


Bridging the Divide: Grouping EFL Undergraduate Students Based on Their Language Proficiency

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Abstract: Grouping students based on their abilities has been a long-standing practice and grouping them based on their English language proficiency has not been an exception. While teachers and some students believe that it is a very good concept to be practiced, and it is very beneficial, others argue that it is detrimental to students and mainly to their mental health. The purpose of the research was to explore the concept, assess its advantages and disadvantages of practicing it, and then conclude whether it is beneficial or detrimental to the academic status of teachers and students. Two survey questionnaires – one for the teachers and one for the students – were distributed in the context of Tishk International University in Erbil, Kurdistan Regional Government to obtain their perspectives regarding grouping students based on their English language proficiency. A total of 15 university teachers and 125 students participated in this study. A mixed-methods approach was used to analyze quantitative and qualitative data to get more comprehensive and detailed results. The results and findings of this research revealed that the majority of the study samples expressed their approval regarding the concept, for it was beneficial for both parties. The foremost reason for teachers was they would be able to prepare and teach customized topics for each group depending on their needs, which will help them improve at a faster pace and see progress earlier.

Keywords: English as A Foreign Language, English Language Proficiency, Grouping the Students, Undergraduate EFL Students.

1. Introduction

The variations of levels among language learners could be depicted in a mini format inside the EFL classroom environment. Teachers usually tend to group students according to their English language levels as a response to this phenomenon. In this process, students' customized educational needs in the EFL classroom would be met when they are categorized inside uniform language-level societies. Proponents of proficiency-based grouping claim that this approach enhances students' learning speed, direct-intake of language, and anxiety reduction (Ellis, 2003). This approach is criticized, however, by those who claim that proficiency-based grouping could restrict lower-level language users from accessing a wider range of language users to communicate with; not to mention that higher-level language users in particular might get bored or feel isolated if they are constricted in a proficiency-based group (Loveless & Ellis, 2007).

Recent studies have further explored the effects of grouping by proficiency on student outcomes, both academically and socially.

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The study results of Magableh & Abdullah (2020) revealed that proficiency-based grouping reduces students' anxiety among their peers at similar levels. However, this approach can significantly limit the students' exposure to learning other languages when they are grouped based on their language proficiency. Conversely, Roo et al. (2018) argued that, in most cases, the merits of mixed-proficiency groups outweigh the advantages of homogenous grouping, enhancing collaboration and peer support among the learners. It is important to consider a variety of viewpoints to fully grasp how proficiency-based grouping affects English as a Foreign Language (EFL) environments. A comprehensive meta-analysis done by Ghasemi & Baradaran (2018) that reviewed findings from more than 50 studies regarding the grouping approach in the context of language learning emphasizes both the advantages and disadvantages of the approach.

It is difficult to fully grasp the efficiency of the proficiency-based grouping method, even though it is a very common pedagogic approach. A gap remains in the literature about how instructors and students live the experience of proficiency-based grouping, despite all the research which theoretically talks about the pros and cons of this practice. By investigating the perspectives of both parties, this research is designed to make up for that gap. Three questions are targeted by our research:

- How did the EFL undergraduate students experience being grouped according to their language proficiency?
- What are the merits and demerits that EFL teachers observe in grouping their students according to their language proficiency?
- Did the efficiency of this method receive contradictory views from the instructors and students?

This study also endeavored to fully understand the effect of this approach on the EFL classroom by exploring the students' and instructors' standpoints concerning this technique's success or lack of success. By exploring the attitudes of university teachers and students regarding the harms and benefits of proficiency-based grouping and how proficiency-based grouping influences students' academic achievement, this research intends to present beneficial understandings concerning proficiency-based grouping by implementing a mixed methods approach. The EFL classroom environment can significantly improve when the standpoints of both students and educators are equally considered. The results and findings of this study can greatly benefit university faculty officials and educators when implementing a proficiency-based grouping in their classes.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Framework: Language Acquisition and Proficiency Grouping

Understanding the rationale behind proficiency grouping requires examining theories of second language acquisition (SLA). Many scholars suggest that cooperation is vital in the context of language learning. Cooperative learning is a method of grouping students in a way where each group consists of students with varying ability levels (Slavin, 2019, as cited in Ghufon et al., 2022). This method is in fact based on Vygotsky's social construction theory (Hong et al., 2022), which stresses that peer interaction is vital for language learning (Vygotsky, 1978). Supposedly, this method helps improve students' communication skills (Buchs and Maradan, 2021 as cited in Hong et al., 2022), and it boosts students' interaction skills in terms of speaking and listening skills (Hill et al., 2020, as cited in Hong et al., 2022). Furthermore, The

ZPD (The Zone of Proximal Development) suggests that interaction is vital between a basic language learner and an advanced speaker for the sake of language attainment (Daneshfar & Moharami, 2018, as cited in Friedrichsen, 2020). The backers of proficiency-based grouping base their reason on Stephen Krashen's (1985) famous Input Hypothesis which explains the subtle difference between language "learning" and "acquisition." The hypothesis proposes that language "learning" occurs when the brain is consciously active in its endeavor to acquire a second language; whereas language "acquisition" refers to the process of acquiring the language passively or subconsciously, which is further equated to the process in which children acquire their native languages, and which is a more efficient way of language input (Krashen, 1985, as cited in Horwitz, 2020). The hypothesis of Krashen suggests that, for the purpose of implementing "acquisition" when studying a second language, one needs to encounter sources that accommodate to his/her comprehension levels (Krashen, 1985, as cited in Horwitz, 2020).

2.2 Effects of Language Proficiency Grouping

When it comes to practical findings, mixed results were retrieved from studies concerning grouping students based on proficiency. A research study by Nhan H. and Nhan T. A. (2019) on English majors did not find significant student achievement differences when grouped heterogeneously or homogeneously. Findings of another study by Sheppard et al. (2018) suggested that proficiency grouping had no impact on the more-proficient students while it did improve the less-proficient students. On the other hand, according to a study by Ghasemi & Baradaran (2018, as cited in Hong et.al., 2022), when students with different levels of ability are grouped, they demonstrate an improvement in their English language skills.

