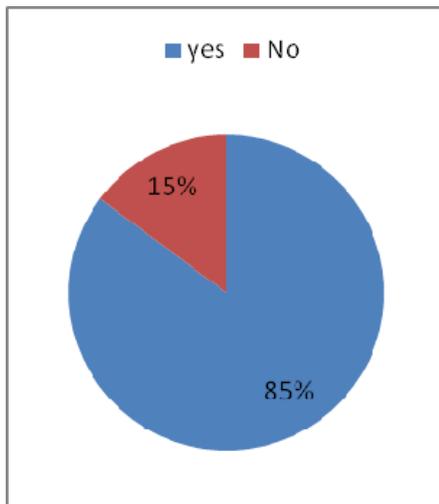
## Improvement in language competency

Question no 7i, inquired whether the students think that their language competency has increased.

Students' responses are shown in Figures 4.6a-4.6e

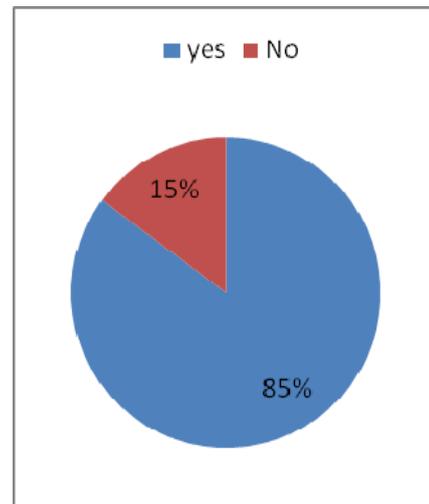
**Fig. 4.6a**

**10C**



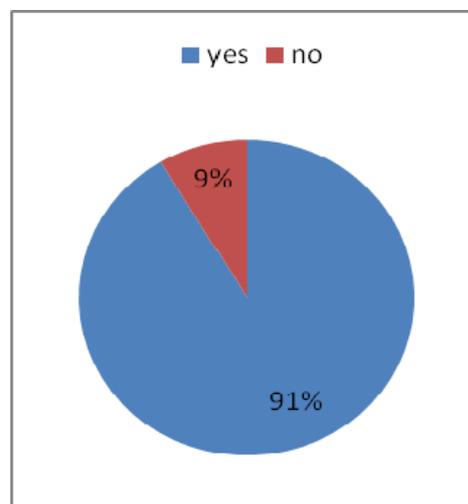
**Fig. 4.6b**

**10B**



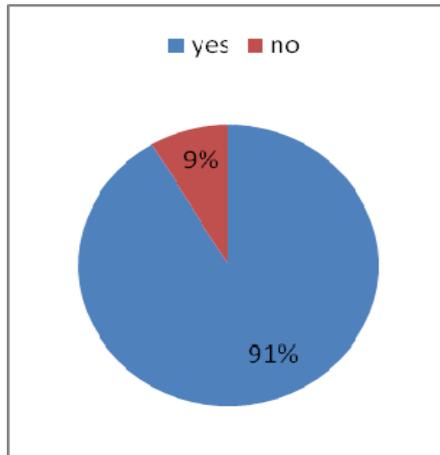
**Fig. 4.6c**

**10A**



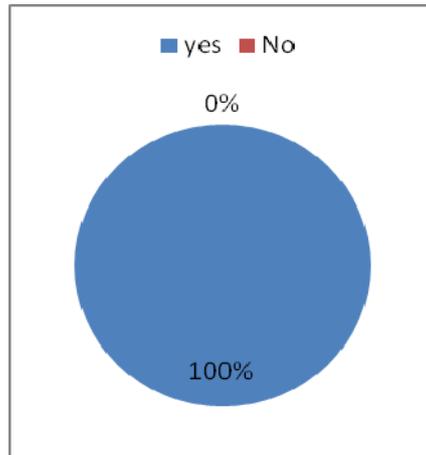
**Fig. 4.6d**

**7D**



**Fig. 4.6e**

**7T**



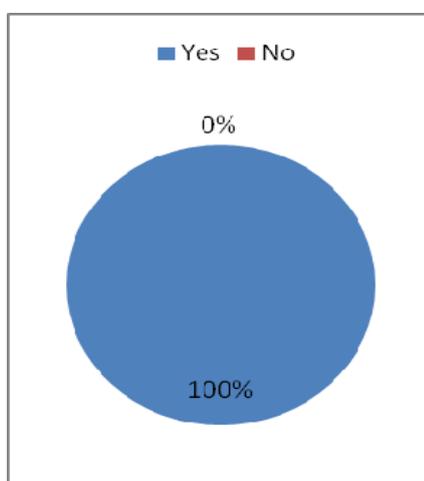
According to the above figures, while the Tamil medium students totally agree majority of the other students in both schools agree that the intervention has helped to improve their language competency.

