



Turning the Threat into an Opportunity: Project-Work in the English Multi-Grade Class

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Abstract

Given the drop in demographics, about 15% percent of the rural schools in Romania have multi-grade classes, at least at primary level. Quite often, these schools are (self)marginalized since it is considered that no quality learning is likely in such environments.

Teamed-up within a UNICEF project aimed at quality inclusive education, the authors of this paper looked for solutions to improve approaches in the multi-grade classes. The hypothesis was: project-work that involves language level-differentiated tasks engages a multi-grade group to develop communication competences according to their own rhythm.

The research has been conducted during the current school year in two multi-grade classes in Versesti-Sanduleni rural school that include grade 2 and 4 children and grades preparatory, 1 and 3 respectively. The research was based on a thorough differentiated planning for each project, basic support materials selection and development by making extended use of internet sources, classroom observation and the teacher's research diary. The duration of a project was of about a month.

The results highlight: the students' increased self-confidence, involvement in and motivation for the English class as well as spectacular language progress. Some of the children are able to perform at the higher level task despite their lower current grade, sometimes 2 grades above their formal enrolment. Last but not least, the projects, the topics of which were suggested by the kids themselves in the second term, show a lot of creativity: the display of the results brought about a lot of colour and fun in an otherwise grey and uniform school environment.

Keywords: Project-work, students at risk, multi-grade classes

1. Multi-grade classes: a challenge

According to the Romanian Education Act, public schools benefit from per-capita funding if there are at least 15 students per class. This number is seldom met in remote village areas, given the drop in demographics (diminished birth rate and/or migration towards better-off neighborhoods). Consequently, schools operate within the multi-grade system i.e. students of various levels of instruction simultaneously work with one single teacher.

Since it is mainly present in disadvantaged communities, the "multi-grade" carries the stigma of a "second class" school: students and parents have small expectations, teachers try to avoid it for fear of a hard unsatisfactory job. From a teacher's point of view, the "multi-grade" is difficult because it requires: thorough differentiated and correlated planning; selection and/ or development of multiple learning resources to supplement for the single grade-based textbook; fast moving from one grade to another within the space of one classroom during the 45 minutes' teaching period. If the teacher is more inclined to teach the textbook than the students then the whole effort looks like a faux-pas ballet more likely to end in failure.

2. Deciding to make things better

In 2015, UNICEF Romania launched a pilot initiative to provide quality inclusive education for all in Bacau county. Within this project, the authors of the current paper met, exchanged views and teamed-up to look for solutions to improve English learning in the multi-grade classes. Problems have been listed (unmotivated students and teachers, undisciplined students, traditional textbook-based practices, the students' poor level of English and their little opportunity to use English, poor ICT tools and facilities); the first research questions were asked (How can better interaction be developed in the unfriendly multi-grade class? How can differentiation be implemented? Can the new competence-based curriculum with its stipulated progression according to the CEFRL levels [8] - support the multi-grade planning?); the literature was scanned: both famous *Mind and brain* studies and small-scale interventions by young committed Romanian teachers.

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In developing our research, we took into account: the positive effects of the social dimension of learning (how interaction can motivate and support students in solving a task – from Bruner’s perspective to nowadays realities [2], [7]); the benefits of project-work that is rooted in the students’ preferences versus the text-book and routines of the “uniform school” [1], [5]; the difficult and yet possible process of changing – sometimes toxic! – practices [3], [4], [6]. On this latter note, we decided we can at least try to make things better in the multi-grade class. Consequently, we developed the following hypothesis: *project-work that involves language level-differentiated tasks engages a multi-grade group to develop communication competences according to their own rhythm.* Our idea was to offer a common “umbrella topic” that can mobilize the students’ language practice in a meaningful way at various levels of performance. In a nutshell: The grade clusters have tasks according to their level but because of/thanks to the proximity of their classmates and their common goal, they can move up and down the scale of performance according to their rhythm by embarking in a similar - yet different in level - activity. In order to test the hypothesis, we made classroom observation of the multi-grade groups’ progress in the communication competences that are stipulated in the official curriculum.

If in the first term the projects topics were given to the groups, in the second, the students themselves suggested the topics. The projects the students worked on are summarized in Table 1.

Our target group consists of two multi-grade classes in a small rural school, Versesti-Sanduleni. The students do not have internet connection at home and their only encounter with English is at school, during classes. The first class includes 15 students in three grades: preparatory grade (PG) – 4 children, first grade – 5, third grade - 6. The group was initially characterized by the antisocial behaviour of the first graders who disregarded the PG pupils because ‘they don’t know anything’ while the third graders were too proud of their ‘knowledge’.