2.3 Key Components of Proficiency Grouping

The implementation style of proficiency grouping as well as the learning outcomes decide the efficiency of the approach. Here's a breakdown of key components:

- **Academic Outcomes:** There is not a significant amount of research targeting the effect of proficiency-based grouping on the long-term academic outcomes of students. What was gathered from the findings either negates the overall impact of such an approach or states that the process helped the less proficient only, as was the case of Sheppard et al., 2018. There is a fair amount of research proving the efficacy of otherwise, however. Firnanda et al. (2019, as cited in Hong et al., 2022) revealed in a study made on English language high school students that students were able to improve their oral language skills as a result of a heterogeneous grouping method. Additionally, a study by Sirisrimangkorn & Suwanthep (2013, as cited in Hong et al., 2022) disclosed that the heterogenous grouping method improved college students' English oral language skills.
- **Social and Emotional Impacts:** Despite the lack of sufficient literature on academic outcomes, there are rising concerns regarding the possible negative psychological effects of proficiency-based grouping, especially on lower-level students. Realizing that they are placed in a lower-proficiency group, students might feel discouraged or demotivated. Not to mention that according to a study by McGillicuddy and Devine (2020), ability-based grouping excites feelings of inferiority among the lower-ability groups while at the same time heightens feelings of pride among the higher-ability groups. However, the emotional impacts may encompass mixed proficiency grouping as well. As

the psychological findings of the study by Al-Tamimi et al. (2020) suggest, some students might feel ashamed to speak in front of others because of potential criticism concerning their English language usage. Hence, if students are grouped heterogeneously, the less proficient might struggle to express themselves because of fear of making mistakes in front of the more proficient ones. Thus, studies exploring student motivation, self-esteem, and peer interactions within proficiency groups are crucial.

- **Teacher Perspectives:** Social and academic aspects grouping based on the language proficiency are worth considering from teachers' perspectives. Even though there is not much research directly addressing proficiency-grouping teaching strategies, a fine amount of research suggests that teachers need to understand the proficiency level of each of their students to get an overview of the most appropriate teaching style tailored to each student (Friedrichsen, 2020). To address students' different learning styles, teachers need to find the best approach to conducting their materials to the heterogeneous class in a way that would keep everyone engaged (Gustiani, 2019). The materials must develop the intellectual skills of the less efficient while keeping the more efficient busy with the same material but with different tasks (Gustiani, 2019). Also, the author states that a good teaching strategy in a mixed-proficiency setting is the cake approach, where the largest, lowest level caters to the most proficient students, which depicts giving the largest amount of freedom and space and giving them the least amount of assistance; the middle part caters for the intermediate students who require average amount of help as well as space; the top smallest part of the cake should cater for the least proficient, representing permission for the least amount of space and so much intervention and assistance.

By closely observing those key areas, our research will follow a multi-faceted approach to understanding the effect of proficiency-based grouping in EFL settings. We will clarify the academic, social, and emotional areas of this approach within the EFL learning environment by examining the perspectives of students and instructors.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

To collect data, two survey questionnaires were administered in the context of Tishk International University to examine the merits and demerits of grouping students based on their English language proficiency and the psychological effects of doing so. One of the questionnaires was for the teachers, and the other one was for the students. A survey questionnaire was our best choice to collect data for the following reasons: both students and teachers were on holiday, so they felt more comfortable sharing their sincere and unbiased opinions via the online questionnaire, remaining completely anonymous. Additionally, it was more convenient for us to collect a large volume of data during the summer break without time constraints or external interruptions.

3.2 Research Participants

Altogether, 125 and fifteen teachers were recruited for this research to obtain their perspectives on the topic. The teachers were all from Tishk International University, and the students came from many

unfamiliar faculties, departments, grades, and diverse demographic backgrounds – Kurdish, Arab, and Turkish.

Google Forms was used to conduct the two survey questionnaires. Neither the students nor the teachers had to write their full names, nor did they have to use their Google accounts or emails to fill out the survey questionnaire.

3.3 Data Collection

The survey questionnaires were administered through Google Forms and were shared with the teachers and the students in June 2024. After one week, access to the surveys was halted to ensure clarity and avoid confusion in the responses. Multiple types of questions were designed to collect reliable and honest responses from both types of research samples. Open-ended attitude questions were added at the end of each questionnaire to get actionable feedback from the respondents.

3.4 Data Analysis

To enhance data analysis, a mixed approach was employed. SPSS (version 26) was utilized to inspect the quantitative data and to display flawless results, including the frequency and percentage of students' responses. For open-ended question results, a narrative analysis structured in thematic order was used to present the perspectives and feedback of the study participants. Each narrative response was translated into English and categorized by common phrases and words (coding) included in the narrative. Later, based on the similarity of codes, three themes emerged, and the summary of the narrative responses was reported with direct back-up quotes from the respondents.

4. Results

4.1 Students' Perception of Proficiency-Based Grouping

This section presents the results of qualitative data analysis in the form of tables that display the frequency and percentage of responses.

Table 1 shows the percentage of responses divided by grades. Just above a quarter of the responses (29.6%) were freshmen from different departments who were grouped by their language proficiency in the English language courses. The juniors and seniors were followed by freshmen, making it (26.4%) and (25.6%) respectively.

Table 1: Student Grade/Year Distribution

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	4.0	32	25.6	25.6	25.6
	3.0	33	26.4	26.4	52.0
	2.0	23	18.4	18.4	70.4
	1.0	37	29.6	29.6	100.0
	Total	125	100.0	100.0	

It is important to note that the responses were collected after the undergraduate students had experienced a grouping method when taking English language courses in either their departments or in the preparatory section of the university.

