

ABILITY GROUPING IN KAZAKHSTANI EFL SECONDARY SCHOOL CLASSES

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The ability grouping in Kazakhstani English as a Foreign Language (EFL) class is a process where a class is divided in two subgroups if class capacity is twenty-four or more students in both rural and urban schools. However, clear instructions of how to produce such divisions are not described and teachers are left to choose for themselves. This study's primary purpose is to study the teachers' experiences of grouping students in English classrooms and it provides a qualitative interview-based research approach, where a teacher from one secondary school in Astana was selected through a purposeful maximal variation sampling strategy. The findings revealed practices of structuring English language programs in Kazakhstan. The use of mixed-ability groups is a key aspect, driven by the need to balance students' academic performance levels. Challenges arise when students with diverse learning experiences join a single class, emphasizing the teacher's role in navigating these differences. The study suggests that while mixed-ability groups have advantages, concerns about evaluating oral competency and potential conflicts among teachers underscore the complexity of class organization in Kazakhstani EFL instruction.

Keywords: ability grouping, class organization.

Introduction

To begin with, it is essential to clarify what we mean by 'ability' in an academic context. The ability grouping research pioneer Gamoran (1995), claimed that ability is a common underlying trait of a student's performance scores. It is important to the theory and practice of education and underlies many of the core philosophical debates in the discipline. The concept of ability is confusing because it is sometimes used interchangeably with various terms including intellect, IQ, talent, aptitude, potential, capabilities, skills, knowledge, competency, and more (Shahar, 2022).

Though its precise definition varies between and within countries, grouping students according to some assessment or judgment of their academic ability is a frequently utilized strategy of organizing students for instructional purposes in many countries (Baines, 2019). Therefore, dividing students into ability-based groups sparks much discussion among educators, legislators, and parents (Shahar, 2022).

Its application is predicated on the idea that all students' achievement may be raised if curriculum, re-

sources, learning support, teacher skill, and other elements are tailored to students with comparable ability levels. Additionally, the potential for teachers' expectations to be influenced by the assigned groupings can lead to unintended biases (Shahar, 2017). Striking a balance between the benefits and pitfalls of ability grouping requires careful consideration and continuous evaluation within the educational context. In particular, there is a vital concern about the possible drawbacks of ability grouping, especially when it comes to access to resources, curriculum, and instructional skills as well as equality of opportunity (Nomi, 2010).

Kazakhstani EFL Classroom

Role of English in secondary education

Former President N. Nazarbayev (2007) highlighted the critical role of the English language, referring to it as the language of integration into the world economy and global community. This declaration significantly altered Kazakhstan's English language education system. As a result of this direction, the highly esteemed Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools were founded, which bear witness to the enhanced standing of English.

These schools switched to using English as their main language of instruction in addition to Kazakh and Russian.

Additionally, beginning with the academic year 2013, the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan strategically implemented English language instruction beginning in the primary grades in secondary general education schools (Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2012). The changing environment of education and policy both demonstrate the pervasive influence of the English language. The government's proposal to begin English education from the 2013 academic year corresponds with the standard starting point for English language instruction, which is the early primary school grades. In 2023, English education begins for children as early as the third year of primary school, at the age of nine.

EFL Classroom Management

The fundamental principles of instructional theory are followed by Instructional-Methodological Letter (2023) in the Kazakhstani setting. The division of the class into two groups in educational organizations is carried out in urban general education organizations with classes of 24 or more students, and in rural 20 or more students. (Instructional-Methodological Letter, 2023- 2024). This implies that teachers can distribute resources more effectively by grouping students. However, the clear instructions of *how* to divide students into smaller subgroups are not clarified in the documents. Therefore, teachers and faculty members are free to choose relevant principles themselves. As Zikrina (2022) pointed out, while dealing with a diverse group of students, teachers are primarily left to rely on their own discretion and gut feeling, and occasionally, the children's socioeconomic backgrounds contribute to the disparities in talent. The methodological guidelines do not adequately address the challenges of working with mixed-ability kids, even while they encourage the use of a variety of activities and give teachers flexibility and autonomy in choosing activities and resources (Zikrina, 2022).

The current research landscape regarding ability grouping in Kazakhstan's educational system appears notably sparse despite comprehensive searches across various research platforms. In the context of Kazakhstani education, this apparent lack of studies that specifically examine the practice of ability grouping presents significant issues for researchers, educators, and policymakers.