### Multiple level textbooks

The questionnaire also sought students' views on the text books. Q.8.1 asked whether the textbook should contain activities to suit different ability levels. Students' responses are summarized in Fig.4.7a-4.7e

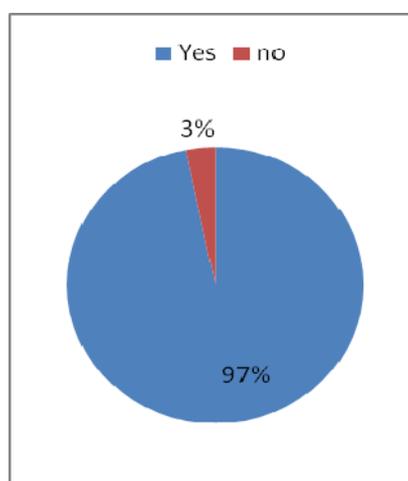
**Fig. 4.7a**

**10C**



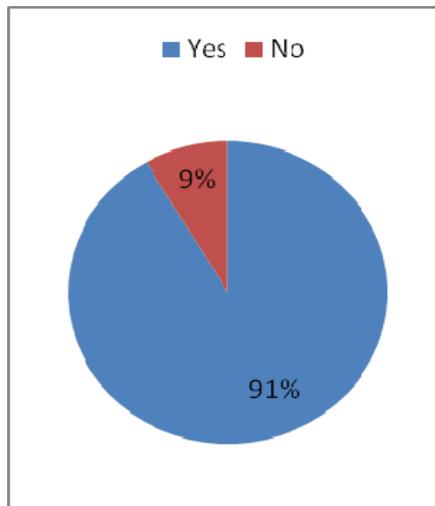
**Fig. 4.7b**

**10B**



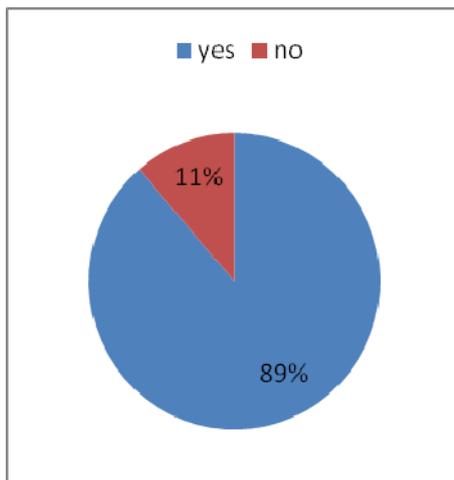
**Fig. 4.7c**

**10A**



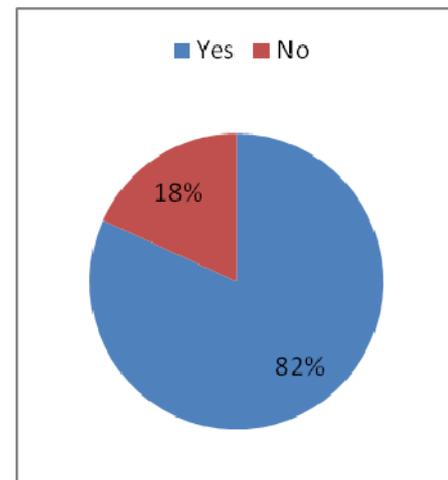
**Fig. 4.7d**

**7D**



**Fig. 4.7e**

**7T**



It could be seen that 10C students of the Colombo school agree 100% that the textbook activities should cater to different ability levels. Majority of the students in the other classes also agree that they should be multi leveled.