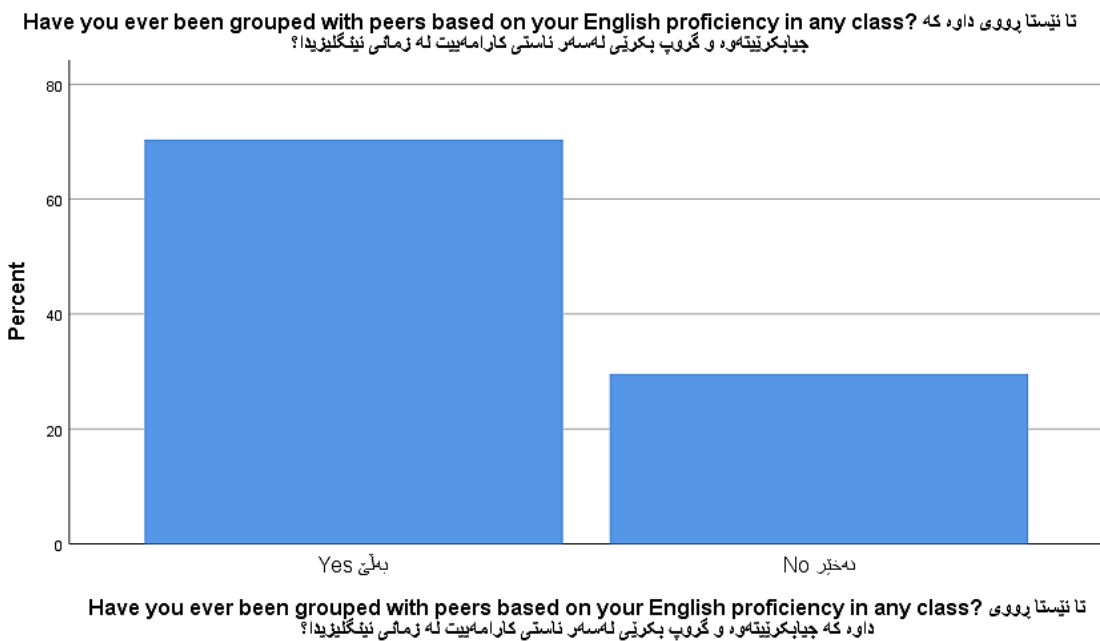


Figure 2: Frequency of Grouping by English Proficiency

Figure 2 presents data on the frequency of student responses to grouping by their language proficiency. The results in the graph display that less than a third of respondents (29.6%) experienced grouping when developing English language skills. This question aimed to determine the percentage of students that were grouped based on their language proficiency.

The purpose of the next question was to define if separating the students based on their language level was beneficial for them or not. The response items for this 5-Likert Scale question varied from 1, being Strongly Disagree, to 5, being Strongly Agree.

As can be seen in Table 3, the respondents support the idea of grouping students based on their language level. While a combination of Agree and Strongly Agree categories of a total of 40.0% suggested that students learn better when grouped with other students at the same level of English proficiency, 28.8% opposed the idea of proficiency-based grouping. The remaining 31.2 % of the study sample stayed neutral, agreeing on whatever decision could be made.

Overall, the responses to the above question suggest that grouping students according to their language skills can be considered a positive sentiment when developing their English language skills in the university setting.

Table 3: Attitudes Toward Proficiency-Based Grouping

Do you believe grouping students based on English proficiency is beneficial for learning? (1-Strongly Disagree, 5-Strongly Agree) نایا پښت وایه که گروپکردن و جیاکردنهوې خوښکاران لهسره ناستی کارامیې زمانې ښکلز بیان شتتیکې سوو دبهخشه بو پرسه ی فیربو نییان؟ (۱- به تهاوی هاورا نیم، ۵- به تهاوی هاورام)					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Agree	30	24.0	24.0	24.0
	Agree	20	16.0	16.0	40.0
	Neutral	39	31.2	31.2	71.2
	Disagree	13	10.4	10.4	81.6
	Strongly Disagree	23	18.4	18.4	100.0
	Total	125	100.0	100.0	

Table 3.1 Statistics

Do you believe grouping students based on English proficiency is beneficial for learning? (1-Strongly Disagree, 5-Strongly Agree)		
N	Valid	125
	Missing	0
Mean		3.168
Median		3.000
Std. Deviation		1.3955
Minimum		1.0
Maximum		5.0

The table of statistics for this item shows that the mean score of the responses is 3.168, suggesting a moderate level of agreement with the standard deviation score of 1.395 (SD=1.395). This shows that the responses were quite diverse.

The tables below present data from student responses to the first research question, “How did the EFL undergraduate students experience being grouped according to their language proficiency? The following items were aimed to determine the level of English language proficiency of students in all four skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The data presented in each table indicates the outcome of the English language skills development after the respondents were exposed to a language proficiency-based grouping. The four response anchors varied from Very Confident to Not Confident.

The results shown in Table 4 indicate the positive outcome in terms of developing English listening skills of respondents. Over a third of the study sample (36.8%) believe that they are confident in understanding English when they listen to someone speaking it. Students who consider themselves confident accounted for (52.0%) in total. Despite having students who need additional support in their listening skills, just above one-tenth of the total (11.2%), the sum of confident students highlights that the respondents have a strong foundation in listening skills. The main purpose of collecting data for this particular question “How confident are you now in English listening skills?” was to measure the benefits and/or drawbacks of proficiency-based grouping among undergraduate students.

Overall, it can be implied that the high percentage of students with good listening skills indicates that grouping undergraduate students by their learning needs and language levels can immensely contribute to their language skills. The data also suggests that there is still room for support for those who consider themselves not confident at all.

