HETEROGENEOUS VERSUS HOMOGENEOUS ABILITY GROUPING IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSES

At a Glance

This Information Capsule examines the research conducted on heterogeneous and homogeneous foreign language classes. The limited number of studies examining the effects of different grouping strategies on proficiency in a second language has produced mixed findings. Some studies indicate that heterogeneous classrooms have a positive effect on students' foreign language acquisition and others show that homogeneous classrooms yield more favorable outcomes. Several studies have concluded that students with advanced levels of foreign language proficiency benefit more from homogeneous grouping than lower ability students. It is unclear how generalizable the results of these studies are to U.S. students enrolled in elementary and secondary schools because most studies used samples of university students located outside of the U.S. This paper also summarizes challenges associated with both heterogeneous and homogeneous foreign language courses. Finally, research-based strategies that educators can use to increase the effectiveness of instruction in heterogeneous foreign language classes are reviewed. For example, some experts recommend that students in heterogeneous classes be grouped by language ability for at least a portion of the class time. They believe that students can benefit from lessons adapted to their proficiency level, as well as from interaction with peers of varying language skill levels.

In some schools, students with different language proficiency levels (beginner, intermediate, and advanced) are placed together in the same classroom to receive foreign language instruction. In other schools, students are grouped according to their level of proficiency in a foreign language. When a classroom is made up of students with varying levels of language proficiency, it is considered to be a heterogeneous or mixed ability classroom. When students with similar levels of language ability are grouped together, their class is referred to as homogeneous (Al-Shammakhi & Al-Humaidi, 2015; UK Essays, 2015; Elizondo, 2013; Asgari, 2011; Aykina, 2011; Ma, 2011; Joyce & McMillan, 2010; Mathews-Aydinli & Van Horne, 2006; Svärd, 2006).

Researchers have pointed out that no matter how students are grouped, all classrooms are actually heterogeneous because students differ in terms of their learning styles, progress rates, and prior knowledge and experience (Ramkumar & Vani, 2016; Al-Shammakhi & Al-Humaidi, 2015; Pango, 2015; Aykina, 2011; Reyes & Rodriguez, 2006; Şalli-Çopur, 2005).

Research on Ability Grouping in Foreign Language Classes

For years, educators have experimented with different student groupings in foreign language classes, but little empirical research has been conducted on the effect of heterogeneous versus homogeneous grouping on students' language acquisition. The few studies that have been conducted have produced mixed findings - some indicate that homogeneous classrooms have a positive effect on students' proficiency in a foreign language, while others show that heterogeneous classrooms produce more favorable outcomes (UK Essays, 2015; Saunders et al., 2013; Asgari, 2011; McMillan & Joyce, 2011).

Studies Favoring Heterogeneous Grouping. Some researchers have concluded that heterogeneous grouping has a positive impact on students' foreign language proficiency. They have hypothesized that heterogeneous classes provide students who have lower language proficiency levels with the opportunity to learn from more advanced students. At the same time, advanced students appear to benefit from providing explanations to their lower ability peers, which can enhance their own knowledge of the language and build their confidence (Ramkumar & Vani, 2016; Greene, 2013; Hazari, 2013; Aykina, 2011; Xanthou & Pavlou, 2008).

One study was located in the literature that found positive outcomes for students placed in heterogeneous classes. Zamani (2016) evaluated the impact that homogeneous versus heterogeneous grouping had on the writing ability of Iranian students enrolled in an English as a Foreign Language course. Participants in the study were 66 adult females who volunteered to take part in the study. Students were divided into three groups: a heterogeneous group, consisting of both high and low writing ability students; a high level writing ability group; and a low level writing ability group. All students completed a writing composition pretest; a posttest was administered after 10 class sessions. Key findings included:

- Low writing ability students in both heterogeneous and homogeneous groups improved their writing ability from pretest to posttest, but the achievement gain for low ability students in heterogeneous classes was significantly greater than the gain for low ability students in homogeneous classes.

- Results for high level students were the reverse of the findings for low level students. Again, both groups of high writing ability students posted gains from pretest to posttest, but this time, students in the homogeneous class had somewhat larger gains than students in the heterogeneous class. However, the difference between the mean gains of the two groups was not significant.