The students who did not agree gave the following reasons as to why they should not be multi leveled.

- Equal opportunities will not be provided
- As all students sit the same examination it will not be fair.

## 4.5 Reflection on the intervention

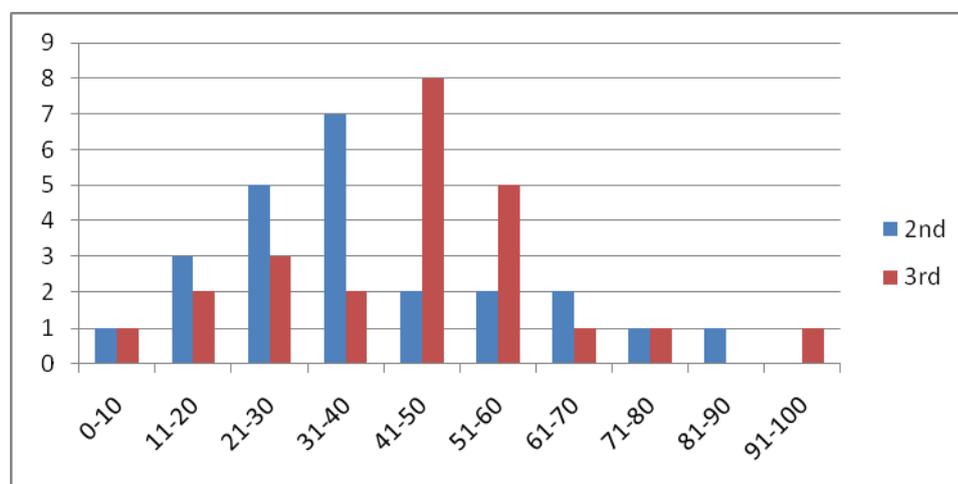
This section refers to the fourth stage of the action plan. That is to reflect on the effects. Reflection will also be based on multiple sources of data.

### 4.5.1 Student Performance after the intervention

In this section students' performance in English at the second term and the third term tests are compared. As mentioned in chapter 3, even though the two tests differ, in language tests it is not the content but the skills that are tested. Thus in both tests it was grammar, reading and writing that had been tested. Therefore, comparison of marks of the two tests will be an indication whether the intervention had an impact on improving students' language skills.

**Fig. 4.8a**

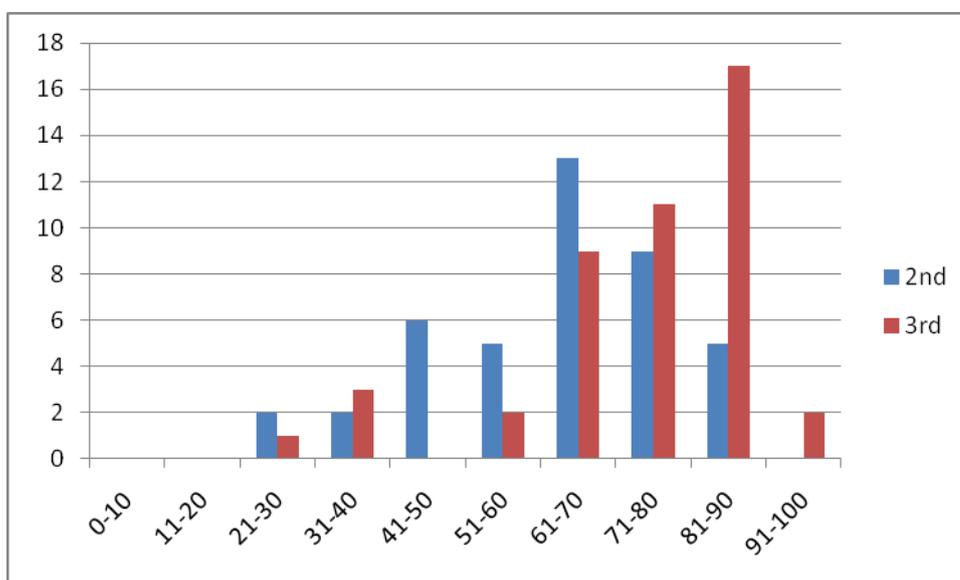
**Student performance - Grade 7T**



As the figure 4.8a indicates, while the weakest student has not improved the number of students in the range of 11-40 has decreased. On the other hand, the number scoring 41-60 has increased.