The lack of significant research on ability grouping in Kazakhstan raises the possibility of a knowledge gap regarding the application of this instructional method, its effects on student learning outcomes, and its compatibility with the larger objectives of the country's educational system. This gap highlights the necessity of conducting more localized research, but it also emphasizes how crucial it is to consider educational methods within particular cultural, linguistic, and contextual frameworks.

Literary review

Approaches while grouping the class

Ability grouping is commonly used to deliver education that is suitable for each student's unique needs. Putting students of different backgrounds, skill levels, and learning styles in the same classroom is known as *heterogeneous grouping*. Slavin (1987), a prominent grouping researcher, has claimed that by encouraging peer learning, this method aids in the development of a variety of skills in pupils through teamwork. Sorting students into groups according to their learning preferences, skill levels, or skills is known as *homogeneous grouping* (Lou et al., 1996). The goal is to make instruction more uniformly leveled so that teachers may focus on individual students' needs. Although more specialized training could result from homogeneous grouping, there are conflicting results on academic achievement (Lou et al., 1996).

Alternative practice of placing students in different classrooms according to their academic standing or prior performance is known as *between-class ability grouping* (Matthews et al., 2013). Here, students in a class are divided into ability groups according to their academic standing, prior performance, or areas of interest and instructions are designed to be flexible, allowing students to quickly enter and exit groups according to their performance. Reducing the number of academic levels in a single classroom will help differentiate instruction and raise student accomplishment overall (Gentry & MacDougall, 2009).

Overall, every grouping approach, just as homogeneous grouping and between-class grouping are similar but not precisely the same, so too are heterogeneous grouping and within-class grouping. When distinct groups are formed within the same classroom or across multiple classes, heterogeneous grouping can include both within-class and between-class grouping. Comparable to heterogeneous grouping, homogeneous grouping can take place both within and between classes, contingent on the goal of assembling groups with comparable attributes within one classroom or

among several classrooms. Whether the grouping is done within a single class or across numerous classes is the crucial factor. Therefore, within-class and between-class refer to the boundaries or context of the grouping, whereas heterogeneous and homogeneous describe the diversity or similarity of the groups.

The question of which approach is better lacks a definitive answer supported by reliable research. There is conflicting evidence in the educational literature regarding whether one strategy is better than another, and experts frequently disagree on this point. It is imperative to acknowledge that the selection of a grouping technique is a personal decision that is influenced by pedagogical philosophies, individual preferences, and the distinct characteristics of a certain educational setting. When choosing a grouping strategy, teachers are urged to carefully evaluate the unique requirements and traits of their pupils as well as their own teaching philosophies. There is no one-size-fits-all answer, and teachers may discover that their pupils respond best to a customized, context-specific strategy or a mix of approaches (Tomlinson, 2014).

Ability grouping's impact on academic performance

It is essential to figure out *what* the effects are of such approaches in the classroom. As shown below, it has lower stakes by nature, that implies only matching students to classes according to ability levels (Gamoran, 2002).

Although each grouping strategy has advantages, the research indicates that grouping techniques' efficacy varies depending on a number of variables, such as the subject matter, grade level, and the unique needs of the pupils (Shahar, 2022). While homogeneity grouping may provide more specialized education there may be concerns for fairness and social development, while heterogeneous grouping frequently encourages a diversity of learning experiences. When students in low-tracked classrooms concentrate on basic literacy skills and exam preparation utilizing lower-level materials, those in high-tracked classrooms are expected to complete a more demanding and fast-paced curriculum (Worthy, 2010). Teachers can engage students more effectively in smaller groups that arise from within-class grouping, which makes it easier to modify instructional materials for homogeneous ability groups (Tieso, 2003). According to Bolick and Rogowsky (2016), this approach balances instructional time lost during small group instruction. Critics counter that there could be negative effects on students' academic performance as well as their social and emotional well-

being if ability groupings within a class are established (Bolick & Rogowsky, 2016). Students with low, medium, and high ability levels all do better academically when they are together (Slavin, 1987). Overall, ability grouping demonstrates that the practice tends to benefit learners across all proficiency levels (Sukhnandan & Lee, 1988). Here, a question of school setting is essential to notice, whether there are more effects for schools having bigger numbers of students or whether this is a language orientated school. Studies indicate that grouping practices are more prevalent in schools with diverse levels of achievement, higher poverty rates, and minority student populations than those that are larger public schools (Condron, 2008). Private and small schools with advantaged students tend to show more positive effects, while schools with more deprived and diverse backgrounds may experience no effect or negative effects, especially for lower-skilled students (Nomi, 2010).

