

Teaching modern foreign languages to single-sex classes¹

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This paper addresses a number of questions of relevance to practitioners and researchers who have an interest in the potential of single-sex groups to raise pupil achievement in modern foreign languages. It explores the perceptions and experiences of pupils and teachers in five mixed comprehensive schools in England who were involved in single-sex initiatives for at least one academic year. The potential benefits of such groups are described, along with other factors which may influence their effectiveness.

INTRODUCTION

The last few years have seen a steady growth of interest in the effectiveness of single-sex classes within co-educational schools. This is a direct consequence of the concern generated by the gap between boys' and girls' performance at GCSE level and, more recently, at Advanced level. In 2000, the Education Secretary, David Blunkett, called for more single-sex classes in mixed state schools in an effort to counter the "laddish anti-learning culture" that currently seems to prevail (Woodward, 2000).

In the 1980s single-sex classes were advocated by researchers and teachers anxious to address the underachievement of girls (Askew & Ross, 1988; Stanworth, 1988; Jones & Mahony, 1989). Single-sex initiatives were launched under the auspices of such projects as GIST (Girls into Science and Technology) in an attempt to relieve girls of the verbal and physical hegemony enjoyed by boys in the mixed-sex classroom. Recent enthusiasm for single-sex initiatives in 'female' subjects (Ormerod, 1975: 262), such as English and modern foreign languages (MFL), represents a recognition of the potential benefits of single-sex setting for boys. Such enthusiasm is no doubt fuelled to some degree by the role played by Ofsted in highlighting gender gaps in performance. It is also probably a consequence of the realisation that groups set by ability lend themselves easily to single-sex setting. A 'top set' foreign languages class, which all too commonly is dominated by girls, clearly facilitates the creation of an all-girls group.

Calls for more single-sex teaching would, nevertheless, initially appear to be ill-considered. While school league tables of examination results highlight the success rate of all-girls schools, they also show that all-boys schools produce GCSE results that are inferior to those of co-educational schools. It is only in the independent, selective sector that all-boys schools achieve better results than mixed schools (Arnot, David & Weiner, 1996: 41). However, modern foreign languages occupies something of an anomalous position in the single-sex schooling debate; it is one of the very few subjects in which boys attending single-sex schools outperform their peers in mixed schools. Researchers conducting investigations into the relative merits of single-sex schools have singled out French as the subject in which girls' and boys' performance may be enhanced in single-sex classes (Dale, 1974; Steedman, 1983; Batters, 1988). Analysis of pupils' GCSE results in 1995/6 similarly reveals that in modern languages there is a divergence from the pattern of pupils' overall achievement in boys', girls' and co-educational schools. While all-boys schools attain lower levels of achievement overall than all-girls and mixed schools, their GCSE grades in modern languages are considerably higher than those achieved by pupils attending mixed schools. The disparity is particularly evident at the top end of the grade range; the percentage difference in A*-C grades in any modern language is 21.1% (DfEE, 1997). There is considerable evidence to suggest that male and female pupils in single-sex schools have a more positive attitude to subjects traditionally favoured by the opposite sex (Ormerod, 1975; Bone, 1983; Harvey, 1984; Department of Trade and Industry, 1997). In contrast, pupils in co-educational schools tend to conform to sex-stereotypical perceptions of subjects, resulting in pupils favouring subjects which reinforce their perceived gender identities.

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METHODOLOGY

The paper draws on the findings of the author's classroom-based doctoral research that set out to observe the practices of five mixed comprehensive schools in England which taught foreign languages to segregated cohorts for at least one academic year. Four of the five schools set up the single-sex groups to address boys' underachievement. Fieldwork was carried out over two years and involved administering around 1,500 questionnaires to pupils across year groups, interviewing around 50 pupils and 17 staff and observing three classes of boys in Years 8, 9 and 10. Twenty-five teachers in each of the 5 departments, including those who were teaching single-sex groups and those who were not, completed questionnaires. The schools are labelled A-E.

WHY DO PUPILS ENJOY BEING IN A SINGLE-SEX GROUP?

