

Challenge: The Great 6th grade Divide

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The greatest challenge I have faced whilst teaching in Elementary Schools in Korea has in turn become one of the greatest achievements of my teaching career – getting the 6th grade to enjoy studying English.

Ask any Elementary school teacher which grade is the most difficult to teach, and the majority will say grade 6. The textbook material is dry, unimaginative and the students themselves are not only starting to go through puberty, but now are starting to find English too difficult. The step up to grade 6 is really the making or breaking point in their English development. Students who have just been hanging on in the 5th grade will soon drop off. The students who couldn't achieve 4th grade English don't stand a chance, and your high ability students will find the curriculum a waste of time and would rather be at their academy.

Then you have our school. We are located in the city centre of Gwangju, and 15 years ago we were one of the biggest and best schools in the city. Now we barely have 200 students who are amongst the poorest in the area. We are also a school famous for baseball so this means that a lot of our boys who need the most help with English, regularly miss classes for baseball training. Couple this with the usual problems all 6th grade teachers face, behavioral issues, short attention spans, lack of interest and an already difficult problem becomes a teaching crisis.

In an average class of 25 we have 6/7 students who have had the advantage of a private education. Approximately 5 students who can meet the target language set out in the curriculum and 13 students who are struggling or have little to no English comprehension.

When I joined the school, the previous grade 6 was even worse with only 1 or 2 students of a higher ability and the whole class under achieving. They were impossible to teach; nobody was willing to be involved in the lessons and they had zero interest in succeeding in the language. That year our school was ranked in the bottom 5 in the city for the standardized exam results.

Now the current grade six were starting to repeat the same pattern, and after only a few weeks into the new semester the signs were there that this was going to be another long year. My co-teacher and I made the decision to separate the classes into ability groups. In a standard four part lesson, we would teach part 1 as a whole class, part 2 we would separate into ability groups, part 3 as a class and part 4 in ability groups.

Usually I would take the high ability students into a different classroom and teach a curriculum focused on getting the students to be creative and analytical thinkers. Some

activities included storytelling, role plays, becoming learning mentors, completing research topics, working to a brief, language games and discussions. The remaining students were taught by the co-teacher using a more simplified target language which was reinforced with games and activities that they could enjoy and achieve to keep them motivated.



6-2 – Pictionary Activity



*6-2 – High Ability Students:
Independent Discussion on Bullying*

Now we are at the end of the semester, and the students are still motivated and achieving the target language. The high ability students now work independently in the classroom allowing both teachers to concentrate on the rest of the class. They have developed so much more confidence and fluency in their speech which they would never have achieved in regular lessons. The other students have also succeeded in learning the target language set out in the curriculum, by focusing on the key sentences and slowly experiencing them to new vocabulary we feel that they have achieved much more than they would have through regular lessons. Overall it has allowed us to get to know each student better so we can praise and encourage them individually based on their own accomplishments.

It's not easy, and it does add a lot of extra preparation to your lesson plans. But we have successfully helped and challenged all of our students this semester, and what makes it all worthwhile is that the students themselves have appreciated the more individual support they have received. My advice to others is don't be scared to break away from the norm. Try to find creative solutions to fit your student's needs, because more often than not they will work.