**Fig. 4.8b**

**Students' performance – Grade 7D**



As Fig.4.8b indicates, while the performance of few of the weaker students have declined the majority had improved.

**Table 4.3**

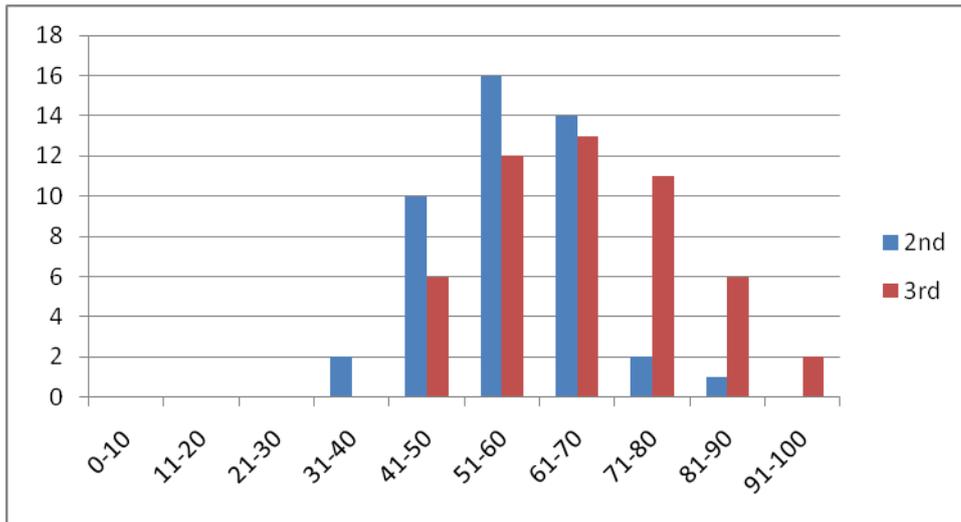
Second Term Marks	Third term marks
56	75
36	70
45	65
52	76
70	91
70	88
65	73
66	86
42	67

As Table 4.3 indicates some of the students' performance has increased significantly. A student who had obtained 36 marks has obtained 70 marks. According to the teacher this student is quite good in his other work but had not been able to perform to

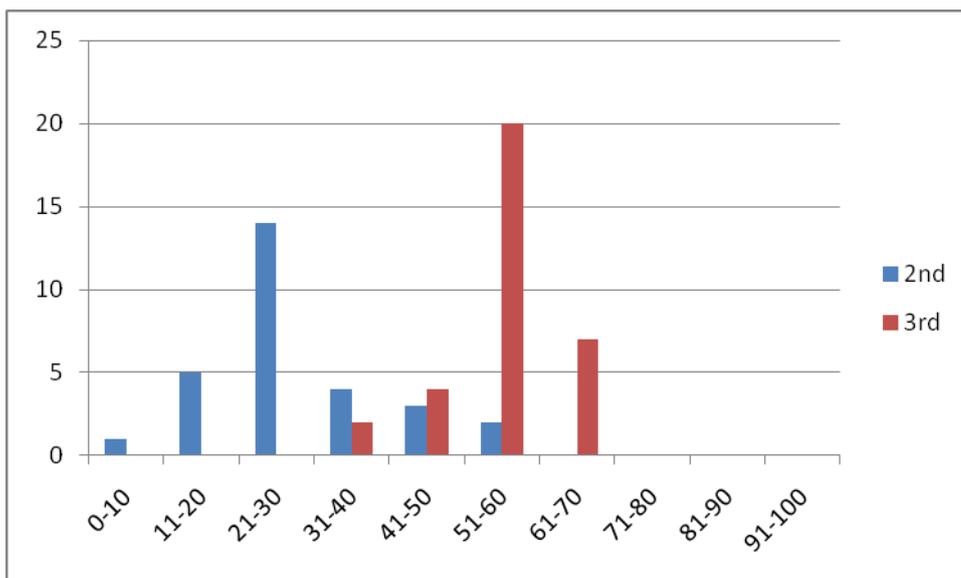
his potential in the English class earlier. The teacher was very happy the way he improved during the intervention’