For the girls in the study, the most important reason is related to the relief that such groups offer from boys' poor behaviour:

(Year 7, School B):

L: "...boys just laugh if you get it wrong and they take the mickey out of you."

R: "Lads are immature. They'll just sit there and somebody will say something and they giggle and mess about."

(Year 8, School C):

R: "The boys just butt in."

V: "And they laugh as well. If you don't know it, it's horrible."

(Year 9, School D):

C: "We talk more....there's no-one laughing at you."

While the boys often claimed to be distracted by girls, they were generally far less likely to express direct criticism of girls' behaviour, other than, occasionally, to mention their chattiness in class.

Large numbers of boys and girls in interviews and questionnaires mentioned feeling more confident in a single-sex group (see also Kenway et al., 1998; Sukhnandan, 2000; Warrington & Younger, 2000a). While girls often recognised that boys dominated mixed classes, causing them to adopt a more passive role in the group, the boys often acknowledged that in a mixed group they were under "pressure to impress" (Year 8 boy).

Pupils also perceived the benefits of being in a class with friends of the same sex. Boys often felt that this produced a more relaxed atmosphere but did not, like the girls, refer frequently to the mutual support offered by the group:

(Girl, Year 10, School A, interview): "Our classroom's like a close-knit community. That's how it is.....It's just all one big 'sister' group. I don't see Miss as my teacher, I see her like a big sister."

The close relationships of the kind described above were often noted as a striking feature of all-girls' groups but only rarely observed in boys' groups.

WHAT REASONS DO PUPILS GIVE FOR DISLIKING SINGLE-SEX GROUPS?

The most frequently cited reason for boys' and girls' dislike of the single-sex setting relates to the social disadvantages of not being with the opposite sex; these pupils frequently mentioned "having a laugh" in a mixed group, or commented on language learning being more enjoyable or fun in the company of the opposite sex (see also Swan, 1998; Warrington & Younger, 2000b). These pupils disliked a single-sex setting because it was "boring", and some girls had a very particular view of the function of boys in mixed groups:

(Mixed class, Year 10, School A): "...it would be boring without the odd fool."

One of the reasons cited by a number of boys in their questionnaires for not liking single-sex groups was that girls offered them assistance in mixed groups (see also Warrington & Younger, 2000b). They sometimes also alluded to girls' linguistic superiority:

(Year 10, School A, questionnaire): "[Girls] help us with our work because they usually know more."

(Year 7, School B, interview): "And they've got nice work. You can just, like, borrow....If a girl's next to us we can concentrate more. Wow, nice work, mind if I copy it?"

The few girls who mentioned boys helping them related this specifically to boys' greater confidence in speaking. It was not, however, clear whether girls appreciated this because they were encouraged by example to contribute more, or whether it was because they felt that they would not be called upon to contribute as much in class.

DO PUPILS FEEL THAT THEY WORK BETTER IN SINGLE-SEX GROUPS?

Pupils seem to regard single-sex grouping as being conducive to hard work rather than enjoyable; even though they may not enjoy it, they still feel that they are working harder. In interviews, girls appeared to be much more convinced than boys that their work was benefiting from the new grouping. Amongst boys particularly, there were considerable differences between the responses of those taught in single-sex groups:

(Year 10, School E): "It's a lot quieter. You get down to your work a lot quicker."

(Year 9, School D): "...most of the class is messing about and the teacher is shouting at them, and they're not getting their work done."

"dislike of the single-sex setting relates to the social disadvantages of not being with the opposite sex"

(Year 8, School D): “People concentrate more....You do more work.”

These differences seem largely related to the teacher’s management of the group. In those groups where teachers appeared to exercise strict control over behaviour, boys often mentioned working together as a team. In less well-disciplined groups fragmentation seemed to ensue, with boys forming small groups between which there was often confrontation.

THE SEX OF THE TEACHER IN SINGLE-SEX GROUPS

Pupils of both sexes who are taught in single-sex groups appear more convinced than their peers in mixed groups of the benefits of being taught by a teacher of the same sex as themselves. A few boys in interviews recognised that it was an advantage to be taught by a male teacher in an all-boys group since he was more likely to be able to engage their interest than would a female teacher:

(Boy, Year 9, School D): “It is different with Mr. F because when we’ve finished our work we just read French comics, and they’re Mr. F’s, he brings them in. ...I don’t think Ms. T would bring in comics like Superheroes and that....”

