Catering for Individual Learner Differences: Primary school teachers’ voices

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Abstract

In view of the recent introduction of the Target-Oriented Curriculum in Hong Kong primary schools, teachers have started to consider more carefully the notion of catering for individual learner differences. This paper examines the perceptions of three English teachers towards this concept. Using classroom data, interview transcripts and attitude scale responses, a picture is developed of how and why the teachers attempt to respond to individual pupil differences. A number of different strategies emerge and their implications for teaching and learning are discussed. The issue of the cultural appropriateness of individualised learning in the Hong Kong context is also touched upon.

Introduction

In the traditional Hong Kong classroom, catering for individual learner differences has not been emphasised to any great extent. In a review of the Hong Kong educational system, Cheng (1997) points out that concern for individual needs and diverse goals appeals only to a small minority and that “The notions of individual-based and student-centred teaching have been slow to take root in Hong Kong schools. Traditional Chinese classrooms rely heavily on the organisation of the class and the social relations among students” (p. 39). In a similar vein, Cheng & Wong (1996) state, “Individualised teaching, where teachers work towards diverse targets at different paces, is almost inconceivable in East Asian societies” (p. 44).

In an attempt to encourage increased attention to learner differentiation, one of the aims of Hong Kong’s Target-Oriented Curriculum (TOC)¹ is to develop greater emphasis amongst teachers on catering for individual learner

¹ TOC is a multi-faceted innovation developed in the early 1990s and implemented in primary schools from September 1995 onwards. Its main features are the use of targets to provide a clear direction for learning, the use of tasks to involve pupils actively in their learning, and task-based assessment to form an integrated teaching, learning and assessment cycle. Carless (1997) reviews the development and early implementation of TOC.
differences. Clark et al. (1994) state in their TOC framework document, “It is the role of the teacher, in so far as it is practicable, to know the particular background and profile of individual learners and to know how to respond to learner differences by providing them with appropriate learning experiences and levels of support” (p. 51). Similarly, the Education Department (1994) lists one of the aims of the TOC as being “to value individual student progress, however large or small, and to motivate students towards further learning” (p. 7). For the purpose of this paper, catering for individual differences is defined as “tailoring teaching so that pupils of different abilities have the opportunity to learn at their own developmental level and at their own pace.”

This paper, deriving from doctoral research on the implementation of the TOC, uses predominantly qualitative case study data to focus on the perceptions and classroom teaching of three teachers with respect to the notion of individual learner differences. The main aims of the paper are to provide teacher perspectives on catering for individual learner differences, to raise awareness of some of the different classroom strategies that can be used to cater for individual learner differences and to explore implications for teaching and learning.

Select Review of Individual Differences

Educational psychology has devoted considerable recent attention to individual differences between learners, for example, in terms of multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1993) and brain-based learning (Caine & Caine, 1997). Second language research on individual differences has generally focused on a number of variables, such as personality (Beebe, 1983; Naiman et al. 1978); aptitude (Skehan, 1989), motivation (Dörnyei, 1998; Gardner, 1985), age (Slavoff & Johnson, 1995); gender (Oxford, 1993), cognitive styles (Skehan, 1998) and learner strategies (O’Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990). In their review of second language research on individual differences, Oxford & Ehrman (1993) point out that implicit or explicit understanding of individual-difference dimensions enhances the work of all teachers. Indeed, the ability to take account of pupil differences is generally considered to be one of the attributes of effective teachers (e.g. Kyriacou, 1997).

Research in Hong Kong related to individual learner differences (at least that published in English) has tended to focus mainly on helping students with learning difficulties (Chan, 1998; Hui & Yung, 1992). Other aspects of learner differences have tended to be neglected, although see Tinker Sachs (1993) for a discussion of the design of graded tasks. Several studies have
also been conducted into language learning strategies, for example, Hepburn (1991) with respect to secondary students and Wong (1997) with respect to primary pupils.

The main thrust of the TOC approach to catering for individual learner differences appears to focus principally on learner aptitude and to some extent on learning styles. The Education Department (1994) suggests that teachers may cater for individual differences by the following:

- Providing pupils with a different amount of input or support
- Providing additional support for less able pupils
- Using graded worksheets suited to different learning styles or abilities.