### Performance of Students in Grade 10

**Fig. 4.8c -Grade 10A**

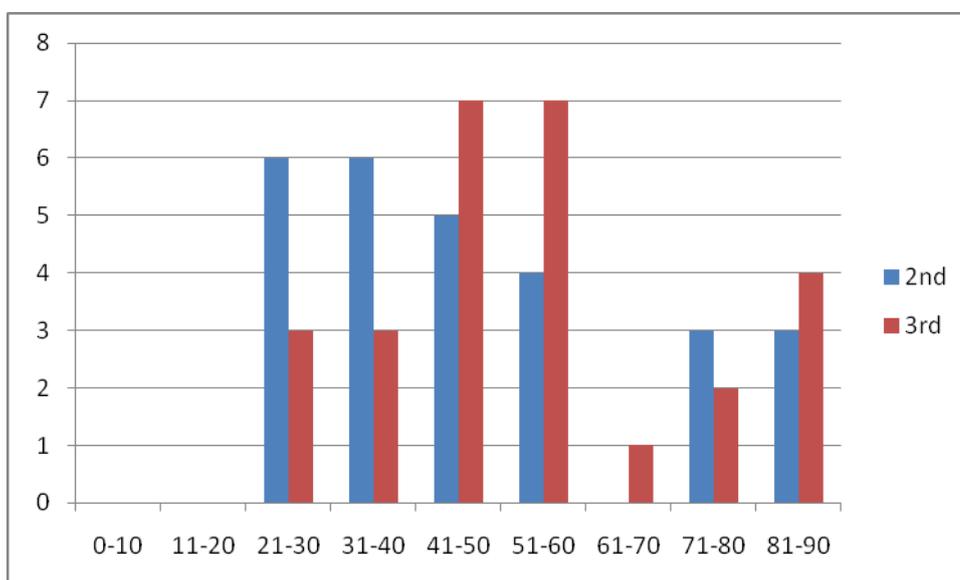


**Fig. 4.8d -Grade10 B**



**Fig. 4.8e**

**Grade 10C**



As the above figures indicate in all three Grade 10 classes the students' performance has increased. The most striking feature is that more than the high performers, it is the low performers that have shown remarkable progress.

This action research not only helped the students, but also helped the teachers as well.

**4.5.2 How the teachers' benefitted**

Given below is a reflection of one of the teachers who participated in the research

*The foremost thing I think I gained is the confidence to handle a mix ability group of students giving each a chance to learn with the chance to succeed.*

*I have been involved in teaching children for more than 25 years and I think I have a fair knowledge of teaching methodology too. But even after such long years of experience, most of the days I walk out of the class with this remorse feeling that I have not been successful with all as I would have liked to. I get this feeling even after a very successful lesson. Therefore, most of the time I thought especially when I wanted to teach the slow learners, it would be safer to screen the students and to teach. So, even for my research, I selected the students after a placement test - to teach them writing.*