Table 4: Students’ Confidence in English Listening Skills

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Listening Skills	Very confident زور باش	31	24.8	24.8	24.8
	Somewhat confident مامناو مند	34	27.2	27.2	52.0
	Not confident لاواز	14	11.2	11.2	63.2
	Confident باش	46	36.8	36.8	100.0
	Total	125	100.0	100.0	

Table 5 displays the percentage of students’ confidence in English speaking skills. 48% of respondents were either “confident” or “very confident,” indicating their strong foundation in speaking skills. It suggests that almost half of the respondents feel quite comfortable communicating in the English language. An additional 37.6% of the study sample emphasized that the respondents could hold conversations in English with some confidence, whereas 14.4% reported themselves as not confident at all, which suggests that external support in developing speaking skills for those respondents is required. All in all, it can be seen that the positive results highlighted that the respondents have significantly improved their speaking

abilities when grouped according to their language proficiency. It approves the benefits behind the idea of grouping the students by their language level proficiency.

Table 5: Students' Confidence in English Speaking Skills

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Very confident زور باش	26	20.8	20.8	20.8
Somewhat confident مامناوهند	47	37.6	37.6	58.4
Not confident لاواز	18	14.4	14.4	72.8
Confident باش	34	27.2	27.2	100.0
Total	125	100.0	100.0	

Table 6 presents the results of students' responses about their reading skills in English. Over three-quarters of respondents (75.2%) were either "confident" or "very confident" in their English reading skills; whereas, 18.4% and 6.4% reported that they were "confident" and "not confident at all" respectively. The numbers presented in Table 6 suggest that students have strong foundation in English reading skills.

To sum up, the high percentage of respondents who possess good reading skills after being grouped based on their language proficiency can be taken into consideration when developing English courses that focus on the language-skill level of learners.

Table 6: Students' Confidence in English Reading Skills

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Very confident زور باش	44	35.2	35.2	35.2
	Somewhat confident مامناوهند	23	18.4	18.4	53.6
	Not confident لاواز	8	6.4	6.4	60.0
	Confident باش	50	40.0	40.0	100.0
	Total	125	100.0	100.0	

As to writing, as shown in Table 7, the percentage of student responses was significantly different from those of other response percentages for the three skills. Table 7 presents data regarding the writing skills of the respondents. A sizeable portion of students who selected "confident" and "very confident" (83.2% when combined) experienced a profound base in developing English writing skills when grouped. Less than a quarter of the respondents believed that they were somehow confident (24.8%) in their writing abilities, and only 12.0% of the total respondents did not trust their writing abilities. From the results displayed in Table 7, it can be summarized that among all four language skills, the students were able to develop their writing skills best. The aim of comparing the development of each language skill was to

demonstrate to what extent the respondents perceived the benefits of being grouped based on their language skills.

The following table lays out the outcomes of the respondents on their perceptions of grouping. The primary aim of the question was to observe to what extent the language-based grouping was beneficial for students.

Table 7: Students' Confidence in English Writing Skills

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Writing Skills	Very confident زۆر باش	30	24.0	24.0	24.0
	Somewhat confident مامناوهند	31	24.8	24.8	48.8
	Not confident لاواز	15	12.0	12.0	60.8
	Confident باش	49	39.2	39.2	100.0
	Total	125	100.0	100.0	

Table 8 suggests that grouping affected the respondents' learning outcomes positively. 36.8% and 17.6% were affected "positively" and "very positively" respectively, while neutral responses accounted for 22.4%. Despite the high percentage of respondents who believed that, in general, grouping affected their language positively, there was still a low percentage of students who did not benefit from being grouped at all, making it 8.8% in total.

Overall, the results revealed that language proficiency-based grouping can positively influence the language development of EFL undergraduate students. The aim of the question was achieved successfully by obtaining overall positive results through the data presented in the table.

Table 8: Students' Perceptions on the Impact of Proficiency-Based Grouping

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Positively ئەرئىيانە	46	36.8	36.8	73.6
	Neutral ھېچ گۆرانكارى لى ناكات	28	22.4	22.4	36.8
	Very positively زۆر ئەرئىيانە	22	17.6	17.6	100.0
	Negatively ئەرئىيانە	18	14.4	14.4	14.4
	Very negatively زۆر ئەرئىيانە	11	8.8	8.8	82.4
	Total	125	100.0	100.0	

4.2 Educators' Perspectives on Proficiency-Based Grouping

In regards to the teachers' responses, the results observed through displayed percentages in figures and tables below suggest a similar viewpoint to that of students on grouping based on language proficiency.

The total number of teacher respondents was 15 from different departments at Tishk International University in Erbil city. The graph below shows the percentage of respondents distributed based on their departments.

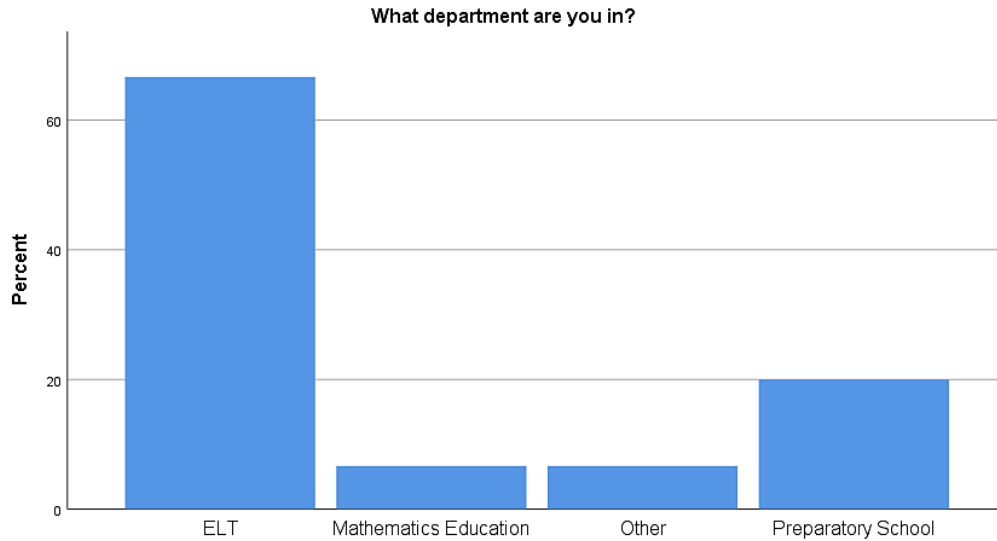


Figure 9: Distribution of Teachers by Departments

Figure 9 displays that a little higher than 66% of total respondents were from the English Language Teaching Department. The second highest percentage of responses were given by the teachers from the Preparatory section of the university, accounting for 20%. The percentage of educators from the Mathematics Education and other departments were the same, around 6.5% each.