Several girls also found that a female teacher was more able to relate to them. While the boys’ appreciation of a male teacher often tended to be based on common interests, the girls’ appreciation appeared to be more for the teacher’s ability to empathize with them:

(Girl, Year 9, School C): “I think it’s better for the girls being taught by a female teacher ‘cos she understands you a bit more.”

(Girl, Year 10, School A): “I think we prefer it with a woman teacher. She seems easy to relate to.”

Several boys in interviews described how female teachers experienced greater problems with discipline in all-boys groups than did male teachers.

HOW DOES SINGLE-SEX GROUPING AFFECT PUPILS’ ATTITUDES TO MFL?

It seems clear that single-sex setting is only one of many variables that may affect pupils’ attitudes to modern languages. Most pupils in interviews were unsure about its impact on their attitudes and found it difficult to assess the effects. Many pupils claimed to perceive no difference and often, when pupils noticed a change in their attitude to languages from year to year, they were unable to attribute it to any particular factor. When encouraged to elaborate, they most often named the teacher and their teaching style as the most

important affective variables. A number went on to suggest that they were probably influenced by a combination of the teacher and grouping variables. In School D, which had also introduced ability setting alongside single-sex grouping, boys placed in higher-ability groups also commented on the importance of being set by ability.

A number of pupils in a range of classes commented on the appropriateness of single-sex setting for a subject which incorporates inherent gender divides. They saw the single-sex grouping as an opportunity to avoid wasting time learning language associated with the opposite sex which, they thought, they would not need to employ:

(Girl, Year 7, School B, questionnaire): “Learning French in an all-girls group is a good idea because there are different ways of spelling between boys and girls and it would have taken a long time to write out everything twice.”

(Boy, Year 9, School D, interview): “I think there’s a need for [single-sex teaching] in French and German because you’ve got different words for feminine and masculine. The stuff that we’re taught is mostly masculine.... We get told the feminine stuff and we put it down in our vocabulary book, but we don’t use it.”

HOW DO TEACHERS PERCEIVE PUPILS’ PERFORMANCE IN SINGLE-SEX GROUPS?

The majority of teachers expressed a strong conviction that girls may benefit academically from being taught in a single-sex class. The principal benefit for girls was perceived as being their release from the influence of vociferous, dominant boys, which was the deciding factor in one school’s decision to segregate. Girls’ progress was often associated with an increase in confidence. This new-found assertiveness was frequently mentioned in interviews:

(Teacher of Year 9 girls): “The able girls have become very assertive. In speaking they’re not shy any more and there’s almost a boy element of competing for the limelight. Most of them are considered by the rest of the staff to be shy, retiring violets.”

The transition from reticence to assertiveness did not, however, generally occur as a matter of course. In the early stages of the initiative, girls’ teachers often described the difficulty they encountered in encouraging girls to speak out. In a number of cases individual ‘boy substitutes’ emerged, who attempted to monopolise the teacher’s attention, and who were readily accepted in this role by their peers, who were accustomed to being ‘swamped’ by male classmates. When teachers deliberately applied strategies to counter this tendency, employing more pair- and group-work and

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encouraging them, in some cases, to view ‘boyish’ behaviours such as shouting as acceptable, girls’ self-confidence seemed to flourish. Those teachers who did not appear to apply such measures found themselves frustrated by girls’ passivity:

(School C, Year 9): “They’re extremely quiet, they don’t give anything back at all, very unreceptive.....They still don’t like speaking out in class, you have to drag things out of them.”

This teacher’s attitude to the group may well have been influenced by her conviction, expressed in an interview, that boys were “a lot more fun”. She was also the only teacher to disagree with the questionnaire suggestion that “Girls may learn languages better in single-sex groups”. Seen in the context of the claim of one of her pupils that speaking in her class was embarrassing, this case may suggest that the improved performance of girls, and particularly their greater self-confidence, is not automatically guaranteed by the establishment of an all-girls group. It would appear to be largely dependent on the teacher’s attitude to the group, which inevitably informs their ability to create both a non-threatening working environment and sound working relationships with the pupils.

