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An Evaluation of Proficiency Grouping in English Language Teaching: SWOT Analysis

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Abstract:

This research study aims to share the analysis of a case study conducted via SWOT framework. The scope of research is to identify the evaluations stated by the participant teachers, students and administrators on the efficiency of the multi-level-grade system applied as an instructional and administrative decision taken for the teaching of English as a foreign language at primary school level. The findings of the present indicate that there are some negative effects of grouping on students. Labeling students is one of the concerns identified by fifty percent of the teachers. The participating teachers also highlighted that grouping students reduces motivation in low-ability groups, as well as diminishing competition in high-level groups. Although negative effects of grouping on students were identified by both teachers and administrators, multi-leveling is still applied. Students coming from other schools are one of the crucial reasons for implementing multi-levels.

Keywords: Multi-level, grouping, English teaching, SWOT analysis.

Introduction

Individual differences play a crucial role in language instruction. The difference among learners in relation to language proficiency level is one of the reasons of grouping students accordingly. Thus, such kind of grouping targets bringing together the students with the same level of ability. Ability grouping is defined as separating same-grade students with distinct differences in aptitude by taking the test scores and school records in regard (Kulik, 1992). The students in the same grade are grouped into different sections in multi-level groups as high, middle and low achievers. The literature on grouping learners in accordance to their abilities, attitudes and proficiency level of English language, highlights the importance of such an issue in foreign language teaching (Burroughs & Tezer, 1968; Macintyre & Ireson, 2002; Macqueen, 2010; Parpart, 1995). The research has revealed numerous findings on multi-levels and the drawbacks of multi-levels; such as, the students and teachers who feel demotivated in low-levels or the case that the students feel 'labeled' in such classes. On the other hand, multi-level classrooms with low student population and fewer concerns on classroom management issues are some of the advantages noted.

Bikle (cited in Sabharwal, 2009) states that when learners of English with different levels of proficiency in the language are divided into different groups, they will have an opportunity to develop vocabulary more effectively. Otherwise, factors like exclusionary talk, difficult academic material, and struggle to keep pace with the group make it extremely difficult for students with lower levels of English proficiency to participate in group conversations. On the other hand, Schindelmar and Szoo (1991) believe that ability grouping and tracking have a crucial role on students' self-concepts because the level or group, in which students are placed, affects their abilities and performance in a positive way. They also stated that in

heterogeneous classes of English and social studies, students have higher self-concept and self-esteem. Abadzi (1985) states that while grouping learners may decline their self-concept, motivation for achievement and academic performance in low-ability groups; and notes that the students' test scores can also be lower because of the lack of competition with high-ability students. Besides, as cited in Schindelman and Szoo (1991), Sorensen and Hallinan (1986) found that ability grouping decreased the equality of achievement, i.e. high-ability students gained more achievement than low-ability students.

To Harlen and Malcom (1999), before grouping students in relation to their academic achievement, taking only the test scores into consideration are not sufficient. Other methods such as classroom observations or interviews should also be taken into account. In addition, Hallam et al. (2000) indicate that while grouping students, teachers should make the decision. The reason is that while making decisions, teachers can take variables such as, students' behavior, their relationships, performance and gender into consideration. Even though grouping the same grade learners into different classes is made use of as an instructional strategy in primary education in Turkey, unfortunately there is not enough data on whether ability grouping as both an instructional and administrative decision/application is effective or not.

Therefore, the aim of this study is to investigate the efficiency of multi-level grades of English classes. To this end, data triangulation will be used and interviews will be conducted with diverse group of participants who are teachers, administrators and students. The research questions targeted for inquiry are as follows:

1. What are the strengths of multi-level grades?
2. What are the weaknesses of multi-level grades?
3. What are the opportunities of multi-level grades?
4. What are the threats of multi-level grades?

Methodology

This research study is designed in line with case study methodology. The setting selected for data collection is a private primary school in Ankara, Turkey. The students enrolled at this school take English classes starting from the first year. In the sixth year, the students take an English proficiency exam and are placed in three different groups of language achievement levels. The students leave their sections only for the English class and study English in their ability groups. The students take the rest of the courses in the curriculum in their usual sections. The English proficiency exam is repeated at the beginning of each term and the students are regrouped as low (A), middle (B), and high (C) achievers.