It is significant to note that most applicants have considerably low English language levels. Thus, the majority of them are required to take general English language courses alongside other departmental lectures during their freshman year. In light of this, we included the item that aimed to measure teachers' perspectives on how beneficial the grouping is for students who are newly exposed to the English language.

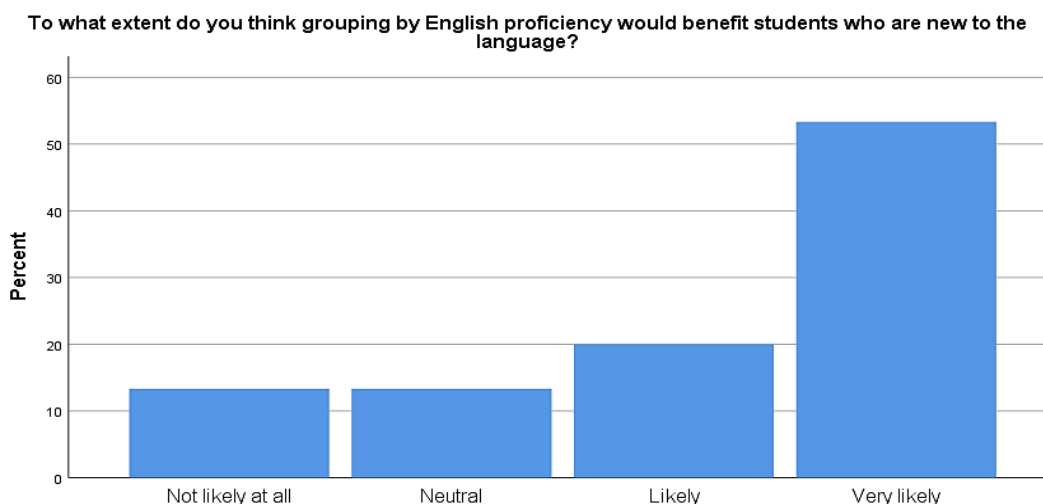


Figure 10: Teachers' Attitudes Towards Grouping Students New to English

According to Figure 10, the item included four segments to choose from, ranging between 1, being “not likely at all,” and 4, being “very likely.” Teachers who reported positive attitudes towards grouping English language beginner students based on proficiency accounted for 73.3% of responses, including both “likely” and “very likely” responses. Meanwhile, “neutral” and “not likely at all” responses hit the same-13.3% roughly.

This outcome of responses suggests that university students with no prior knowledge of English can benefit from taking English courses when grouped with their peers of similar language proficiency.

In the next item, by using a Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), we aimed to observe teachers’ perspectives on the effect of overall language skills when students are grouped according to their language proficiency levels.

As shown in Table 9, the educators held similar opinions regarding language proficiency grouping. Slightly above three-quarters of respondents (73.4%) when combined, voted for “agree” and “strongly agree” sentiments, declaring that grouping would benefit the students’ language skills and overall learning development. 13.3% of educators chose to remain neutral, believing that grouping would have both benefits and drawbacks in the learning outcome. The same percentage (6.7%) of teachers reported that they “disagree” and “strongly disagree” with the idea that students would benefit from being grouped according to proficiency.

The overall results suggest that both teachers and students hold positive perspectives about the benefits of grouping undergraduate learners of similar language skill abilities.

Table 9: Teacher Beliefs about Proficiency-Based Grouping

Do you agree grouping by English level could help your students improve their English language proficiency and their overall learning skills more effectively? (1- strongly disagree, 5- Strongly agree)					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly disagree	1	6.7	6.7	6.7
	Disagree	1	6.7	6.7	13.3
	Neutral	2	13.3	13.3	26.7
	Agree	7	46.7	46.7	73.3
	Strongly agree	4	26.7	26.7	100.0
	Total	15	100.0	100.0	

Item (8) in the questionnaire was aimed to discover whether the grouping would create a more supportive learning environment for students with similar language level proficiency. The graph below provides the teachers' responses in percentages.

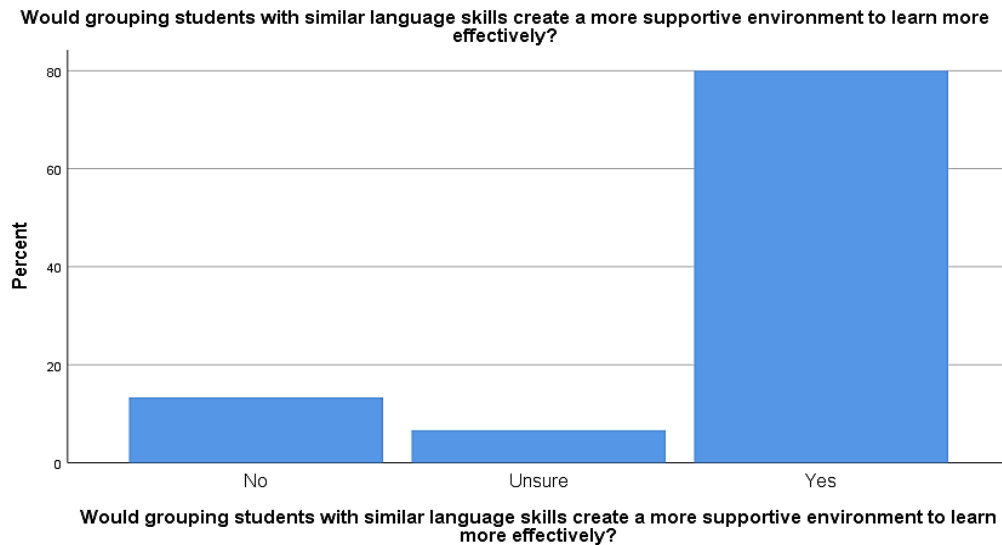


Figure 10: Teacher Beliefs About Learning Environments in Proficiency-Based Grouping