Evidence from the early implementation of TOC (Carless & Wong, 1999; Clark et al. 1999; Morris et al. 1996) indicates that teachers have problems in carrying out teaching which caters for individual learner differences. Morris et al. (1996) noted that the majority of teachers confessed that they did not know how to cater for the individual differences amongst their pupils. Teachers stated that this was a source of frustration as they were able to identify pupils in need of further support but felt themselves unable to do anything for them. Morris et al. (op. cit.) reported that for the majority of teachers, attention was mainly directed towards trying to assist the weaker pupils and there were few indications of trying to extend the brighter pupils. A similar picture emerged from the Clark et al. (1999) study in that understanding and responding to individual differences was evaluated by both teachers and teacher educators as an area that teachers were having difficulties with and one where the further provision of professional support was required. The exact cause of these difficulties is open to debate, but it is suggested that the following factors are of relevance. Firstly, in the early stages of the implementation of an innovation, teachers’ concerns may be directed towards “mechanical” issues, such as struggling to make the innovation manageable and easy to implement (Hall & Hord, 1987). Secondly, teachers may not be entirely convinced of the value of individualised instruction given the collectivist nature of Hong Kong society and the local classroom (cf. Cheng, 1997; Cheng & Wong, 1996 above). Thirdly, large class sizes, heavy workloads and generally poorly resourced working conditions may prevent or discourage teachers from paying more than lip-service to the notion of individual differences. And fourthly, given the relatively low levels of professionalism amongst primary school teachers in Hong Kong (Lee, 1996), the competencies required to cater skilfully for individual learner differences may be present among only a minority of teachers.
Research Methodology

The study involved case studies of three English teachers, in different schools, implementing the TOC over a seven month period in their own primary one or primary two classrooms, with pupils aged six to seven years old. Case studies characteristically enable information to be collected from multiple data collection instruments and sources and over a period of time. For this study, the case approach permitted an in-depth look at a small number of classrooms, so facilitating the development of an understanding of TOC from the teachers’ viewpoints. For example, it was possible to probe what the teachers were doing in the classroom and why, and relate this to their attitudes towards teaching, learning and the TOC.

The central focus of the study was to explore how the teachers were implementing (or not implementing) the TOC in their classrooms and ascertain the teacher perceptions of issues emerging from the classroom data. The research questions which guided the study focused mainly on the following issues:

- the teachers’ attitudes towards English teaching and towards the TOC
- the teachers’ understanding of TOC principles
- the extent to which the teachers perceived that they were implementing TOC principles compared with the extent to which they were actually implementing the TOC
- the implementation strategies used by the teachers and their rationale for doing so.

Data collection methods used for the study comprised classroom observation, focused interviews and an attitude scale. Classroom observations were conducted for five to six consecutive English lessons for each teacher in three separate cycles during the school year, totalling 17 audio-taped observations per teacher. Both quantitative data in terms of a tailor-made classroom observation schedule and qualitative data in terms of lesson transcriptions and field notes were collected. Lessons which indicated the highest degree of implementation of TOC features were selected for transcription.

A series of six semi-structured interviews, lasting between forty minutes and one hour, were conducted with each of the three teachers. A baseline interview, prior to the commencement of classroom observation, collected relevant background information about the teacher and the school.
observation interviews, carried out at the end of each cycle of observations, focused primarily on the lessons that had just been observed. Summative interviews were conducted in order to probe into some of the main issues arising from the classroom observations and the ongoing data analysis. Post-analysis interviews were carried out once the data analysis had been almost completed to facilitate member checking. All interviews were transcribed verbatim by the researcher. Teachers’ focus on catering for individual learner differences, and its challenges, was one the two TOC principles (the other being task-based learning) that emerged most strongly from the classroom observation and interview data.

A 5-point Likert attitude scale was developed to measure the orientation of respondents to ELT and the TOC. Half of the items in the scale implied a broadly positive orientation towards the TOC and related principles, while half of the items indicated a broadly negative orientation. An overall orientation towards the TOC was computed by scoring strong agreement with a positive item as 5, down to 1 for strong disagreement, and strong agreement with a negative item 1, up to 5 for strong disagreement. The higher the total, the more positive orientation towards the TOC as measured by the scale. The attitude scale (see appendix 1) was administered to the case study teachers prior to the classroom observation period and again seven months later at its conclusion. It was also administered to a wider sample of 70 primary school English teachers in order to gauge the extent to which the attitudes of the three case study teachers reflected those of the wider target population. Two of the items in the scale were directly related to the notion of individual differences.