Studies Favoring Homogeneous Grouping. Other researchers have concluded that homogeneous grouping is associated with greater gains in students' foreign language proficiency than heterogeneous grouping. They maintain that students benefit when teachers tailor the pace of instruction to students' need for comprehension. Observations of mixed ability classrooms have consistently found that advanced students often become bored by what they perceive as the slow pace of the instruction, while lower ability students become frustrated because they are unable to keep up with the pace (Saunders et al., 2013; Adhikari, 2012; Aykina, 2011; McMillan & Joyce, 2011; Ma, 2011; Sonoma County Office of Education, 2008; Xanthou & Pavlou, 2008; Svärd, 2006).

Asgari (2011) studied 120 randomly selected university students in Iran who were enrolled in a Preliminary English course. The treatment group was split into two English classes – students with higher levels of English proficiency and students with lower levels of English proficiency. Control group students attended a mixed ability class. Results indicated that students enrolled in homogeneous classes had higher levels of achievement on tests of English knowledge.

Several studies have found that students with advanced levels of foreign language proficiency benefit more from homogeneous grouping than lower ability students. When advanced students are grouped together, they appear to benefit from more in-depth conversations in the foreign language, more challenging assignments, and a more autonomous approach to learning (UK Essays, 2015; Furcsa, 2014; Saunders et al., 2013; McMillan & Joyce, 2011; Goldenberg & Coleman, 2010). Even in Zamani's (2016) study, summarized above, which found that lower ability students benefited from heterogeneous class grouping for language instruction, findings indicated that highly proficient foreign language students in a homogeneous classroom outperformed highly proficient students in a heterogeneous classroom, although the difference between the mean gains of the two groups was not significant.

Student Perceptions. Joyce and McMillan (2010) administered a survey to students in six homogeneous classes and six heterogeneous classes at a Japanese university. All participants were undergraduates enrolled as full-time English language majors in their first year of study. Survey findings included:

- Students in homogeneous classes reported being better able to understand the classroom learning materials than students enrolled in heterogeneous classes.

- Students in homogeneous classes agreed more strongly that the level of their class was appropriate for their level of English skills.

- Students in homogeneous classes, particularly highly proficient students in homogeneous classes, reported that they pushed themselves to use English at a high level more than their peers in heterogeneous classes.

- When asked if they would prefer to be in a "streamed" (homogeneous) class or a mixed ability class, 72% of students enrolled in homogeneous classes said they preferred a homogeneous class, while 17% said they preferred a mixed ability class, and 11% had no preference. Among students enrolled in heterogeneous classes, 40% said they preferred a homogeneous class, 41% said they preferred a heterogeneous class, and 19% had no preference.

Elizondo (2013) conducted focus groups with approximately 30 university students in Costa Rica who were enrolled in English language courses. Students cited the following positive effects of heterogeneous English language classes:

- Students with higher language proficiency levels helped lower level students understand concepts and correct their errors; and
- Students with higher language proficiency levels inspired lower level students to improve their language performance.

Negative consequences of heterogeneous English language classrooms reported by students included:

- Students with lower language proficiency levels reported feelings of inferiority and embarrassment regarding their lack of command of the language; and
- Students with lower language proficiency levels said they were not provided with sufficient opportunities to participate in class.

Teacher Perceptions. McMillan and Joyce (2011) surveyed 31 English as a Foreign Language teachers at four Japanese universities. Survey results indicated that the majority of instructors teaching both homogeneous and heterogeneous classes believed that students were better served in homogeneous classes. The teachers who expressed a preference for homogeneous classes believed that they were better able to tailor lessons and materials to students' levels of language proficiency.

Elizondo's (2013) study at a Costa Rican university included interviews with and surveys of three English language professors. Professors concluded that participation in mixed ability classrooms "is hindered since students with a high language level tend to take control over the class and have no problem expressing or communicating ideas while low proficiency students have a passive and limited role in the class." The reader should note that Elizondo (2013) conducted a very small exploratory study and her findings should therefore be interpreted with caution.

Challenges Associated with Heterogeneous Language Courses

Heterogeneous foreign language classes can present challenges to both students and teachers. These challenges are summarized below.