As displayed in Figure 10, 80% percent of respondents agreed that grouping would create helpful environments for students to accomplish their learning needs. While 6.7% of teachers were not sure that grouping students based on proficiency would create a positive learning environment, only 13.3% of educators chose to disagree with the idea that this grouping approach would create a positive learning environment. The results presented in this figure can be considered as a positive remark that students who are in the same group with the same language skills level can learn more effectively than the ones who are in mixed language level groups.

As was pointed out in the results of the above figure, a more encouraging and supportive environment can be established when students with similar language levels are grouped. This, in turn, can create a room for the students to showcase their abilities and participate actively in different classroom activities with little to no hesitation.

Table 11 demonstrates that 66.7% of the respondents (combined) believe that the students are likely and very likely to engage in classroom discussions, while 20.0% of them hold a negative opinion regarding the students’ cooperation in class. Only a small percent of the teachers responded with ‘neutral’ and ‘not likely at all’ equally, making it 6.7% each. Overall, it can be concluded that there is a high probability that students would actively involve in the class when they are grouped according to their English language skills level.

Table 11: Perceived Likelihood of Student Participation in Class Discussions

How likely are your students to participate actively in class discussions if grouped with students of similar English proficiency?					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Not likely at all	1	6.7	6.7	6.7
	Neutral	1	6.7	6.7	33.3
	Unlikely	3	20.0	20.0	26.7
	Very likely	4	26.7	26.7	100.0
	Likely	6	40.0	40.0	73.3
	Total	15	100.0	100.0	

4.3 Challenges Observed When Implementing Proficiency-Based Grouping

To answer the second research question, “What are the merits and demerits that EFL teachers observe in grouping their students according to their language proficiency?”, the following data was analyzed and presented in the form of tables and a narrative analysis. Despite having positive attitudes towards having students with similar language proficiency levels in the same classroom, teachers believe that obstacles and challenges may still occur.

Table 12 reflects teachers’ responses on potential drawbacks when students are grouped based on their language levels. Using the Likert scale, items in the teachers’ survey ranged from 1, being “not likely at all” to 5, being “very likely,” for which 40.0% of the respondents displayed their indifference, suggesting they may be uncertain if there could be any demerits of grouping the students. Teachers who did not believe in the occurrence of any potential drawbacks in the same language proficiency group accounted for 26.7%, whereas the ones who doubted a flawless classroom with students of similar language skills made it to 26.6% (“likely and “very likely” combined). This outcome refers to the absence of a strong consensus among teachers regarding concerns about possible downsides of grouping students with similar language skills proficiency. It also implies the need for further and detailed investigation into the reasons behind such perspectives of teachers.

Table 12: Distribution of Responses on Possible Drawbacks in the Grouped Classroom

In your opinion, are there any potential drawbacks to grouping by English proficiency?					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Drawbacks	Not likely at all	4	26.7	26.7	26.7
	Unlikely	1	6.7	6.7	33.3
	Neutral	6	40.0	40.0	73.3
	Likely	2	13.3	13.3	86.7
	Very likely	2	13.3	13.3	100.0
	Total	15	100.0	100.0	

As demonstrated in Table 13, similar results were obtained with the item indicating the extent to which learners could be ranked as ‘better’ and ‘worse’ learners when grouped according to their language proficiency levels. Despite having positive views about having similar language proficiency students in one classroom, the teachers believed it could still create a sense of ‘divide’ into ‘good’ and ‘not good’ learners among the students. Table 13 revealed that 60.0% of the respondents remained uncertain regarding the item, while other opinions of “not likely”, “unlikely”, and “likely” made it to 40.0% when combined with (6.7%), (6.7%), and (26.7%) respectively. Despite the majority of teachers remaining indecisive or indifferent, the fact that 26.7% of respondents claim that it is “likely” suggests a strong opinion about a hierarchy of ‘better’ and ‘worse’ learners.

Table 13: Likelihood of Creating a Hierarchy Among Students

How likely do you think it is that grouping by English proficiency might lead to a hierarchy of "better" and "worse" learners?					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Not likely at all	1	6.7	6.7	6.7
	Unlikely	1	6.7	6.7	13.3
	Neutral	9	60.0	60.0	73.3
	Likely	4	26.7	26.7	100.0
	Total	15	100.0	100.0	

According to Table 14, there were not any negative responses regarding the challenges students encountered when grouped with their peers based on their language proficiency. In contrast to the teachers’ responses about the drawbacks of grouping, the student samples indicated the downsides of being in a mixed proficiency level group. The item about possible challenges the students face when grouped with different language skills had multiple response options ranging from “different learning paces”, “communication barrier”, and “difficulty in group cohesion”.

Table 14 revealed that close to half of the respondents (46.4%) struggle with catching up with other students in the classroom. Having communication problems with everyone in the class and forming a cooperative learning environment followed the issues with learning paces making it (32.1%) and (21.4%) respectively. The overall results of the data presented in Table 14 set forth the idea of having students with similar language proficiency in one classroom rather than mixing them.