It does, however, imply that teachers are under additional pressure to provide differentiated training that is tailored to the needs of each group (Lou et al., 1996). The resources available to each school, specifically the quantity of specialized staff members, determine its success (Sukhnandan & Lee, 1988). Additionally, teachers have to find a way of grouping which does not harm the student's self-esteem. Ability grouping is criticized for perpetuating educational inequality, according to its detractors, who place kids from low-income households and members of racial and ethnic minorities on lesser educational tracks where they are given worse education and fewer possibilities, although unconscious and unintentional, biases are difficult to overcome (Shahar & Carmel, 2017). Teachers frequently have lower expectations for students in lower ability groups and higher expectations for those in advanced groups (Boaler et al, 2000). These expectations affect the curriculum, tests, and relationships between teachers and students, which may have an effect on the motivation of the pupils. While some people are demotivated by low expectations, others can flourish under high ones. On the other hand, studies, like Castle et al. (2005), believe that flexible grouping enhances students' confidence levels, indicating that different styles of ability grouping may impact students with diverse abilities differently.

Given that, students in the low ability range frequently perform worse in ability groups than in heterogeneous classes, gifted and high-achieving students generally perform better in homogeneous ability classes (Schoffield, 2010). The study came to the conclusion that, even in cases where curriculum material and teaching strategies are regulated, peer influences in

high-achieving tracks in the US foster academic success, and that pupils with higher ability levels exhibit a greater sensitivity to peer ability impacts (Schoffield, 2010). Also highlighted by Merry (2008) was that learning in mixed-ability groups slows down and prevents the teaching of advanced material, depriving high achievers of the opportunity to have a stimulating and challenging education. Some report positive outcomes, such as favorable attitudes toward subjects, career interest development, healthy social relationships, and high motivation, while others find varied and inconclusive results (Vogl & Preckel, 2014).

Methodology

Research Methodology

The purpose of this research was to investigate how EFL teachers set up their classes and the results of such ability categorization by focusing on research questions such as: 1) What are teacher experiences of working in mixed-ability classes? 2) How is the process of grouping in KZ EFL class is organized? The study also seeks to examine the literature on alternative practices and experiences addressing these basic grouping concerns. In keeping with the main objective, this study also presents the findings of the pioneering researchers regarding grouping methods and which ones could be employed in order to improve classroom organization.

The present work is a crucial part of a larger thesis project. The extended thesis will explore a targeted investigation carried out in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom in Kazakhstan. Student-teacher interviews and experimental components will be included in this in-depth study to give a thorough grasp of the dynamics at work. Due to constraints on time and resources, the present emphasis is on a thorough review of existing literature, laying a robust foundation for the forthcoming detailed study.

Procedure

For the initial stage, the experiences of one teacher were considered enough to achieve data saturation. This deliberate choice allows for a nuanced exploration of the subject matter within manageable parameters. The subsequent stages of the research will build upon this groundwork, incorporating a more intensive investigation into the experiences and perspectives of both students and teachers in a Kazakhstani EFL setting.

For the purpose of this preliminary phase, one teacher, possessing a wealth of experience with fourteen years in the field of education, was deliberately selected from a secondary school setting for an in-depth, semi-

structured interview. This deliberate choice was made to guarantee a thorough and concentrated analysis of the complexities related to ability grouping in EFL classes. Although the focus of the current study is a single teacher, it is crucial to emphasize that this intentional selection is a component of a larger research approach meant to achieve data saturation for a more thorough and perceptive analysis. This methodology will be expanded to include a wider spectrum of participants in the research's later phases, offering a more in-depth and thorough investigation of the topic.

