

A fair deal for all

Laura Loder Büchel integrates 'native-speaker' students into the foreign language classroom.

As English becomes a compulsory part of primary education across central Europe, the question is often raised of what to do in English lessons with children who speak the language at home. At the moment, English is in the process of being introduced as a compulsory subject in elementary schools in eastern Switzerland, starting in the second or third grades (children of eight and nine). As this is a new subject, some teachers have little or no experience of teaching English or any other foreign language. They often wonder what to do with the stronger learners in their English classroom. These 'native' speakers may leave them feeling a little uncertain as they find their footing in this new subject.

The purpose of this article is to provide concrete practical ideas for allowing native-English-speaking children to benefit and develop their own language skills while working with the whole class as well as while working independently.

Knowledge

As with every subject taught in schools, children come to class with varying levels of prior knowledge. Moreover, there are often children who know more than their teacher about a specific topic. According to the census of 2000, approximately 1% of the Swiss population is 'native' English speaking, and English is defined as the most important non-official language of the country. There are no official statistics about the number of 'native' English speakers in Swiss schools but, from my experience in in-service and pre-service

teacher training courses, there may be anywhere from one to three 'native' English-speaking children per group of 20 children. In addition, for various reasons, many children starting third grade come to school with a higher level of English than might be expected.

'Native' here refers to learners who are more advanced because they have received and continue to receive more extensive exposure to the language. These may be children who speak English to one or both of their parents, who are themselves native English speakers; those whose parents communicate in English although neither parent is a native speaker; and those who have spent time in an English-speaking country and may have gone to school there. That said, the following suggestions about integrating native speakers can be used to cater to the needs of *any* more advanced learners. Moreover, this article does not seek to imply that native-speaking children are always stronger in all their language skills than their peers in English lessons – it is assumed that the teacher has already diagnosed the class and identified that a certain child, whether a native speaker or not, needs more encouragement.

Class benefits

When I ask them about their experiences, teachers on training courses invariably say, *'I often use the native speaker as my helper though I know that this isn't always good.'* Teachers should keep in mind that while being a helper is a good lesson in diplomacy, learners should not be helping others to the detriment of their own progress

in English. This is not fair. Therefore, this use of the native speaker should be limited to cases where it is clear that the child can profit at least on a social level, if not perhaps at a linguistic level. However, there are ways to integrate native speakers into the class so that they make progress in the language as well as benefiting the class as a whole.

Reading

Firstly, there are activities that these children can work on independently during a lesson but which, at the same time, are for the benefit the class. For example, they can be asked to select a story or an article that is relevant to the topic being taught and to record themselves retelling it or reading it aloud. This recording can then be transcribed and edited by the learner or the teacher. The final version can be used as a listening exercise for the rest of the class or as a comparison exercise for the other learners to evaluate their own production.

Writing

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

Culture

Thirdly, the native learners' experience of other countries or with other cultures can be integrated into the

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lessons. Language awareness and cultural activities can be used which give the students the opportunity to share songs, games, stories and traditions from their own culture or those they have experienced. It would be good to let every child lead a game in the language they speak at home. The role the community can play in schools should also not be forgotten. In Switzerland, parental involvement is being highly encouraged at the moment. In some communities, one might see, for example, a South African father coming once a week to the English class and taking his child and a few more to another room to read them stories.

Cooperation

Finally, native speakers can be used in many ways in cooperative learning contexts to their own benefit and to the benefit of the class. When assigning roles in groups, they can be the 'writer', as they should be expected and encouraged to write more. They can also be the 'mediator', as this requires more formal English and use of language such as *Yes, that's right. However ...*. They can be put in charge of materials so that the other students have to come up and ask for things, in a shop-like setting. They can be made responsible for ensuring the whole group speaks in the target language, and they can be the resource person with the dictionary.

Individual benefits

The above ideas fully integrate the native speakers into the class for the benefit of all. The following ideas are more for the benefit of the individual, though the child still belongs to and can work alongside the class.

Differentiation

The first suggestion involves the preparation of handouts. It is useful and relatively simple to prepare at least two versions of a handout, with less language support (model sentences, word banks, etc) on the ones for the native speakers. In addition, handouts

can be created for the native speakers which have more of a focus on spelling and writing. With gapped texts, the same text can be given to all the other learners, but with more gaps for the native speakers to complete, or with an additional section where they have to do some extra writing or take the activity or activity reflection one step further. Extra worksheets from language classrooms in English-speaking countries (from www.abcteach.com, for example) can be kept in a special binder and used as supplementary materials for the 'native' students.

Organisation

Organisationally, it is a good idea to have the native speakers sit where they are not facing any language support on the board or on the wall. This ensures they don't have the information right at their fingertips. Furthermore, the teacher could have monolingual dictionaries for the native students and bilingual ones for the others.

Independence

Schools aim not only to teach content, but also social skills and skills for life. The ideas listed above help to support language development as well as social development. However, some children may need more social development than content development, others not. Depending on the situation, it might be useful for the native-speaking child to develop their local language skills, so teachers should be prepared to give support in the main language of the school.

The following ideas might be used for one lesson a week for those learners who can work more independently.


Working on a computer can help native speakers set their own pace in language learning activities. In addition, computer work allows these children to keep up with the typical language development of their peers in English-speaking countries. There are numerous sites, such as www.discoverykids.com, www.funbrain.com and www.pbskids.com, which offer educationally relevant and challenging materials for independent work. Furthermore, letting children read books of interest in English and getting

them to write reports can support their skills in their mother tongue and in their second language, too. Allowing them to choose an independent project such as making a poster about a country they have lived in, can help promote cultural and linguistic knowledge and can lead to a product that can be shared with the class.

Materials

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



Teachers in many countries need to have a repertoire of ideas for working with native speakers in the foreign language classroom. I hope this article has sparked some creative ideas for integration and differentiation, which can benefit all the children. Every language in the classroom should be recognised and shared, and children of all language backgrounds should be provided with opportunities to improve their mother-tongue competence within and outside the classroom. 



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