- **Instruction.** Teachers of mixed ability language classes may find it difficult to provide instruction that is motivating and interesting to all students in the classroom. The content and activities may be too easy for some students and too difficult for others. The result is that some students become bored, while others become confused and discouraged (Ramkumar & Vani, 2016; Adhikari, 2012; Asgari, 2011; Ma, 2011; Svärd, 2006; Şalli-Çopur, 2005). Hernandez (2012) stated, "Trying to create lessons with a 'one size fits all' strategy creates a disservice to the students receiving the instruction as well as to the teacher struggling to work within such limitations."

- **Classroom materials.** Several experts have found that it is difficult to find suitable materials for heterogeneous foreign language classrooms. Textbooks are usually designed for one language level and rarely offer teachers options or flexibility. Some students therefore find the textbook difficult to understand, whereas other students find it engaging and easy to read (Ramkumar & Vani, 2016; Elizondo, 2013; Asgari, 2011; Ma, 2011; Xanthou & Pavlou, 2008; Şalli-Çopur, 2005).

- **Classroom management.** A few studies have found that mixed ability classrooms lead to classroom management problems. Students with higher levels of language proficiency often finish tasks before lower level students. As a result, they may misbehave while

waiting for other students to finish. Students with lower levels of language proficiency, on the other hand, may behave in a disruptive manner because they become frustrated when tasks are too difficult (Ramkumar & Vani, 2016; Aykina, 2011; Ma, 2011; Mathews-Aydinli & Van Horne, 2006; Şalli-Çopur, 2005).

- **Classroom participation.** In mixed ability classes, students with higher levels of language proficiency tend to participate more actively than students with lower levels of proficiency. Some studies have found that students with the highest levels of spoken proficiency monopolize the classroom conversation, giving less proficient students few opportunities to practice speaking the target language (Elizondo, 2013; Asgari, 2011; Ma, 2011; Rance-Roney, 2010; de Jong & Commins, 2006; Şalli-Çopur, 2005).

- **Student anxiety.** Several researchers have concluded that students with lower levels of language proficiency often feel insecure, inadequate, and anxious about their abilities in the target language when they are placed in heterogeneous foreign language classes (McMillan & Joyce, 2011; de Jong & Commins, 2006).

Challenges Associated with Homogeneous Language Courses

Challenges associated with homogeneous foreign language classrooms include:

- **Peer interaction.** In homogeneous foreign language classrooms, low achieving students are not provided with the opportunity to increase their proficiency by interacting with higher achieving students. Homogeneous classrooms also have drawbacks for higher achieving students - research indicates that they benefit from interacting with their less proficient peers. Providing explanations and modeling more complex ideas appear to build advanced students' confidence and enhance their fluency in the target language (Li, 2014; Greene, 2013; Asgari, 2011; Aykina, 2011; Ma, 2011; Rance-Roney, 2010; Mashburn et al., 2009; Xanthou & Pavlou, 2008; de Jong & Commins, 2006; Mathews-Aydinli & Van Horne, 2006; Texas Education Agency, 2006).

- **Learner autonomy.** Students are more likely to develop learner autonomy in heterogeneous classes than in homogeneous classrooms. Because teachers do not have as much time to focus on students' learning needs in mixed ability classrooms, their role shifts from lecturer to facilitator. Students in heterogeneous classrooms therefore learn to help or teach each other, rather than being reliant on their teacher. In contrast, students in homogeneous classrooms are provided with fewer opportunities to learn independently (Al-Shammakhi & Al-Humaidi, 2015; Adhikari, 2012; Hernandez, 2012; Ma, 2011).

- **Student self-esteem.** Several studies have found that homogeneous classes may result in a decrease in the self-esteem and aspirations of low achieving students. In contrast, researchers have found that there is little impact on self-esteem when advanced students are grouped together (Furcsa, 2014; Hazari, 2013; McMillan & Joyce, 2011; Xanthou & Pavlou, 2008; Svärd, 2006).

- **Student diversity.** Some researchers have suggested that homogeneous classrooms have less student diversity than heterogeneous classrooms. They have found that students in heterogeneous classrooms are more likely to be from different cultural backgrounds, with many different experiences and many styles of learning. Mixed ability classrooms may therefore provide students with more opportunities to discuss and listen to other students' diverse perspectives (Ramkumar & Vani, 2016; UK Essays, 2015; Adhikari, 2012; Teach This, n.d.).