Data analysis

Since these viewpoints are often developed through conversations or interactions with other people, the study focused on the participants' interpretations of their specific circumstances. This study used a qualitative research approach to address the general research questions centered on the perspectives and experiences of participants (Creswell, 2014). Because open-ended questions about what participants say or do in their environments could be asked during interviews, a qualitative research design lets the researcher better grasp the circumstances of the students. The procedure of inductive or deductive analysis is typically used by qualitative researchers, who first organize the collected data into discrete analytical units known as codes. After that, related codes are grouped together to create categories. The researcher translated the interviews verbatim into English for additional analysis because the interview responses were given in both Russian and English. I employed deductive analysis in this study in accordance with the conceptual framework. Written interviews, instructional and training materials, and questionnaires were examined and coded into predefined categories after a broad understanding of the data was obtained. These codes were then described in the conceptual framework and matched with the underlying study questions.

Ethical Considerations & Confidentiality

Since the interview is the main instrument used to collect data for qualitative research, following ethical guidelines is crucial (Creswell, 2014). First and foremost, it was critical to prevent power disparities and inform participants of the study's goal and voluntary nature. Therefore, it was imperative that researchers safeguard research participants, uphold integrity standards, and avoid any actions that would betray their identity. Moreover, the researcher made sure the data was presented truthfully when reporting it. Through informed permission forms, the respondents' privacy was protected in this research project. There were no direct identifiers on the questionnaire, such as names,

employment locations, or gender. The city, type of school and teacher experience are the sole indirect forms of identification that are mentioned.

Findings & discussion

Correlation to a previous study

The questions for this interview were foregrounded by a previous study related to implications on communicative competence in mixed-ability classes. Five students from different state schools in Astana had previously mentioned a number of difficulties, which are now clarified by the EFL teacher participating in this study. One of the main issues raised was the lack of speaking practice—a problem that these students from various academic institutions have noticed. The interview also explores the differences in instructional strategies and teaching styles employed within subgroups present a multifaceted challenge for both educators and students alike, requiring thoughtful consideration for cohesive classroom management. Most importantly, criteria used by at-home educators to divide their students into smaller groups—which include seating arrangements, alphabetical order, and academic achievement—highlights the complex choices that go into determining the makeup of these subgroups.

An average EFL classroom in KZ

Having worked as an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teacher for fourteen years, the instructor has a strong background and a wealth of experience helping students through the complexities of language learning. The instructor has been in charge of five classes a year on average over the years, with 20 to 24 pupils in each class.

There is a notable change in the 2023 school year since the instructor is now in charge of seven classes. This comprises one class for students in the tenth grade and two classes for each of the fifth, eighth, and ninth grades. This educational environment is further complicated by the long-standing practice of grouping children into smaller groups—a procedure that begins as early as the third year of elementary school.

Organizing grouping

The interview revealed a set of principles that seem to define how classes are organized, which has a significant impact on how English language instruction is conducted. First, the home teacher creates intrinsic heterogeneity by splitting the class into mixed-ability groupings. Notably, because these groupings are present, the English teacher has *no control* over their composition. Class capacities demand the division of classes into two subgroups when the total number of pupils in the class reaches the limit; students with special

needs are counted as ‘two’ in state schools. As a result, a class of 24 students with two subgroups (12 students each) will have two English teachers assigned to each subgroup. The main principle behind the grouping is to balance students of approximately the same level of academic performance.

Difficulties faced by a teacher

The difficulties arise when students who were previously in subgroups under the direction of different teachers join together in a single class. When students bring distinct experiences and instructional approaches from different teachers, the teacher draws attention to the inherent challenges in the learning process. In the modern classroom, navigating these differences and making sure every student has a smooth transition become crucial components of the teacher's job description.

The interview also brought to light a potential drawback in evaluating oral competency on an individual basis by emphasizing the difficulty of evaluating speaking abilities for a large number of students during summative examinations: *“It is impossible to check speaking part of 23 students (if not divided) during summative assessments”*. Concerns were also expressed regarding the distribution of teaching time, highlighting the fact that working with students of lower ability takes a significant amount of time and may prevent students of higher ability from reaching their full potential. As noted by the participant: *“It would be nice to have same ability groups but teachers would fight for high ability students...Like, who wants to struggle with weaker students”*. The resistance to implementing same-ability groups—which has been ascribed to possible conflicts between teachers competing for students with high ability—further clarifies the complex dynamics underlying class organization in English language instruction.