The majority of teachers were aware that teaching an all-boys group represented a rather more intense experience than teaching an all-girls or mixed group; boys’ lack of self-control and the unpredictability of their behaviour were mentioned as particular problems. A few teachers, however, felt that the polarity and intensity of boys’ emotions could offer certain advantages; they described how relationships with boys were likely to be more clear-cut, and related the passion with which their pupils had engaged with some topics.

While teachers were generally less certain that single-sex groups benefited boys’ learning of languages, there was still considerable support for the suggestion that “Boys may learn languages better in single-sex groups”. Almost half the teachers (12 out of 25) agreed, 2 of them strongly, while 7 were unsure and 5 disagreed. It is of interest that 3 of the 5 who disagreed were teaching boys’ groups that were also mixed-ability, the latter being a feature criticised by them in interviews.

Teachers’ perceptions of the benefits derived by boys from single-sex grouping were diverse, as the following comments indicate. These were made by teachers of boys’ groups within the same school, in response to the question whether the single-sex grouping had been effective in terms of raising boys’ achievement:

(Ms. C, teacher of higher ability pupils): “With that group, no. Purely because there are some individuals in the group who are not capable of working by themselves, who need to have someone else in the group

who will lead for them, almost. There are some quite strong characters who’ve made the group disruptive.”

(Ms. M, teacher of lower ability pupils): “I don’t know....My boys have probably achieved what they would have produced anyway. I don’t feel it’s improved what they have achieved.”

(Mr. R, teacher of higher ability pupils): “Very much so. In terms of discipline and achievement I feel that they’ve learned a lot.”

In comparison with girls’ groups, all-boys groups are, it seems, less likely to represent a clear-cut and short-term formula for improving pupil performance.

WHICH OTHER VARIABLES ARE PERCEIVED TO AFFECT PUPILS’ PERFORMANCE?

Age of pupils

The findings suggest that the older boys are, the less likely they are to enjoy the benefits of being taught in a single-sex group. While this does not mean that there is no chance of success, it does suggest that it is much more difficult for teachers to address bad habits – poor social, organisational and communicative skills – at key stage 4. On the other hand, single-sex grouping at key stage 4 might represent a means of ‘re-packaging’ a subject which has lost its appeal for many pupils by this stage.

Ability setting

For a number of teachers, ability grouping was perceived to play as important a role as single-sex setting in determining pupils’ performance. Concerns that mixed-ability setting was not conducive to language learning were voiced in two of the three schools with current or recent experience of teaching mixed-ability groups.

Class size

Teachers were also acutely aware of the effect of pupil numbers. In interviews some teachers of boys’ groups attributed some of the success of the grouping to the opportunity it had given them to reduce the size of the class:

(School A, Year 10): “Some of these boys would have sunk completely in larger groups – we had the benefit also of being a small group

In a number of schools, however, the creation of single-sex classes had resulted in larger than average groups. While large classes of girls and higher-ability boys did not seem to create insurmountable problems, large classes of lower- or mixed-ability boys were often perceived as less

“improved performance would appear to be largely dependent on the teacher’s attitude to the group”

manageable than large mixed-sex groups. Thus 32 higher-ability boys in one class presented scarcely any disciplinary problems, in stark contrast to the 26 lower-ability boys in another and the 28 mixed-ability boys in a third.

Sex of teacher

The theory that teachers and pupils may feel more at ease with each other when they are of the same sex (Bone, 1983) and that the teacher might use this commonality to their advantage (Kruse, 1992), received some endorsement in interviews:

(Ms. M, School D, Year 9): "I talk to [the girls] in a way that I probably wouldn't talk to the boys, and I don't know why. I'm just a lot more comfortable with them; I'm uncomfortable with the boys. I'm more relaxed with the girls."