Data analysis of the qualitative data from the study was carried out by coding and then categorising the data according to themes. Data was then compared across cycles and across teachers according to the principles of inductive analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). Reasoned judgements were developed as a result of constant comparative analysis of the informants’ understandings and interpretations of their classroom actions. Extracts from interviews are used in the remainder of the paper to provide supporting evidence for the findings and permit the teachers’ voices to be heard directly.

**Background to Schools and Teachers**

This section will provide a brief contextual background to the three schools and three teachers involved in the study and will indicate the teachers’ overall orientation to the TOC in comparison with the wider sample of
teachers. It will also provide an initial outline of their perspective on catering for individual learner differences.

**Teacher A**

At the time of the study Teacher A had eight years experience as an English teacher and had been working in her current school for the past six years. In terms of training, she is an English major from a college of education. She has also completed the 16 week full-time inservice course offered by the English department of the Hong Kong Institute of Education (HKIEd). There are several panel chairs (similar to heads of department) for major subjects in the school and she is one of the panel chairs for English with special responsibilities for TOC development.

Her school is a whole-day school with pupils above average in terms of ability and generally coming from relatively privileged backgrounds. At the time of the study she was teaching a primary 1 class of 33 pupils (19 boys and 14 girls), with a wide range of ability. A small number of the pupils in the class are very capable in English, due to the fact that they have recently returned to Hong Kong from English speaking countries or that one of the parents is a native speaker of English.

Teacher A’s lessons tend to involve a lot of activities and be very motivating for pupils. She believes in the concept of catering for individual learner differences and believes that teachers should strive to cater for pupil differences in the classroom. She outlines her views as follows:

> It should be the aim of every teacher to cater for individual differences because every pupil, every person is unique and they develop in different ways and they learn differently. … In every class, there must be some pupils slower than the others so we teachers have to think of the way to help them. Also there must be some pupils brighter than the others so we should prepare something and let them do more, let them learn more.

Teacher A’s attitude scale responses (see Appendix 1) indicate a comparatively positive orientation towards the TOC, ranking 21st out of 73 total responses to the scale from the wider sample of teachers. Her attitude scale responses also seem to confirm her belief in tailoring teaching and learning to the individual needs of pupils. In both the pre- and post-observation administrations of the attitude scale, she agreed with the following items: ‘It is important to give pupils the opportunity to learn at their own pace’, and ‘The teacher should take into account pupils’ needs and interests’.
Catering for individual learner differences

She does however acknowledge that catering for individual learner differences is a challenging ideal that is very hard to achieve in practice, particularly in a class such as hers where there is a wide gap between the more able and less able pupils:

One problem is individual differences, some pupils are brighter than the others and a few of them are less capable than the others. It doesn’t mean that they are only less capable in English but less capable in doing other things in learning. So it is quite easy to forget them sometimes, because sometimes the brighter ones occupy you with their own questions and their own problems, but at the same time those less capable ones are just sitting there, they don’t know what to do and they don’t know how to ask. But there is only one teacher, so I know sometimes it is quite easy for me to forget them.

This is a particular issue in Teacher A’s class where a number of the boys are quite demanding and relatively lacking in patience or self-discipline. If the teacher does not attend promptly to their needs they are likely to become disruptive. This may mean that less able, but quieter, pupils are somewhat neglected.

Teacher B

At the time of the study, Teacher B was in her third year of teaching. She holds a BA degree majoring in music from the Baptist University of Hong Kong but was an untrained teacher in the first year of a two year teacher training course at the HKIEd. Her school is a whole-day school with an intake of roughly average ability. The class she was teaching was a primary 2 class with 31 pupils mainly aged seven years old. One of the students is from the Philippines and a number of them are recently arrived immigrants from mainland China.

In her teaching, Teacher B tends to emphasise classroom discipline and group cohesiveness. Classroom observation data indicated that she tends not to place much emphasis on individual activities or differentiation of pupil learning. The following comment identifies the centrality of catering for individual learner differences in the TOC but alludes to her perceptions of some of the constraints of the Hong Kong context:

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2 The HKIEd two year inservice course for untrained primary school teachers.
I think the idea of TOC is to cater for learner differences; this is an ideal way to have different levels of homework worksheets for different learners to cater for learner differences. This is rather difficult in the Hong Kong school situation, because we have too many students in the class.