Discussion

Considering all the factors mentioned, the Kazakhstani classroom employs a heterogeneous grouping approach. This, in fact, is highlighting the advantages of mixed-ability groups in fostering positive interdependence and enhancing academic results for all students (Slavin, 1987). The acknowledged resistance to same-ability groups highlights the fact that teachers really have conflicting interests (Tomlinson, 2014; Kulik & Kulik, 1992). However, this approach cannot be considered as a panacea (Baines, 2019). While Kazakhstani EFL classrooms actively utilize grouping and differentiated learning, why not make it a bit more efficient? It is essential to notice that this model of a classroom in Kazakhstan is similar to those in other Asian countries, but does not divide into subgroups

(Setyaningrum, 2018). Also, the implication of this practice in rural schools should be investigated thoroughly and considered the overall English level and readiness of students.

Conclusion

Ability grouping

The results of the study shed light on a complicated web of practices influencing how Kazakhstani English language programs are structured, highlighting both issues and factors. The benefit of grouping pupils according to similar academic ability is that it enables teachers to provide instruction that is specifically targeted to each subgroup's needs (Shahar & Carmel, 2017). With a more individualized approach, students can advance at a rate that suits them, which can provide a more stimulating and encouraging learning environment (Kulik & Kulik, 1992). Additionally, while working with homogeneous groups, teachers can assign tasks that are appropriate for each student's level of ability and carry out more focused interventions (Tomlinson, 2014). However, ability grouping is not without its problems. Both social stratification and educational inequality might be strengthened by it (Schoffield, 2010). Less access to educational resources and stigmatization of students in lower ability groups may have an adverse effect on the motivation and self-worth of these students (Vogl & Preckel, 2014). All things considered, the findings offer a thorough grasp of the complexities required in successfully running a classroom, especially when considering subgroup dynamics and a variety of teaching philosophies. The teacher's knowledge is a great asset in resolving these problems and improving the general education that children receive in Astana's public institutions. Other teachers are restricted to instructing a particular subgroup due to the grouping process, which is started by home teachers in the third year of primary school. In spite of the grouping being well-organized, this method has drawbacks, especially when students switch professors and the learning process is disrupted. The study highlights a deficiency in the existing data on ability grouping in Kazakhstan on research platforms, emphasizing the want for additional investigation and stressing the significance of comprehending and tackling ability grouping-related problems in the nation's educational framework.

Limitations

The fact that only one teacher took part in the interview procedure is a major study constraint. Although the teacher's observations provide insightful ideas on Kazakhstan's ability grouping decision-making process, it is important to recognize that educational pro-

cedures differ greatly. The experiences and choices made by a single instructor may not accurately reflect the variety of strategies and justifications used by educators across the nation. A larger and more thorough sample of teachers from different locations and school settings would be required to get a more thorough knowledge of the mass decision-making surrounding ability categorization in Kazakhstan. A wider variety of teachers should be included in the interview process so that their individual perspectives and experiences can be expanded too, thereby increasing room for the research on results. The results of studies can indicate whether or not this technique has a beneficial impact on students' motivation, sense of academic worth, and overall educational experience. Furthermore, Kazakhstan can be positioned within the larger international education scene by comprehending how ability grouping fits with worldwide educational trends. Using this information to benchmark and modify best practices is beneficial. The lack of data on ability categorization in Kazakhstan emphasizes the necessity of focused study to guide instructional strategies and regulations. Localized research can enhance Kazakhstan's educational system's ongoing development by advancing our understanding of how ability grouping functions within its particular setting.

Future implications

The subject of ability grouping requires additional investigation for it has complex implications covering multiple educational domains. To find and fix any inequalities between student groups, it is essential to comprehend how ability grouping affects educational fairness. Investigations examining the connection between ability grouping and academic performance of students might yield important information about efficient teaching strategies. Educational policies and professional development plans might be influenced by examining more teacher practices and opinions of ability grouping. Furthermore, investigating students' social and emotional aspects in small-group settings might provide insight into the wider effects on their overall wellbeing. Comprehensive knowledge on the effects of ability grouping is aided by long-term studies that look at how it affects educational and career paths. The study concludes by illuminating the complex dynamics of class structure in English language instruction and highlighting the necessity of carefully weighing a number of variables in order to improve student results and teaching efficacy. Interviews with teacher trainers could add to our understanding of Kazakhstani attitudes toward ability grouping by illuminating their viewpoints and offering advice to teachers regarding grouping practices.

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