Table 14: Challenges in Mixed-Grouped Classes

		Responses		Percent of Cases
		N	Percent	
Challenges in Mixed Grouped Classes	Different Learning Paces	65	46.4%	67.0%
	Communication Barrier	45	32.1%	46.4%
	Difficulty In Group Cohesion	30	21.4%	30.9%
Total		140	100.0%	144.3%

4.4 Narrative Analysis

To get a concise and focused response and to examine the teachers' and the students' narrative viewpoints regarding grouping students based on their English language proficiency, open-ended questions were included in both questionnaires. The main purpose of having such questions was to get honest and detailed responses from both parties regarding the research case and to determine if grouping is necessary when developing the EFL of undergraduate students. The following thematic analysis displayed the responses of both research participants:

Theme 1: Proficiency vs. Random Grouping

Upon investigating the narrative responses of both research sample groups, asking teachers and the students to explain the difference they would feel and how their learning/teaching style would change in an ability-mixed classroom vs. a randomly grouped classroom was the initial theme that appeared from the integration of coded words and phrases.

Quite analogous responses were given by the majority of (12 out of 15) teachers. Teaching proficiency-grouped and randomly grouped students were discussed by the teachers, and they came to the realization that in a mixed-ability group, the motivation of some students has to be compromised to cater to other students in each class. In contrast, they could make customized content for each group with proficiency-grouped classes by applying fewer grammar activities and more speaking in more proficient groups, resulting in better outcomes.

Also, they mentioned that mixed groups impacted their ability to place students into groups. They also observed that in less-able groups, collaboration would be more focused on, whereas in more-able groups rivalry would be high, and more independent work would occur. However, one teacher mentioned that large class sizes restrict their ability to practice ability grouping.

As to the students, their perspectives were different. A small number of students were against ability grouping, claiming that it would not change much, and would create a sense of inferiority among the less-able students. It would deprive the low-able students of being able to engage and collaborate with the more able students, and it would not be possible for them to get the help they need in their learning journeys. One of the students stated, “A mixed environment is better at all levels because it allows those with weaker levels to improve, including learning English”.

Contrary to this belief, the majority of students were in favor of ability grouping because students shared a common language proficiency, which would lead to smoother communication and understanding. Additionally, they mentioned that teachers can tailor instruction to the specific language level of the group. Students can support each other and collaborate effectively. Moreover, they believed grouping students would motivate them and create a positive environment for them. For example, some of the students stated, “Teachers can customize instruction to the specific language level of the group”. Another student stated, “Students can support each other and collaborate effectively”.

Overall, all of the students stated that their learning style will change. The majority of the respondents were pro-ability grouping while the minority were against ability grouping, and they all stated the reasons behind their stances on the topic. One of the students said, “Grouping students based on their English language proficiency can create an environment in which students feel more comfortable.” Grouping with analogous proficiency levels can boost one’s confidence in participating actively, this also can help teachers adjust instructions to students' specific needs; while grouping students randomly would make the proficient and non-proficient learners feel bored and uncomfortable since they don't share analogous levels. Such an environment could hinder students from participating in class. In contrast, another student said, “Co-education would be great for those students due to listening and watching students who are better at English, and I think it is more beneficial than classroom segregation”.

Theme 2: Challenges and Negative Effects in The Long Run

Upon further investigation of the responses given by teachers, another theme appeared which was the long-term challenges and negative consequences/results that hold teachers back from grouping students based on their English language proficiency.

Even though most teachers believed that proficiency-based grouping is superior to its alternative, they also realized that grouping students by proficiency might make classroom supervision and resource distribution difficult. They stated that it could require more teachers, tailored materials, and tensing educational resources. Additionally, they discussed that grouping by proficiency can restrict access to different educational content and experiences for lower-proficiency students, potentially making the achievement gap bigger.

Moreover, teacher respondents stated some reasonable challenges that may hold them back from implementing the approach in the future. One of the teachers stated, “It might affect them psychologically and demotivate them”. Another teacher stated, “Grouping by English proficiency can be detrimental as it may denote students, lower their confidence, and restrict opportunities for different relations, thereby hindering overall language development and social integration”.

Still, after stating all of these potential disadvantageous consequences and pitfalls, the majority of them believe ability grouping is advantageous. One of the teachers said, “I suppose the probability of the approach being beneficial is way further than being challenging”.

Theme 3: Suggestions For Bettering the Process of Grouping

We were able to create a new theme through the integration of the students’ comments and the teachers’ suggestions to better the process of grouping students based on their English language proficiency.

When answering the query, “What suggestions do you have for bettering the process of grouping students based on English proficiency?” almost all the teachers suggested analogous techniques and approaches to the query.

For example, they stressed that integrating all language skills when grouping students, rather than merely depending on written placement tests, will not provide a comprehensive picture of their proficiency. Conversely, one of the teachers stated, “emphasizing all skills is very important... If only grouping students be on doing a written test that would not give the whole image”.

Also, they discussed that ability grouping would cater to individuals more, but they also highlighted the necessity of delivering the required materials, providing equal attention to all groups, and considering the psychological aspect.

Furthermore, to create a probative and inclusive learning environment, the teachers stressed the need for cultural sensitivity, support for lower-proficiency students, and teacher training in inclusive tutoring strategies. They also emphasized the significance of perpetually evaluating students' levels using varied assessment methods, allowing flexible groupings, providing teacher training on effective strategies and enhancing a supportive classroom culture that values growth and cooperation across all proficiency levels.

Eventually, the teachers stressed that students should be assessed well and handled veritably carefully in the teaching and learning process.

Moreover, they mentioned that the psychological component of the students should be paid significance to in the process of grouping them based on their English language skills. This would help to avoid creating feelings of inferiority among them and to avoid demotivating them from learning and/or bettering their English language skills. They have also stated that students should be evaluated well and handled very carefully when being grouped so that they are not placed in the wrong groups. So, they implied that whatever process is used, it should be conducted meticulously.

To put things into perspective, the ideas that teachers suggested were all based on their tutoring experiences and their perspectives, and they believed their suggestions to be salutary to bettering the overall grouping process of students.