The second multi-grade class comprises 17 children, 7 in grade 2 and 10 in grade 4. In Sept. 2016, three of the girls in grade 4 transferred from another school where they hadn’t studied English at all. During the first weeks, the students were friendly to each other, but sometimes the older ones tried to impose on their younger classmates by manipulating the entire English class, not allowing the second graders to answer or do their task.

80% of the students’ parents depend on the social allowance and have only completed middle school. Only four of them have a job and graduated high school. The parents are not able to help the children with their homework or English practice.

3. Engagement in learning

The first assignment was a challenge for everyone involved. Nevertheless, project-work gradually gave scope and focus. The formerly disruptive bunch of kids started to work together to reach the common goal. Discipline, interaction, self-confidence, communication improved (see the progress in Table 1). Learning was a lot of fun and English became a class to enthusiastically wait for (see Fig. 1-3).



Fig. 1. A multi-grade class complete a mural



Table 1. Project-work topics, activities, results during the first and second terms

Grade	Project topics: Activities. <i>Results.</i>	Children's Reactions
PG, 1, 3	'Presents': Children made cards and gifts for the loved ones. <i>Exhibition of artifacts</i>	Children were a bit reluctant not knowing what to expect in the absence of textbooks and strictly separated groups. Interaction was difficult.
	'Cartoons': The pupils chose, coloured, made frames and described cartoon characters (clothes including). <i>Poster</i>	Children got interested and grew involved. They tried to finish their tasks in time but did not work at home.
2, 4	'Christmas Joy': Students prepared for Advent. They wrote Christmas cards, letters to Santa; they designed Gingerbread men, Christmas balls and Christmas trees and developed brief fact files for the latter. <i>Mural.</i>	Kids were very positive. The arts and crafts sequences kept them motivated. Writing remained difficult. Some home assignments were reconsidered and we did class extra practice.
	'Carnival in winter': Children developed a costume+mask for a character they were to play in the Carnival. They wrote invitations, and rehearsed. <i>Carnival.</i>	Children enjoyed acting in front of a public so they eagerly learned their parts, paid attention to all recommendations regarding the masks manufacturing and the use of English. Speaking improved.
PG,1,3	'Fashion': Children posed as models and described their outfits. They then played the designers' role to make their own collections. <i>Posters.</i>	There were problems with group management. Children worked better when grouped by grades, rather than in mixed clusters.
	'The Big Masque': They chose characters, explored and described them, designed masks, played their part. <i>Masks' Parade.</i>	Individual work proved to be the best choice for this multi-grade class. They helped each other when they needed to present their part.
	'Toy Factory': Minnie and Mickey helped children to arrive at the factory and make, toys. Pupils designed the class currency, got/gave directions, 'bought' toys. <i>Toys made of recycled materials. Role-play</i>	Each group worked hard to finish their task and helped each other like never before; they exchanged money/goods in order to buy their favourite toy. Interaction improved.
2, 4	'Seasons Festival': Kids designed a variety of artifacts to present the seasons features; they made cards for Moms' Day (March 8 th). <i>Exhibition.</i>	Students showed good command of description, colours and numbers and developed their speaking skills. They enjoyed pair work.
	'Easter Play': They made puppets, decorations, learned the roles and went egg – hunting. <i>Puppet show.</i>	Children practiced speaking and paid more attention to spelling. They started to correct each other without teacher's intervention.
	'Village Map': Children made family trees, drew and cut paper houses and represented their village (buildings) on a genuine map with friends and neighbours. <i>Map.</i>	Children were confident with their English and helped each other when needed. The 2 nd graders (!) supported the fourth graders if one was too shy or went short of words. No one got upset; most 2 nd graders performed at 4 grade level.

During project-work students realized they needed English in order to express themselves. They chose enjoyable topics and learned in engaging contexts. Even assessment became friendly and fun since the final presentations brought about recognition - and applause! The internet was not available, but the teacher downloaded images, audio-video files and brought them to class. Other materials were ICT-designed (Fig. 4).



Fig. 2: Students immersed in the project process



Fig. 3: Final assessment is fun!

4. Conclusion

Far from being a threat to quality learning, the multi-grade class can provide a remarkable opportunity for meaningful communication within a differentiated approach. Students come together naturally, learn by doing something fun, interact with purpose, communicate genuinely. Some manage an amazing performance leap from grade 2 to grade 4 level.

The teacher enjoyed the lucrative atmosphere. She learned to plan and carry out simultaneous multi-level tasks. She also learned that *doing* is more important than being grammatically correct: when practiced in engaging contexts, communication improves, without the drill!

As for the impact beyond the class, the final results - with the imprint of the students' personality - splashed color on the dull school walls. The vivid display of good work allowed colleagues to have a peek and indulge with a different type of learning. Some tentatively think of doing something similar.



Fig.4: ICT-designed materials and downloaded images



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