The data is collected from three different groups of participants: (1) Teachers (n=10) who have been working as English teachers at a private school and teaching multi-level groups for four years, (2) the 8th grade students (n=6) , (3) and administrators (n=3). A structured interview was used to gather in-depth data to find out the sources of teachers', students' and administrators' beliefs about grouping in terms of students' proficiency levels. Purposeful sampling was applied; the participating teachers were selected by taking into account their years of experience in teaching multi-levels and the students were selected from the 8th grade as they are the most experienced students in multi-level applications at this particular school. In order to analyze the data from this specific case study, SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) framework developed by Learned et al. (1965) was utilized. Besides, the qualitative data collected were transcribed and analyzed by two different experts in terms of theme and codes.

Findings

The research findings were categorized in three different tables which are the evaluations stated by participant teachers, administrators and students on multi-level grades in accordance with SWOT analysis framework; strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. The teachers' evaluations on the issue are illustrated in Table 1 below:

Strengths	Weakness	Opportunities	Threats
Equality for students' levels of proficiency of English (f=8)	Labeling students (f=5)	Make-up (for low-levels) (f=3)	Discrepancy between levels (f=3)
Motivation of students and teachers (f=4)	Lack of motivation of students and teachers (for low-levels)(f=5)	Students efforts (f=2)	School Success (f=2)
Low number of students (f=3)	No Peer Modeling (for low-levels)(f=2)	Tracking students	Reliability of Exams (f=2)
Students' participation in lessons (f=2)	Lack of skill-based activities (f=2)		Competition between students
Classroom management (f=2)	Different group levels for teachers		
Students coming from other private or state school (f=2)	Examination results		
	Physical Environment		

Table 1: Teachers' evaluations

The participating teachers (n=10) stated the strengths of multi-level grades and they indicated that the system provides equality in terms of students' levels of proficiency of English (f=8), it increases both teachers' and students' motivation (f=4), the classroom population decreases in multi-level grades (f=3), the classroom management is easier to handle in low population classes (f=2), the students' participation in lessons increases, and it is advantageous for the students transferred from other private or public schools as they might usually be below the average proficiency level of students.

The participating teachers (n=10) also indicated the weaknesses of multi-levels and they specified that students are labelled because of the system (f=5). To the teachers, both students' and teachers' motivation decreases in low-level classes (f=5), and there is no modeling for low-level students (f=2) as there does not exist any high achievers in the classrooms. In low-levels the activities are not skill-based (f=2) since the teachers are asked to focus on the structural aspects of language more. The teachers are to teach different group levels, which is found to be demanding and digressing. The students are grouped only according to the results of an exam administered and teachers' opinions are not taken into

consideration. The participants also highlighted that the students have to change classrooms as they are grouped in different sections and the school has to provide an appropriate physical environment for students.

The teachers stated the opportunities and threats of the system, as well. It was proposed that the low-level students can have the chance to make up ($f=3$), the students may feel motivated to spend an effort in order to be in high-level classes ($f=2$), teachers can easily observe and help students since the number of students in each section is rather low. Nevertheless, as for the threats, the participants indicated that the discrepancy between the levels rises ($f=3$), the success of the school gradually decreases and the students cannot progress in multi-levels ($f=2$). Besides, the reliability of exams is a concern as the teachers think that the exams sometimes do not illustrate the real results.

The administrators' evaluations on the multi-level grades are illustrated in Table 2 given below:

Strengths	Weaknesses	Opportunities	Threats
Equality for Students' Levels of Proficiency of English	No Modeling (for low-levels)	The chance to catch up high-levels ($f=2$)	Parents' expectations
Peer Bullying	Lack of Motivation of teachers (for low-levels)	The chance to make-up missing subjects	Gaps between high-level and low-level grades
Classroom Dynamics	Examinations	The feeling of success	Examinations
-	Physical Environment	-	-
-	Psychological condition of students	-	-

Table 2: Administrators' evaluations

The participating administrators ($n=6$) stated the strengths of multi-level grades and they indicated that the system provides equality in terms of students' levels of proficiency of English, as they are separated into groups, and they may get over the problem of peer bullying in same-level classes. In addition, the multi-level grades are stated to be more advantageous in terms of classroom since the students have the chance to participate in the lessons more.