- **Curriculum differences.** It has been reported that low ability students assigned to homogeneous classrooms are exposed to less and more simplified versions of the curriculum, while broader and more challenging material is covered in classrooms containing higher ability students. In contrast, researchers have noted that mixed ability classrooms send the message that all students are expected to work at the highest possible level (Furcsa, 2014; Xanthou and Pavlou, 2008).

Strategies for Managing Heterogeneous Classrooms

Studies have found that if properly managed, heterogeneous foreign language classrooms can provide a positive learning environment for all students (Aykina, 2011; Mathews-Aydinli & Van Horne, 2006; Reyes & Rodriguez, 2006; Şalli-Çopur, 2005). Following is a summary of research-based strategies that educators can use to increase the effectiveness of instruction in heterogeneous classrooms.

- **Conduct a needs assessment.** Researchers have concluded that a needs assessment is the best way to determine how to teach effectively in a mixed ability class. Ongoing needs assessments may include standardized tests, alternative assessments, group discussions, one-to-one interviews with students, and student observations. The needs assessment process provides teachers with data that can help them adjust content and activities to meet all students' learning needs (Al-Shammakhi & Al-Humaidi, 2015; Mathews-Aydinli & Van Horne, 2006; Teach This, n.d.).

- **Create a supportive learning environment.** Experts strongly recommend that all students in mixed ability classes be treated equally, with teachers showing support and enthusiasm for each student and his or her unique learning needs. Teachers should create an atmosphere where all students feel secure, can voice their opinions, and can ask questions without feeling that they are being judged negatively (Al-Shammakhi & Al-Humaidi, 2015; Hernandez, 2012; Ma, 2011; Roberts, 2007; de Jong & Commins, 2006; Svärd, 2006).

- **Differentiate instruction.** In classrooms with differentiated instruction, there are a variety of learning options designed around students' different language proficiency levels and different activities through which students can gain an understanding of the language. Most experts believe that teachers of mixed ability foreign language classes should deliver differentiated instruction and have the freedom to modify lesson plans according to their students' abilities. Scholars argue that activities that meet only the

needs of students whose skills fall in the middle leave struggling students behind and fail to engage advanced students (Al-Shammakhi & Al-Humaidi, 2015; Pango, 2015; Hazari, 2013; Hernandez, 2012; Joyce & McMillan, 2010; Sonoma County Office of Education, 2008; Mathews-Aydinli & Van Horne, 2006; Reyes & Rodriguez, 2006; Svärd, 2006; Şalli-Çopur, 2005; Theisen, 2002).

- **Appeal to all learning styles.** Teachers should be aware of students' different learning styles and ensure that activities appeal to all senses. Researchers have concluded that classroom instruction and activities should be presented through auditory, visual, and kinesthetic means in order to satisfy all styles of learning (Ramkumar & Vani, 2016; Adhikari, 2012; Xanthou & Pavlou, 2008; Roberts, 2007; Şalli-Çopur, 2005).

- **Engage students in competition.** Studies have found that students are more motivated to use the target language when they are engaged in competitive activities, such as word and language games. Regardless of the differences in students' levels of language proficiency, research shows that when students are playing and competing, their attention is focused on fluency instead of language accuracy or correctness of linguistic forms. These types of activities provide students with the opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge of the new language in a non-stressful atmosphere, without fear of negative evaluation (Aykina, 2011; Xanthou & Pavlou, 2008; Şalli-Çopur, 2005).

- **Encourage students' independent learning.** Students in mixed ability foreign language classrooms should be provided with the opportunity to work at their own pace, in their own style. Experts recommend that teachers compile a collection of self-access materials that provide students with a choice of assignments they can work on individually. Self-access materials should include activities from all skill levels and activities should be structured so that students need little, if any, assistance from teachers to accomplish the tasks (Ma, 2011; Mathews-Aydinli & Van Horne, 2006; Şalli-Çopur, 2005).