(Mr. F, School D, Year 9 boys): "It probably makes a difference being a male teacher. It's definitely an advantage. I had a parent come up to me last night demanding that her son is in my class next year, saying that he feels secure with me."

Problems with discipline were more likely to arise when the teacher and pupils were of different sexes. This was not just the case with regard to female teachers of boys' groups; the few male teachers of girls' groups in the study encountered problems with poor behaviour which resembled difficulties faced by male colleagues in other single-sex research projects (see, for instance, Danischewsky & Joseph, 1994). These were particularly noticeable with older classes of girls, such as a Year 9 lower-ability girls' group in one school, taught by a young male teacher who attributed to them a "building-site mentality".

One male teacher of Year 10 boys saw his sex as a distinct advantage in establishing a close relationship with the class:

"...there has been this bonding thing. At times I have felt there's been a father-like relationship. 40-50% of them are from one-parent families. I present an alternative role model. They know that I'm a dad, I'm successful in my career, I play football."

WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL ADVANTAGES OF TEACHING SINGLE-SEX GROUPS?

Targeting learning styles

A number of the teachers involved in the research perceived as a distinct advantage of single-sex grouping the opportunity it afforded them to tailor their teaching styles to meet the common needs and learning styles of the group:

(School B, Year 7/8): "It's allowed me to look at the strengths and weaknesses of the boys much more clearly and, as a result, I've targeted areas which I feel they need to do more work on."

Several teachers used this opportunity to address boys' weaknesses, including organisational, social and writing skills, while teachers of girls' groups focused their attention on encouraging girls to become more assertive and adventurous in class. Some teachers, however, resented the time and effort needed to equip boys with the basic communication and behavioural skills required before language learning could properly begin. Such remedial training, usually regarded as unnecessary in girls' groups, was sometimes seen as being both arduous and protracted. A considerable number of teachers expressed the view that boys' performance in boys' groups improved at a much slower rate than that of their female peers.

Reducing boys' image awareness

A large number of teachers endorsed the suggestion that boys in boys' groups may become less aware of the image they convey to their peers than in mixed groups, where the presence of girls may heighten their sensitivity to the need to conform to fashionable, anti-academic male stereotypes. Several teachers referred to both boys and girls appearing more 'relaxed' and able to ask questions, in the boys' case without fear of being teased for demonstrating an interest in work. Single-sex groups were sometimes seen as giving the pupils the opportunity to explore their interests more freely since their questions often focused not on the specific linguistic area being taught, but on broader issues related to languages. In one school, higher-ability Year 9 girls were keen to discuss the development of different languages, and the implications of learning two languages, while the parallel boys demanded much more detailed explanations of grammatical points than the teacher had anticipated.

The teacher of one Year 8 boys' group also found that his pupils were considerably more relaxed, although observation and his own comments suggested that the ease of his relationship with the class was also attributable to his status as a foreign native speaker:

"...they were very shy in the beginning. So I said, 'Look, I make mistakes learning English, and you make mistakes in French. You teach me English, and I'll teach you French'. So we are on the same level, but I have the reins of the whole thing. Sometimes I do it deliberately, to shock them, and they say, 'Sir! You can't say that!' And I say, 'Well, I don't know, I'm a poor foreigner.' And they say, 'You're doing well, Sir, you're doing well.' I take advantage of that."

This teacher's deliberate exploitation of his non-native knowledge of English also involved his mock-naive emulation of the boys' colloquial English, an action that also appeared to enhance his relationship with his pupils. The possibility

"boys' weaknesses, including organisational, social and writing skills, encouraging girls to become more assertive and adventurous"

that boys' embarrassment in speaking a foreign language may be reduced when their teacher exploits the fact that he is genuinely sharing their experience of learning a foreign language may be of considerable interest to the members of a profession increasingly characterised by non-native speakers of English.

CONCLUSIONS

The most striking feature of the teacher perceptions collected in this research is the broad diversity of opinion. While these teachers are, it seems, agreed on a principal argument for establishing single-sex groups – boys' and girls' differing learning styles – they are by no means united in their views on the success of such initiatives.