With respect to the attitude scale in the pre-observation administration she chose the mid-point ‘uncertain’ in response to the statement, ‘It is important to give pupils the opportunity to learn at their own pace’, and agreed with the statement, ‘The teacher should take into account pupils’ needs and interests’. In the post-observation response to these items, she agreed with the former item and strongly agreed with the latter item. This is tentative evidence that she had become more concerned about pupil individual needs over the seven-month period of the study, a finding neither corroborated nor disconfirmed by classroom or interview evidence that tended to show a broadly similar orientation throughout. In comparison with the wider sample of primary English teachers, Teacher B’s orientation towards the TOC as measured by the attitude scale was close to the mean, so she appears less positive towards the TOC than teachers A and C.

**Teacher C**

Teacher C had four years teaching experience at the commencement of this study, three of them being in her current school. She holds a teaching certificate majoring in English from a college of education in Hong Kong. She also holds a B.Ed degree from a British university and at the time of the research was studying for an M.Ed at the Open University of Hong Kong. She is the panel chair for the subject of English and also the TOC co-ordinator in her school.

Her school is a bi-sessional one, meaning that there are two sections, a morning one and an afternoon one that co-exist more or less independently in the same premises. Teacher C works in the afternoon section of the school which is less popular with parents and therefore has smaller than average class sizes. The school caters for pupils of roughly average ability. During the period of the research, she taught the TOC with a primary 1 class of 26 pupils aged mainly six years old.

Teacher C’s stated perspective on catering for individual learner differences as evidenced by interview data is principally to emphasise the use of graded worksheets. She feels that graded worksheets provide a better focus for pupils to respond at their own level and that through arranging pupils in small groups according to ability, she is better able to support them. She has
an interesting perspective on parental (or societal) views of catering for individual learner differences: “if they [parents] believe that their children are weak, they hope that there will be more individual help … but they believe that if their children are okay, we [teachers] don’t have to do that”. Her attitude scale responses show a strong belief in tailoring learning to the individual needs of pupils. In both the pre- and post-observation administrations of the attitude scale she strongly agreed with the following items: ‘It is important to give pupils the opportunity to learn at their own pace’, and ‘The teacher should take into account pupils’ needs and interests’. Her overall orientation towards the TOC, as measured by the attitude scale, indicated that she was strongly in favour of it. In comparison with the wider sample, she had the third most positive orientation towards the TOC out of 73 attitude scale responses.

**Strategies for Catering for Individual Learner Differences**

This section will describe and discuss a number of strategies used to cater for individual learner differences in the three classrooms under review. The strategies discussed will be those that emerged most prominently from the classroom and interview data. Some of the strategies are designed explicitly to cater for individual learner differences whilst others are general classroom strategies which cater for learner differences to some extent, although this is not necessarily the teacher’s main purpose. For reasons of space, classroom transcripts will not be used in this paper.

**Teacher A**

For Teacher A, five strategies for catering for learner differences will be discussed: pupil response at own level, more able pupils supporting the less able, supplementary work-cards, individual questioning and variable grouping.

Teacher A carries out a lot of activities which allow pupils to respond at their own level, both in terms of degree of difficulty and quantity of work done. For example, in a lesson in which the pupils drew and wrote about a clown there was quite a diversity of response (partly teacher encouraged and partly pupil-initiated). Some pupils kept rather closely to the language items which had been practised in class, whilst others were more wide-ranging in their choice of vocabulary and more ambitious in the length and depth of their descriptions.
Another strategy employed by Teacher A is to organise *more able pupils to help the less able ones*. Interestingly, she stresses the benefits of this arrangement for the more able as well as the less able:

Sometimes I ask the brighter pupils to help the less bright pupils, in this way I am reinforcing the brighter pupils’ knowledge because through teaching the others, they must clearly know what they have learnt in order to teach the others. And for one of my pupils when he was responsible for teaching a less bright girl, he found that he himself didn’t quite understand something and he asked me to clarify it and it helped him and helped the less bright one, also.

Teacher A also uses *supplementary work-cards*, particularly as a method of providing additional learning activities for the more able pupils:

In our school we have prepared some extra work-cards and extra reading articles. There are some things for the brighter ones to do, so the early finishers may ask ‘can we do the work-cards?’ Then they go and take the work-cards and do it on their own and after that they check the answers at the back and after they did three or five the teacher gives them stickers for encouragement and they like the stickers very much.

Teacher A often asks *individual questions*\(^3\) to pupils in a principled way. For example, sometimes she will deliberately nominate the less able pupils to answer or present in front of the class:

During the guessing game, I asked some pupils to demonstrate first and at that time I looked around the class to find out pupils who are not sure if they understood or not and then I ask him or her to come out; this is one way of catering for individual learner differences.