- **Use a range of within-class student groupings.** Researchers have suggested that teachers sometimes group students homogeneously according to language proficiency, and sometimes heterogeneously, depending on the purpose of the activity. Studies have found that students benefit when they work occasionally with small groups of peers who have similar levels of language proficiency and occasionally with peers of varied proficiency levels. The composition of student groups should be changed regularly so students have the opportunity to work with a variety of different peers (Ramkumar & Vani, 2016; Greene, 2013; Cho, 2012; Aykina, 2011; Xanthou & Pavlou, 2008; Mathews-Aydinli & Van Horne, 2006; Teach This, n.d.).

- **Make contingency plans for early finishers.** When teachers assign the same tasks to all language learners, the more advanced students usually finish the tasks earlier. Researchers recommend that teachers have contingency activities available for the early finishers. They suggest that teachers offer early finishers several engaging options so

they do not view the extra activities as punishment (Ramkumar & Vani, 2016; Xanthou & Pavlou, 2008; Reyes & Rodriguez, 2006; Şalli-Çopur, 2005).

- **Adapt course materials.** Most course books are designed for a specific language level and do not offer much flexibility. Teachers should therefore be encouraged to adapt the materials to suit students' different learning needs (Ramkumar & Vani, 2016; Al-Shammakhi & Al-Humaidi, 2015; Ma, 2011; Şalli-Çopur, 2005). Mathews-Aydinli and Van Horne (2006) suggested that teachers use more student-generated and authentic materials and rely less on textbooks written by language level.

- **Assess students' language skills frequently.** Students' levels of language proficiency should be regularly assessed to ensure that instruction and within-class group placements are suited to their language learning needs. Since one-size-fits-all assessments often fail to recognize the diversity of learning needs within mixed ability classrooms, experts recommend the use of student portfolios or other alternative demonstrations of linguistic skills (Ramkumar & Vani, 2016; Saunders et al., 2013; Hernandez, 2012; Aykina, 2011; Goldenberg & Coleman, 2010; Xanthou & Pavlou, 2008; Reyes & Rodriguez, 2006; Şalli-Çopur, 2005).

- **Provide teachers with opportunities for professional development.** Researchers have found that teachers often lack sufficient knowledge of the most effective strategies to use in heterogeneous classrooms. They strongly recommend that teachers be provided with specialized training that enables them to cater to the wide variety of proficiency levels and learning styles in a mixed ability classroom. In addition, foreign language teachers should be given opportunities to visit one another's classrooms, plan together, and discuss teaching strategies (Ramkumar & Vani, 2016; Al-Shammakhi & Al-Humaidi, 2015; Elizondo, 2013; Mathews-Aydinli & Van Horne, 2006).

Summary

This Information Capsule examined the research conducted on heterogeneous and homogeneous foreign language classes. In heterogeneous, or mixed ability, classrooms, students with varying levels of language proficiency are all placed together. In homogeneous foreign language classes, students with similar levels of language ability are grouped together.

Little research has been conducted on the effects of different grouping strategies on second language proficiency. The few studies that have been conducted have produced mixed findings - some indicate that homogeneous classrooms have a positive effect on students' foreign language acquisition, while others show that heterogeneous classrooms produce more favorable outcomes. Several researchers have agreed that students with advanced levels of foreign language proficiency benefit more from homogeneous grouping than lower ability students. Most studies have used samples of university students located outside of the U.S. It is not clear how generalizable the results of these studies are to students enrolled in grades Pre-K through 12 in U.S. schools.

Surveys of students' and teachers' perceptions of heterogeneous and homogeneous classes indicate a preference by both groups for homogeneous classrooms.

Challenges associated with heterogeneous foreign language courses were summarized, including how to provide instruction and activities that are engaging and motivating for all students; classroom management issues; and unequal levels of classroom participation. Challenges associated with homogeneous foreign language courses were also reviewed, such as the lack of opportunities to interact with and learn from peers of varying proficiency levels; a possible decrease in the self-esteem and aspirations of low achieving students; and curriculum differences that might exist between low ability and high ability classrooms.

A summary of research-based strategies that educators can use to increase the effectiveness of instruction in heterogeneous classrooms was also provided in this report. For example, some experts recommend that students in heterogeneous classes be grouped by language ability for at least a portion of the class time. They believe that students can benefit from lessons adapted to their proficiency level, as well as from interaction with peers of varying language skill levels. In addition, researchers suggest that teachers use differentiated instruction, encourage independent learning, and adapt course materials to meet students' diverse learning needs.

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