*However, once I got involved in this research, by and by I came to realize that there were only few techniques needed to make this giant change in the classroom. Initially, we had to group the students according to their ability. Then, for easy identification of the students and their books, a coloured strip of paper was pasted on the book. In my class, Red was given to the slower learner, Green for the middle group, and Yellow for the best set of students. The colours immensely helped specially, when I corrected the books in their absence. In the classroom, I place the students in smaller groups of four, six or eight. The slower learners were always put in groups of four as the chances of them getting disturbed is low and also I thought it was easier to help the students when they are in small groups. If it was not possible to place in groups of four, then the students made to sit in groups of six or eight according to the space available in the class. I felt this non-fixed seating arrangement made the class less rigid. Then when it comes to teaching, the presentation was done to the whole class. It was only the activities and sometimes the texts were adapted to suit the level of the students. In some instances, we simplified the activities by cutting down the number of tasks to be done. Sometimes re-worded the activities, so, the students could understand the task easily. In reading activities the paragraph numbers were indicated with the questions. If the reading passages were lengthy, we simplified the text and the slow learners were asked to attempt only few tasks. And also they were given the freedom to continue and move onto the other group of activities if they wish. With writing activities, the technique of mind mapping was used to provide them with ideas and vocabulary. We used these adaptation techniques to reduce the degree of difficulty for the slower learner. Sometimes the slower learners were able to write only three or four sentences during the given time or even less, so the targets were set according to their ability. With time these students voluntarily moved on to do difficult tasks and towards the end of the unit their performance and enthusiasm both increased. This was also reflected even in the term end marks. Although, the enthusiasm of all the students were high, I began to notice that brightest group was not doing their best mainly when it came to completing their work- especially the home work. Perhaps, the work load set for them was little too much but we had to terminate the research before finding a solution for this changing condition as the term was coming towards the end. Further, If there was little assistance in correcting the books as there were 46 students in the class and the students too were eager to get their books corrected by a teacher, this venture would have been a total success. As a*

*teacher, engaging in this research was a very rewarding experience and to see the slower learners thriving was indeed satisfying.*

(From Ms Lilani. C.D. Wickramsnayake-Asst Teacher-Minu /President's College, Minuwangoda. )

### **4.5.3 Mentor's reflection**

A Mentor's report also confirms that both the students and the teachers have benefitted from this action research.

#### **A Mentor's report**

##### **Observations at St. Clare's Balika M.V., Wellawatte**

**Classes:Grade 7 (Tamil Medium)**

**Grade 10 (Sinhala Medium)**

**Subject: English**

#### **Initial Stage:**

- Only a few students were actively engaged in the lesson
- Teachers were discouraged because they were unable to complete the lessons they planned.
- Students were not responsive. They were reluctant to engage in group activities.
- Even when the students were grouped they worked individually.

#### **Second Stage:**

- Teachers were instructed to group the students according to their abilities and assign tasks according to the level of competency.
- Students were grouped according to their level of ability but the same activity was given to all the groups.
- Students in the above average ability level completed the task soon and idled. Only a few students in the average ability level groups worked and the others were passive. Students in the ability level below the average did not participate in the activity.
- Teachers were advised to prepare different tasks for each ability level and they were given examples as to how to do it.

**Final Stage:**

- Teacher gave instructions to the whole class based on the competency of the lesson.
- When the activities were given students were grouped according to their level of ability. Since teacher had already identified the student's ability level this was done without wasting time.
- Three types of activities were prepared for the three levels. Students with average ability level were given the activity suggested in the text book. Those who were below the average ability were given an activity for a lower competency level and the students who were above the average ability were given an activity for a higher competency level. Same time was given to the three categories and all the groups completed the task around the same time. Teacher helped those who needed special instruction.
- Presentation was done by each group to the class and feed back was given either by the other students or the teacher. All the students were interested in the lessons and actively participated in the lesson.

**4.6 Summary**

This chapter presented and analysed the data gathered through multiple data gathering tools.

The analysis of data indicates that the intervention has been successful in both schools in all five classrooms. Not only students but also teachers have benefited from this intervention.

## **Chapter 5**

### **5.0 Conclusions and Recommendations**

#### **5.1 Introduction**

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. However, over six decades of teaching English based on this assumption had not been successful and as discussed in chapter 2, this assumption has been challenged and the need for more classroom based research has been emphasized.

Despite this concern, there is little attention focused in teacher training or preparation of learning materials on how to cater to the different ability levels of the students. This problem is further aggravated at present as there is a mismatch between the Teacher Instructional Manuals (TIMS) which are to be used in Schools and the textbooks given to the students.

Therefore, the main purpose of this collaborative Action Research was to adapt learning material to suit the different competencies expected to be achieved as well as to cater to three different ability levels.