Her rationale is that if the less able pupils are able to carry out a task, then she can be reasonably confident that the whole class is able to do so. This seems to be a well-thought out strategy and contrasts with one carried out by less experienced or less capable teachers, who tend to call too frequently on their best pupils to answer or demonstrate with the result that the less able pupils are often neglected\(^4\). Conversely, Teacher A also involves the more able

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\(^3\) It is not suggested that individual questioning per se is a method of catering for individual learner differences. However, when done in a principled way, putting questions of appropriate level to different pupils, involving all pupils in some way, individual questioning is a useful practical technique which allows learning to be tailored to the needs of pupils.

\(^4\) Admittedly, the relatively high overall aptitude of her pupils does offer Teacher A some advantage in this respect, in comparison with teachers of less able classes who may have difficulty in eliciting substantial contributions in English from more than a minority of pupils.
pupils at their own level. For example, in a lesson about smells, she once elicited the vocabulary item ‘shoe polish’ from a quiet girl with a native English-speaking parent, on the grounds that she was the most suitable pupil to provide this particular answer.

With respect to grouping, the pupils are seated in five mixed-ability groups with six or seven pupils in each group. Although the groups were generally employed on the same tasks, in one lesson, she organised groups to do two different activities. Two of the five groups did a relatively routine exercise from their workbooks, whilst the teacher focused her attention on the other three groups who were carrying out a mingling activity in which they had to circulate and identify someone who had chosen the same favourite animal as them. In the next lesson, the tasks required of the groups were reversed. This strategy seemed to work well and enabled better classroom control and more focused teacher support than would probably have resulted if all groups had done the mingling activity at the same time.

Teacher B places less emphasis on catering for individual learner differences than Teachers A and C. This may be due to the fact that she is a relatively inexperienced and untrained teacher. At this stage in her professional development, she seems to be putting more emphasis on the basic teaching tools, such as lesson planning, teacher presentation of language items, classroom management and organisation. She is indeed very well-organised, her classroom management is systematic and the standards of pupil behaviour are high. Two strategies which seem to cater to some extent, for individual learner differences, will be discussed, namely choice of language medium and pupils responding at their own level.

The principal strategy by which she attempts to cater for individual learner differences relates to the choice of language medium. She frequently uses a dual language medium (mixed code), characteristically some instructions or explanation in English followed by a summary or elaboration in Cantonese. She explains her thinking in several interview excerpts, for example, “After I have given the English instructions, I found from their facial expression that they are not understanding what I am talking about, so I need to explain it in Chinese,” or “I often use English once and then I use Chinese … for these students I think that it is a good method”. This is a common strategy in Hong Kong schools and one that has been extensively criticised
particularly in official government documents5 (Education Commission, 1990, and also reiterated in Education Commission, 1992 and 1995), principally on the grounds that pupils are unlikely to attend to communication in English, if they believe that a Cantonese elaboration will soon follow. In teacher B’s class, she states that the extent of this strategy is also dependent on the degree of interest in the topic and the time of day of the lesson. For example, if she perceives the topic to be more interesting and that pupils will be more attentive, she feels more confident to use a greater amount of English. Conversely if the topic seems less interesting or if the lesson is in the afternoon and the pupils are more tired, she tends to use more Cantonese, indicating her sensitivity in accommodating her teaching style to the needs of her pupils. A parallel strategy is with respect to pupils’ use of Cantonese. She hopes that pupils will be able to respond in English but is tolerant of responses in Cantonese, especially from the less able pupils. As she explains,

If I ask them what the name of the item is then for the less able students if they can’t give the English name, I will just allow them to give the Chinese one or do drawings. For more able students they can just say the word in English.

Activities where pupils can respond at a different level of quality or quantity occur less frequently in Teacher B’s lessons in comparison with Teachers A and C. One example, however, of Teacher B facilitating pupil response at different levels was when they were preparing for a class picnic. Pupils were invited to bring to class things which they might take to a picnic. They carried out a pair-work activity involving the question, ‘What have you got?’ and the answer, ‘I’ve got a ____.’ There was a variety of pupil responses in terms of full-sentence or short answers (omitting ‘I’ve got’), simple or more complex choice of vocabulary and quantity of sentences generated (one or more than one).