The greatest differences in opinion are, it seems, to be found amongst teachers of boys' groups. While the majority of girls' teachers agree that the setting is effective, particularly in terms of improving girls' assertiveness and speaking skills, perceptions of boys' performance in single-sex groups vary widely. An improvement in boys' performance in these groups seems to be dependent on a complex chemistry of independent variables including the age of the pupils, ability setting, class size and, most importantly, the relationship with the teacher, and their teaching style. Other factors mentioned by teachers, but not discussed here for reasons of space, are the 'novelty value' of such classes; the timetabling of language lessons; and the turn-over of staff in language departments.

Teachers must decide on the basis of experience whether boys work better in the presence of the opposite sex, with the girls assisting them, or in their absence, where boys may become less self-conscious. There is, it seems, a clear dividing line between those boys' groups which are effective and those which are not. The teachers of all-boys groups were apparently subject to extremes of experience. In those cases where the setting was judged effective, teachers fostered a close relationship with their pupils and saw improvements in targeted weak areas such as social and organisational skills and writing. In unsuccessful classes, teachers experienced a deterioration in discipline which forced them to deliver unstimulating lessons structured to maximise control. While many teachers accounted for these different experiences by referring to the divergent personalities of individual classes, the appropriate pairing of teachers with classes also appears to have played a key role in determining effectiveness. Single-sex groups are, it seems, most effective when they allow teachers to practise a teaching style informed by their age, sex and experience, with which they and their pupils are comfortable.

The only GCSE results obtained from single-

sex groups in one of the five schools seems to underline the potential of such initiatives. The results of those boys and girls who were taught in single-sex, mixed-ability groups in Years 10 and 11 compare favourably with those of their peers: 68% of the boys achieved an A*-C grade, compared with 33% of boys in the mixed-sex cohort, and 89% of the girls in the all-girls group gained an A*-C grade, compared with only 48% of their peers in mixed-sex groups. While this should not be regarded as conclusive evidence of the effectiveness of single-sex groups, particularly since the comparison is between two single-sex groups and four mixed-sex groups, it nevertheless suggests the potential of single-sex groups for raising pupil achievement in this subject area, when the staff involved are committed to the initiative's success. It is the teacher's engagement with their pupils that ultimately determines the effectiveness of single-sex groups, as the vast majority of pupils testified:

(Boys, Year 10):

AB: "Do you think it's important being in an all-boys group?"

C: "No, I don't think it is."

S: "It's not really important. It's just the same as in other groups."

C: "It's the teacher that's most important. He's got to make the lessons enjoyable, or you just lose interest....."

¹ This article is based on a paper presented at *Language World*, UMIST, April 2001

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NOTES FOR CONTRIBUTORS

Contributions

The Editors welcome previously unpublished articles, reports and other contributions which will further the cause of the learning and teaching of languages. These contributions are normally expected to fall into one of the following categories, although contributions of different lengths will also be considered:

- (a) Articles or reports of about 3000 to 5000 words. (Longer pieces may be considered subject to prior consultation with the editors.)
- (b) Shorter articles of up to 1000 words that might include items of information, notes on innovative classroom practice and discussion points (including those arising from previous articles).

An abstract of 200-250 words should accompany articles of 3000 to 5000 words and an abstract of approximately 100 words should accompany those of 1000 words.

Articles should be written in English and may deal with any aspect of contemporary language, literature and culture. Previously unpublished photocopiable classroom material to accompany the contribution (a worksheet, for example) is particularly welcome.

Presentation

Contributions must be typed with double spacing and sent in on disk or as an email attachment (MS Word preferred), accompanied by 3 copies on paper and an address for correspondence. These should be presented anonymously for review purposes, carrying *no* indication of the author's name or place of employment. The latter details should be given in a covering letter. Remember to keep a copy of the article for yourself. Please give your article one title only, not a title and a sub-title, but do feel free to divide it up with (short) sub-headings.

If you quote references or sources, please give full details using the Harvard system, e.g.: Barber, C. (1993) *The English Language: a historical introduction*, Cambridge: CUP. In the text the author's name, year of publication and page number where relevant should be quoted in brackets, e.g.: (Barber, 1993: 27).

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