This chapter elaborates on the conclusion, based on the findings and propose recommendations to reduce the problems associated with student heterogeneity in the English Language classrooms.

#### **5.2 Conclusions**

##### **5.2.1 Mismatch between TIMS and Pupil's Textbooks**

It was found that there is a mismatch between the competencies expected to achieve for the particular grade and the activities in the pupil's textbook. This mismatch was found in

both grade 7 and 10. Although, in this action research only one unit was examined the participating teachers have found this difficulty in teaching the other units as well.

In both grade 7 and 10, the syllabus which is given in the Teacher Instructional Manuals has identified the competencies to be achieved. Later the National Institute of Education had categorized the competencies to be achieved during each term. The team however, found that this document had not been given to the teachers in the Gampaha school.

The TIMS contains some activities aligned with the competencies. There are detailed instructions and activity plans to teach these activities. However, the number of activities given in the TIMS is limited. Further the procedures recommended are not feasible in all teaching contexts and would not cater to all ability levels.

There are also practical problems in using TIMS in the classroom as students do not have TIMS. It is only the teacher that has the TIMS. If the teacher is to use these activities in the classroom s/he will need to duplicate task sheets which may not be possible in all schools. Textbooks are the most readily available learning material to the students. They are provided free of charge to the students.

There are very few activities in the textbooks that match with the identified competencies. Thus either the activities had to be adapted to suit the competencies or look for other competencies that matched with the activities. Since there were a large number of activities that was not based on the competencies identified for the grade it was not possible to adapt the activities to suit the competencies. Instead we looked for competencies outside the grade compatible with the given activities. This was possible and the Tables showing how the activities are matched with the competencies are given in annexure 8.

It could be concluded that the activities in the Pupil's book are often not compatible with the competencies identified for the grade.

However, these activities can be matched with competencies identified for other grades.

### **5.2.2. Student heterogeneity**

The marks of the second term test clearly indicated that all five classes are heterogeneous (Ch4 –analysis and annexure 9). This heterogeneity could be seen with the classes and also across classes. The students could clearly be grouped into three ability levels.

### **5.2.3 Adapting activities**

At the beginning of the planning stage when the activities were adapted, same activity was adapted to suit three different levels. Some of the teachers thought that the reading passages and some of the activities were not difficult for the students. However, once the students were grouped and the activities commenced they realized that even the simplified activities were too difficult for the lower ability group. Therefore, the reading passages had to be simplified or a simpler passage used to teach the identified competency level. Similarly, for the highest ability groups, more challenging activities had to be given.

As the theoretical framework discussed in chapter 2, explained language input should be ‘comprehensible’ to all the learners. In order for the input to be comprehensible it should be little beyond the students current level ( $i+1$ ). In the classrooms observed the students’ current level of competence differed. Hence, the input was not ‘comprehensible’ to all the students. Thus it could be concluded that activities in the textbook do not cater to all the ability levels within the same class.

### **5.2.4 Implementation**

#### **How students felt**

In the implementation of the activities initially the students did not like being grouped. This seems to confirm the research findings (ch2) that students do not like to be put into same ability groups due to psychological and social reasons. The reasons the students gave were that they are being separated from their friends and also because they felt they were the weak group. Further, the lower ability group of students had been free riders copying from their more able peers. Once they were left alone they felt insecure and unable to cope with even the simple activities.

However, as the activities progressed they realized that they were capable of doing the work. This resulted in their ‘affective filter’ being lowered (Affective Filter Hypothesis – ch.2). They lost their “learned helplessness” and even attempted the task given to the middle group. Further, since some of the activities were mixed ability or whole class work they could work with their friends during these activities. Hence, except for a few students, the majority liked working in same ability groups. Further, it allowed them to interact with both the peers and the teacher (Interaction Hypothesis – ch.2) and this enabled them to produce language which is necessary for language acquisition (pushed out put hypothesis)

Thus it could be concluded that same ability groups can be used effectively in the second language classrooms.

### **How teacher’s perceptions changed**

At the inception of the study, the teachers were not very confident of handling same ability groups in their classrooms. Further they had not realized that there were ‘free riders’ in their classrooms. They had a wrong perception of the abilities of their students.