**Teacher C**

For Teacher C, five strategies for catering for individual learner differences will be discussed, namely graded worksheets, individual questioning, extra support during writing activities, language medium and classroom grouping.

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5 Academic opinion tends to find the issue less clear-cut, for example, Boyle (1997) defends the use of mixed code, whilst Johnson (1998) points out that in the classroom, as in society, there is both expedient and orientational motivation for mixing English and Cantonese.
Consistent with her stated belief in graded worksheets, Teacher C likes to use graded worksheets on the same topic but with varying degrees of support. She explains as follows:

I can make something graded, for example, work-cards or worksheets, the same worksheets but a different grading, so they get different designs for the same activity or the same exercise. I think it’s good, for example, I’ve got some worksheets, they’ve got three levels, they did the same thing, but with different points or clues to help them, so they can still finish the same worksheet but in different ways.

For example, in the third cycle of observation one lesson involved three graded worksheets with six filling-in-the-blanks items. The weaker pupils had to circle the correct answer from a choice of three answers given, the average pupils were required to fill in the blanks choosing from six words given, the brighter pupils had to fill in the blanks without any given words. The worksheets are designated as ‘sun’, ‘moon’ and ‘star’, in an attempt to avoid labelling of pupils. Although generally enthusiastic about this strategy for catering for individual learner differences, Teacher C did express some reservations about the identification of students as brighter or weaker and the negative effect this might have on social relationships in the class.

The second main strategy used by Teacher C is to ask a lot of individual questions of her pupils. This seems to cater for individual learner differences in that pupils can respond at their own level (e.g. single word or sentence answers, simple or more complex answers) and that they can receive individual feedback on their response (praise/acknowledgement or feedback/correction). It is interesting that in this class, there is something of an individual rather than a collective spirit, manifested by a variety of responses in contrast with the uniformity of some Hong Kong primary classrooms, where whole class choral repetition has been predominant. It is suggested that this has been stimulated by the teacher asking a lot of individual questions and encouraging individual responses.

Another strategy employed by Teacher C to cater for learner differences is to provide additional support during individual writing activities. As she explains,

For written exercises, for those that have lower ability, I have some more prompts and hints for them or I will talk with them in Chinese to help them, but for some brighter students I can just leave them to do it alone.
She often spends quite a lot of time supporting less able pupils through individualised tutoring when the others are doing something relatively routine, such as drawing or colouring. In particular, she frequently gives individual teaching or counselling to a boy sitting at the front who has both learning and behavioural difficulties.

Teacher C also caters for individual differences to some extent in her use of language medium. She believes very much in the importance of maintaining exclusively English medium during whole class teaching and her own confidence and fluency in the language is a significant factor in helping her to achieve this (Carless, 1998). She does however, often use Chinese when talking individually to pupils, particularly the less able students. She explains her method as follows, “Sometimes I will give the Chinese meaning to the weaker students and maybe Chinese instructions. When they come out and not everybody is listening to me, I can tell them in Chinese”.

Another interesting strategy used by Teacher C is in classroom grouping. The pupils who most need additional support are positioned closest to her in the classroom so as to facilitate her easy access to them. As she explains, “In the first term I try to group those weakest pupils to the front group so that it’s easier for me to teach them and to give some more help to them”. Occasionally instructions are also given group by group rather than to the whole class so as to maximise attentiveness, permit pupils to ask for clarifications and provide flexibility in the choice of language medium or the amount of Cantonese used (as indicated earlier it is not the teacher’s practice to use Cantonese when addressing the whole class). Occasionally, when instructions are given group by group, additional extension activities are given to brighter or quicker students, although this is usually done unobtrusively.

Table 1 below summarises the strategies related to catering for individual learner differences utilised by the three teachers.

**Table 1: Summary of Main Strategies Related to Individual Learner Differences**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher A</th>
<th>Teacher B</th>
<th>Teacher C</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mainly English medium throughout but Cantonese used for discipline purposes</td>
<td>Mixed code, approximately 2/3 English to 1/3 Cantonese</td>
<td>Full English medium (almost exclusively) in whole class teaching; frequent Chinese medium in small-group or individual teaching</td>
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</table>
Catering for individual learner differences

| Emphasis on individual questioning | (Choral responses predominate; little emphasis on individual questioning) | Emphasis on individual questioning |
| Teacher support for weaker pupils; (boisterous boys attract teacher attention); more able pupils help less able pupils | Some teacher support for weaker pupils | Clearly focused additional teacher support during writing activities |
| Use of supplementary work-cards | (No supplementary or graded worksheets used) | Use of graded worksheets |
| Strong emphasis on opportunities for pupils to respond at own level | (Little emphasis on opportunities for pupils to respond at own level) | Some emphasis on opportunities for pupils to respond at own level |
| Some flexible grouping, according to the activity | (Pupils mainly remain in fixed seating) | Weakest pupils grouped at front for easy teacher access |