As indicated by the teachers, the administrators emphasized the issue that low level learners cannot learn from one another sufficiently since there are not any high achievers as model providers in such sections. A participating administrator is of the opinion that the examination is not enough to evaluate students, and the students may be affected psychologically for being in low-achieving groups. For the opportunities, the administrators stated that the students have the chance to catch up with the high-levels ($f=2$), students also have the chance to make-up missing subjects, and the feeling of success is higher in this system. On the other hand, the parents' expectations are one of the threats identified by

administrators. The administrators also stated that the gap between the high-level and low-level classes increases as time passes, and the examinations are also seen as one of the threats.

The third group of data providers in the research was the students. Their evaluations are given in the Table 3 below:

Strengths	Weaknesses	Opportunities	Threats
Equality in No weaknesses proficiency levels (f=4) of students in English (f=6)		The chance to use the target language (f=4)	There are no threats (f=4)
Examinations (f=3)	-	Experience of multi-levels (f=3)	-
Number of students (f=2)	-		-

Table 3: Students' evaluations

The students believed that there is equality in the English proficiency levels of students (f=6). Besides, the examinations (f=3) and also the number of students (f=2) are the strengths identified by the participating students. The students (f=4) stated that there is no weakness in multi-level grades. As for the opportunities, the students added that there is more chance to use the target language (f=4) in their classes, and they have the chance to experience multi-levels while learning the English language. To the students (f=4), there are no threats of the system.

Conclusion and Discussion

The findings of the present study also support the related literature that there are some negative effects of grouping on students (Macintyre & Ireson, 2002; Oakes, 1985; Worthy, 2010). Labeling students is one of the concerns identified by fifty percent of the teachers. Labeling affects low-level students psychologically. As cited in Worthy, Dweck and Leggett (1988) believe that ability grouping has some negative effects, not only on lower-level students whose self-concept affects their achievement, but also on high-ability students whose awareness of their abilities can lead them to avoid difficulties in effective learning. As one of the teachers stated, high-ability students may have excessive confidence about the future, as they are aware of their levels.

Half of the participating teachers believed that grouping reduces motivation in low-ability groups, as well as diminishing competition in high-level groups. Lack of skills-based activities, no opportunities for modeling, and an intensive curriculum are the other weaknesses with respect to low levels identified by the teachers. Thirty percent of the teachers believe that the gap between levels is getting higher because of the different levels of students. On the other hand, to Oakes (1985), teachers in low levels spend their time mainly on managing students' behaviors, rather than on instruction. However, high-level teachers have little time to spend on the behaviors of students. This causes an increase in the gap between the low and high levels of students.

Though the teachers who have applied the multi-level system have responded with some concerns, especially with respect to the students, the participating students do not seem to have such issues according to the result of the study. Four of the students stated that there

were no weaknesses in multi-level programs. Low-level students did not state that they felt bad about the level in which they were placed. One of the low-level students did mention that the high-ability students learned more than them, and another student complained that in grouping, the teachers' views were not taken into consideration. One of the teachers saw this as a threat, as with Harlen and Malcolm (1999), who contend that classroom observations or interviews should also be taken into consideration. Hallam et al. (2000) also argued that while grouping, decisions about students should be left to the teachers. However, most of the teachers did not share these ideas about forming groups.

The students related similar ideas about the strengths of the multi-level system, such as equality levels of students, number of students and students coming from other schools. Like the teachers, the administrators' concerns are similar. They also expressed that there is no opportunity for modeling for low-level students. Motivation, inadequacies in the physical environment and psychological conditions of students are also cited as weak points of multi-levels. Equality in students' levels, peer bullying and classroom dynamics were the main strengths identified by administrators.

Although negative effects of grouping on students were identified by both teachers and administrators, multi-leveling is still applied. Students coming from other schools are one of the crucial reasons for implementing multi-levels. Another reason for applying this system is related to the lack of parents' complaints; rather, because the parents of high-level students are pleased, as their children were not placed in the low levels.

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