As the study progressed they began to form a correct perception of the abilities of different students. Thus they were able to exploit the true potential of the students. They also realized that same ability groups can be successfully used within the same second language classroom. Further, that a mix of same ability and mix/whole class activities are effective.

### **5.2.5 Language improvement**

Comparison of marks of the students’ second and third term tests clearly shows that there is an improvement in student performance. This improvement could be qualitatively displayed through students work during class (see activity sheets – annexure 10)

### **5.2.6 Collaboration between practicing teachers and teacher educators**

This study is an example of how different institutions such as the schools, RESC centres and Universities can collaborate to improve teaching and learning in the classrooms.

### **5.2.7 Teacher empowerment**

As one of the teachers said

*The foremost thing I think I gained is the confidence to handle a mix ability group of students.*

All the other teachers at the interviews agreed that this action research has been a learning experience for them. They were confident that they could implement this in their classrooms. In fact in the Gampaha school in the grade 7 class this method is now being tried out from unit 1. Thus this action research has empowered the teachers to find solutions for their problems and to find techniques of teaching suitable for their contexts.

The two RESC members said that they would advocate this method to the teachers that comes to their centre. They were of the view that techniques adopted by the teachers were successful and could be used in other classes.

The two university lecturers that worked as mentors in the Colombo school were also happy about the effectiveness. They are advocating this method to the teachers following the Post Graduate Diploma Courses. An observation lesson to observe one of the teachers who participated in the action research is planned for the first week in February.

## **5.3 Suggestions**

### **5.3.1 Mismatch**

The mismatch between the TIMS and the Pupil's textbooks should be reviewed. In this study only one unit in the two grades were reviewed. However, the success of the exercise indicates that a thorough study be undertaken by the NIE to identify the competency levels related to the activities given in the pupil's book.

### **5.3.2 Textbooks**

In the future textbooks should be written to cater to three ability levels. Since language teaching involves teaching skills, it is possible to acquire the same skill or competency

through different activities. As this study indicates some times the same passage could be used to cater to the three levels through three different activities.

The other option could be to have texts of different complexity level to cater to the different ability levels.

In either way as students progress they could attempt the more difficult tasks.

### **5.3.3 Teacher Training**

Until such a revision of learning materials take place teachers should be guided as to adapt materials to suit the levels of their students. This study clearly showed that “one size does not fit all”. Hence teachers should be equipped with the skills of adapting learning materials to suit the ability levels of their students.

### **5.3.4 Role of RESCs**

RESCs could be utilized better in continuous professional Development of teachers. There should be better liaison between schools, ISAs and the RESCs.

### **5.3.5 Bottom up approach**

This collaborative action research indicated that the bottom up approach can be used to find insights as to how to improve English language teaching at classroom level. Thus more action research of this nature should be encouraged, especially as part of teacher development programmes.

## **5.4 Limitations of the study**

There were several constraints that the researchers had to face in conducting this study. Of these time was the main constraint. Even though it was planned to be completed with

six months finally when the approval was given it had to be completed within five months.

Since school tests commenced in mid November, the intervention had to be completed by then. Hence only one cycle of the action research could be implemented.

The National school that was originally planned to be taken in Colombo could not be used. This was once again due to the fact that the research was to be conducted during the third term and the teachers were keen to cover the syllabus as soon as possible.

The third term marks were available only in January. This delayed the data analysis process.

Questionnaires had to be administered in some classes after the term tests. Hence there were some absentees.

Some of the teachers also felt that they seemed to have concentrated more on the less able students and as a result the more able students or the middle level may have been neglected. This is an area we could have attended to if we were able to go through a second cycle.

## **5.5 Summary**

Participating in this collaborative action research was a very enjoyable learning experience for all the partners. As the data in chapter 4 displayed both students and teachers enjoyed it. The mentors claimed that they want to advocate this method to other teacher educators. For the principal researcher it was evidence of a conviction proved right.

I do not claim that the findings can be generalized, since this is an action research. However, it proves that more and more classroom based research is needed to find solutions to the problems related to teaching of English in Sri Lanka.

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