Implications for Teaching

This paper has considered the perceptions and strategies of three Hong Kong primary school English teachers with respect to catering for individual learner differences. It is not suggested that these three teachers are typical of the wider primary school teaching population, in fact their willingness to take part in a longitudinal study of this nature indicates that they probably belong to the more motivated and more capable teachers. In addition, their attitude scale responses have indicated that Teachers A and C are more positively oriented towards TOC than the general target population, whilst Teacher B, who devotes less attention to catering for individual learner differences, has an orientation more typical of the wider population of Hong Kong primary teachers.

The evidence from their lessons attests that there is a variety of strategies for providing individualised learning experiences. Some of these strategies are explicitly designed to tailor learning to individual pupil needs, for example, the design of supplementary work-cards or the use of graded
worksheets; these tend to require more teacher preparation and may place higher demands on classroom management skills. Other strategies cater for individual learner differences more indirectly such as the use of individual questioning or modifying language input, which place relatively few demands on the teacher in terms of preparation or classroom management. In practice, teachers are most likely to adopt those strategies that best suit their teaching philosophy, their stage of personal professional development and their school and class context. What is clearly desirable is that teachers have a varied repertoire of strategies which can be used to cater for individual learner differences and with this in mind some additional methods are outlined in Appendix 2.

I would like to conclude by highlighting three relatively simple strategies discussed in the paper which I believe can enhance the individual language learning of primary pupils in the Hong Kong context. The strategies, for the most part variations on current practices, derive both from the research discussed in this paper and the approximately 200 primary school English lessons that I have observed over the last six years. Firstly, I would like to discuss the use of the target language as the classroom medium. Mixed-code, as practised by Teacher B and many other Hong Kong language and subject teachers, seems in the long-term to be detrimental to pupil language development. Evidence from Teacher C’s lessons (Carless, 1998; 1999) indicate that it is feasible to maintain consistent English medium with young Hong Kong Chinese pupils of average ability. The conditions for consistent use of the target language in her classroom appear to be her own high level of proficiency in the target language, her active involvement of pupils in lessons, her well-developed teaching skills and her personal belief that this will benefit the pupils’ language development. The so-called constraint of limited language proficiency of the pupils seems in this case to be largely irrelevant. From this discussion, a more general maxim of classroom practice is suggested: teacher competency allied to teacher belief may override classroom contextual constraints.

Secondly, individual questioning is often somewhat under-utilised in the Hong Kong primary classroom in favour of choral repetition and response. Whilst acknowledging the value of choral response as a practice method, a device for group cohesion and for maintaining discipline, it is suggested that greater individual questioning has a number of benefits. It is more interesting for pupils and provides more meaningful opportunities for them to practise language items; it can help to develop confidence and permit specific feedback
from the teacher; and can allow for pupil response at their own developmental level, in terms of short or long answers, simple or complex ones.

The third issue, which is linked to the second one, is concerned with providing pupils with greater opportunity to respond at their own level. This can be achieved by permitting more variation in pupil response, for example, during individual, pair, group or homework activities, the same task is provided for all pupils but they can respond qualitatively or quantitatively differently. This maintains the social cohesion of the class in that everyone is doing the same activity but also permits a degree of individualisation of response. For example, the more able or more ambitious pupils can be encouraged to generate more extended language and with a slightly higher degree of linguistic complexity.

Envoi

The issue of the cultural appropriateness of the concept of catering for individual learner differences, alluded to in the introduction, remains unresolved. Wider issues of the cultural appropriateness of imported methodologies (Holliday, 1994) arise and arguably the TOC is largely “imported.” Rather than importing curriculum (or school restructuring) models from Anglophone countries, the Hong Kong educational system may be better served by developing more home-spun policies or through greater adaptation of overseas models to the local context (Dimmock, 1998).

References


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Education Department (1994). *General introduction to Target-Oriented Curriculum*. Hong Kong: Education Department.