As for the students, their suggestions were similar to that of the teachers'. For instance, they mentioned that students' will to learn should be the fundamental pillar of grouping students. Those with a higher will to learn can be placed with the fluent ones. Thus, students should not be exposed to embarrassment or shame when being grouped. In addition, they have mentioned that it would be more salutary to group students based on their English language skills from grade one. Furthermore, they added that utilizing technology that adapts to every student's proficiency and that records progress should be skilled to better evaluate and support students of different proficiencies. Finally, they mentioned that teachers should make sure all students understand the shared learning objectives for their group and that collaboration should be encouraged by emphasizing that everyone's success contributes to overall achievement.

5. Discussions and Limitations

This study explores the perspectives of both parties, educators and students, regarding the controversial teaching approach of proficiency-based grouping.

The students are among themselves divided in their opinions regarding this kind of practice. While very few of them consider it demotivating and restricting in nature, a large number of the student respondents perceive it as a cohesive, student-tailored approach. This shows that while some students consider the manageable and smooth conduct of the approach, others consider students' interactions and the emotional aspect of this approach.

As to the teachers, they endorse it more than they do not. We could say they have a more unified opinion regarding it. Teachers share the need to apply different teaching strategies according to the levels of their students; thus, a proficiency-based atmosphere would grant them the opportunity to implement this more focused style of teaching. This perspective aligns very closely with the statement made by Friedrichsen (2020) and Gustiani (2019): teachers need to prepare materials according to the proficiency levels of their students, such as by implementing the "cake strategy" according to student proficiency. Hence, teachers are almost united in their endorsement of preparing tailored materials for different student levels. However, fear of causing negative psychological effects, like what was previously mentioned in the study of McGillicuddy and Devine (2020), is one of the few pitfalls teachers consider to be the result of this approach.

Hence, even though the view of most students agrees with the more unified view of the teachers (supportive of the proficiency grouping), a smaller number of the students have contradicting views. But in general, most perspectives are promotive of this approach. This further proves that Krashen's Input Hypothesis is considered more applicable in this matter from the point of view of the majority of participants (teachers and students combined.) This suggests that the emotional aspect of the approach is not as significant as the comprehensive, educational one. However, we could mitigate the psychological aspect by giving students of lower-proficiency supportive feedback each time they succeed at a task, and by raising the stake on those in the higher-proficiency groups.

Considering the huge amount of literature supportive of cooperative learning and mixed-ability grouping, it was nearly unexpected to find that otherwise is considered more advantageous by most participants. The reason for this discrepancy could be rooted in the fact that the previous studies did not consider the perspectives of teachers in this particular context. Teachers in our study express that materials need to adjust specifically to students' needs; thus, they are supportive of this approach which meets this particular aspect of teaching.

Furthermore, one particular tiny observation was that in accordance with the observation made by one of the teachers (that the less proficient would work more collaboratively, while the more proficient would possibly initiate animosity), the study by Sheppard et al. (2018) realized that the method benefits the less-proficient more. So, this teaching strategy might overall be dedicated to targeting the less efficient in the classroom and enhance them to boost their skills. Whereas it might not be as effective for the more proficient. Considering this fact, this approach must not represent a scenario of superiority/inferiority, but only a paved path or an opportunity for the less proficient to climb higher.

Regarding the limitations, this study was done solely in one university, which fundamentally limits the generalizability of the results. The viewpoints and experiences of students and teachers may diversify greatly across different educational institutions, demographic and cultural backgrounds of the students and the teachers. We suggest that future studies include a wider range of educational institutions namely schools of different educational level, both public and private universities, and universities in different geographical regions. In addition, including students from every different demographic and cultural backgrounds would also significantly increase the generalizability of the future studies. Following these steps would result in a significantly more comprehensive and inclusive study and will give us a more holistic understanding, which consequently facilitates addressing the ongoing issues regarding grouping students based on their English language proficiency, and would also help and guide us in finding solutions for the issues.

The sample size of this study was restricted to a particular number of students of the university. A small number of students might not effectively represent the larger number of the students, resulting in probable biases in the study. For example, if the sample mainly encompass a particular cultural and demographic background, the results may not illustrate the view of the other students and teachers. We suggest that future studies include a larger sample size to enhance the credibility and reliability of the results.

Data collection techniques might lead to bias which impact the results of the study. For example, students expressing themselves from surveys or interviews can be impacted by social preference, where partakers structure their perspectives in accordance with the assumed expectations, rather than unbiased, independent opinions of themselves. In order to prevent the participants from expressing biased perspectives, future studies might need to practice different techniques and strategies, integrating quantitative metrics coupled with qualitative information to obtain a more unbiased opinion.

The complexities pertaining to the educational methodologies addressed in this study might not be fully analyzed through the collected data. Opinions alone might not optimally deliver us a decisive comprehension of the effectiveness of the educational methodologies used. A more effective and comprehensive strategy is incorporating investigative techniques, where one group follows the introduced

approach and the other does not, and then comparing the results of both of the groups. This comparative assessment could provide us with more credible and reliable results. However, such experimental approach might be time-consuming and the examiners may also face obstacles trying to examine it.

The research was done within a particular and limited period of time, which restricted the scope of both the analysis and data collection. Due to this, specific dimensions of the educational experience might not have been meticulously examined. We suggest that future studies consider longer periods of time for a more profound and comprehensive investigation of the different aspects surrounding the educational methodology.

6. Conclusion

It is important to take the perspectives of both the “receiver” and the “giver” of a particular service to understand its merits and demerits as well as the efficacy of the ongoing conflating perspectives around what is considered most beneficial for both parties. In our case, our study was able to conclude, after exploring a sufficient number of opinions from both parties, that proficiency-based grouping has more advantages than it does disadvantages. Therefore, implementing it will help improve the comprehension levels of the students and will help them acquire language in the context of EFL through “acquisition” rather than merely “learning.”

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