Kwai Chung Public School (1998). The ‘Little Teacher’ Scheme. In *Good Practice in English Language Teaching: A handbook for Primary*
schools. Hong Kong: English section, Advisory Inspectorate, Education Department.


**Appendix 1. Attitude Scale**

The letter denotes the teacher and the number the first or second administration of the attitude scale e.g. A1 = the response of Teacher A to the first administration, B2 = the response of Teacher B to the second administration etc.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>STRONGLY DISAGREE</th>
<th>DISAGREE</th>
<th>UNCERTAIN</th>
<th>AGREE</th>
<th>STRONGLY AGREE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. It is important for pupils to do dictations regularly.</td>
<td></td>
<td>C1</td>
<td>A1, A2, B1, B2, C2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. The main role of the teacher is to transmit knowledge.</td>
<td>A1</td>
<td>C2</td>
<td>A2, B1, B2, C1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Making errors is a natural part of the learning process.</td>
<td>A1</td>
<td></td>
<td>A2, B1, B2</td>
<td>C1, C2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. The teacher should be an authority figure in the classroom.</td>
<td>C2</td>
<td>C1</td>
<td>A1, A2, B1, B2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Pair/group work are useful teaching techniques.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>A1, A2, B1, B2, C2</td>
<td>C1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. TOC is impractical in Hong Kong schools.</td>
<td>C2</td>
<td>B1, B2, C1</td>
<td>A1, A2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. The main role of the teacher is to facilitate learning amongst pupils.</td>
<td>A1, A2, B1, C1, C2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


### Explaining grammar rules is an important part of my teaching.

- A1, A2, C1, C2
- B1, B2

### Pupils learn most when they are actively involved.

- A1, A2, B1
- C1, C2

### It is important to give pupils the opportunity to learn at their own pace.

- B1
- A1, A2, C1, C2

### Pupils learn through constructing their own grammar rules.

- A1, B1, B2
- A2
- C1, C2

### Under TOC pupils will learn more than before.

- B1, B2
- A1, A2, C1, C2

### It is important for pupils to create their own sentences.

- B1, B2
- A1, A2, C1, C2

### It is important to use a communicative approach to teaching.

- A1
- B1, B2, A2
- C1, C2

### Pupils learn most when listening to the teacher.

- A1, A2, C1
- B1, B2, C2

### Traditional teaching is more effective than TOC teaching.

- A1, A2, C2
- B1, B2, C1

### It is important for pupils to do language learning tasks.

- A1, A2, B1, B2
- C1, C2
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, C2</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18. I support the principles of TOC.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, C2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. It is important to complete the teaching syllabus.</td>
<td>A1, A2, B1, C2</td>
<td>C1</td>
<td>B2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. I am now teaching according to TOC principles.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, C2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. It is necessary to correct all pupil errors.</td>
<td>C2</td>
<td>C1, B2</td>
<td>B1</td>
<td>A1, A2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22. Under TOC pupils will be less motivated than before.</td>
<td>C1, C2</td>
<td>A1, A2, B2</td>
<td>B1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23. It is important for pupils to know the rules of a language.</td>
<td>C2</td>
<td>C1</td>
<td>A1, A2, B1, B2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24. The teacher should take into account pupils’ needs and interests.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>A1, A2, B1, C1, C2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25. Pair/group work leads to discipline problems.</td>
<td>C1</td>
<td>A1, A2, B1, B2, C2</td>
<td>B2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26. It is important to do all the exercises in the textbook.</td>
<td>C2</td>
<td>A1, A2, B1, B2, C1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 2.

Other strategies for catering for individual learner differences that are either additional to or variations on those discussed in the body of the paper:

- Providing individualised instruction during break times or after school
- ‘Little Teacher’ schemes (Kwai Chung Public School, 1998), whereby pupils in higher forms provide individual or small group tuition to younger pupils
- Flexible grouping: according to seating, according to ability or according to characteristics of the activity being done
- Several different exercises are provided, sequenced in terms of difficulty. Pupils are not obliged to complete all exercises but proceed as far as they are able
- More able pupils take out readers when they have completed individual class work; this strategy can conveniently be integrated with extensive reading schemes (Yu, 1997), designed to encourage wider reading amongst Hong Kong pupils
- School-initiated or teacher-initiated after school or Saturday supplementary classes, in small groups or in groups according to ability
- The use of technologies in catering for individual learner differences, e.g. CD ROMs, IT
- Enlisting the support of parents to provide individual instruction inside and/or outside of school
- Remedial classes.