



CHAPTER TWO

STUDENT PERCEPTION OF THE EFFECT OF ABILITY GROUPING: THE SOOCHOW EXPERIENCE

2.1 Introduction

Improving listening comprehension and oral English have always been the dual objectives of the English language lab course at Soochow University. However, students often had difficulties achieving these goals because they were mostly placed based on major and year¹, and their levels of English ability vary greatly. Beginning in the 1993-1994 academic year, a dramatic change has been made in the structuring of the lab program — students are now placed into different levels according to their level of ability. This study was undertaken to explore the students' perceptions about the effects of ability grouping with respect to language learning and teaching for the lab course. A survey of 2,448 students who experienced major and year based grouping in Lab Course I (mostly during their freshman year) and ability grouping in Lab Course II

¹ Students of the same major and year study in the same class.

(mostly during their sophomore year) was conducted and the students were told to compare their perceptions and experiences of the two systems, i.e., major and year based grouping versus ability grouping.

In this paper, situations in secondary and college education in Taiwan, Mainland China, and the United States with respect to ability grouping will be reviewed first. Second, some of the criticisms of ability grouping, especially in the United States, will be discussed. Third, the results of the student survey will be presented and then examined statistically in some detail. Finally we will discuss the implications of this study for changes in the design of university English lab courses.

2.2 Review of Current Situation

Generally speaking, there are two ways to group students in practice. One is heterogeneous grouping, in which system students are grouped based on year, regardless of their interest, ability, aptitude, and achievement. The other grouping is homogeneous grouping. In this system students are organized based on one dominant factor—their academic performances.

2.2.1 Taiwan: Growing Awareness of Ability Grouping

In many college language courses in Taiwan, heterogeneous grouping has been adopted. However, because of students' background and previous education, they often have varying levels of English abilities. From Table 2.1, which shows how students of Soochow did on the English portion of their entrance exam in 1993, we find that students do vary greatly in their English abilities except the students from the Japanese and German department.

Some studies (Wang Hai-Kang, 1993; Chen Chiu-Lan, 1993 & Chang Ch'uan, 1993) describe the differences in students' abilities as a great obstacle to their teaching because students of varying levels have vastly different needs. It is very difficult for the teachers to first find out the needs of students, and then adapt themselves, the management of the

class, and the curriculum to accommodate those diverse needs. According to Yao's study, "the results indicated Among the many factors affecting students' particular needs for the EFL listening program, the language proficiency level appeared most significant." She then suggests that "Students should be accepted to a particular class on the basis of scores from a mandatory 'listening proficiency test', and curriculum should be designed according to students' language proficiency, interests, and learning objectives." (1994, Abstract)

Furthermore, although some public universities set a limit on the number of students in a class, in most private universities, there are often a large number of students in each class. This, in combination with the diverse levels of the students, severely limits the teachers' options in the classroom. As a result, several universities began to look into ability grouping as a way to cope with the situation. The School of Foreign Languages of Catholic Fu-Jen University started placing students into different levels for the course of Freshman English in 1977 (Chang Pao-Yen, 1992). National Chiao Tung University has also adopted a partial placement program (Kuo, Hung, Chang & Chang, 1990). Tung Hai started placing students many years ago (Yang I-Li, 1992; Chen Chiu-Lan, 1993). Chung Cheng University began to group freshmen into three levels in 1993; however, in 1994 this practice was discontinued (Chang, 1995). Chang's survey indicated that 66.3% of the freshmen at Chung Cheng thought that they should be placed into different levels according to their proficiency.

In order to better find out about the placement situations in universities, in March, 1994, the teaching assistants of Soochow University language center conducted a telephone survey of the lab course offered in several colleges and universities in Taiwan. The results of the survey are as follow:

<i>Universities with a placement program</i>	
National Cheng Chi University	Started a placement program in the 1992 academic year. Students who are required to take the Lab I or Lab II course in compliance with the policy of their departments are placed into three levels. Freshmen are placed based on how they did on the English portion of the Joint College Entrance Exam, and sophomores are placed based on their grades for Lab I in the second semester. Some teachers at Cheng Chi also indicated that ability grouping has made it a lot easier for them to design classroom activities.
Tung Hai University	Started placing students many years ago. Their lab course has always been part of the Freshman English program. Freshmen are tested when they go through the orientation program for new students.
Chinese Culture University	A placement program of two levels was started in 1988. All students except students from the art and physical science department and transfer students need to be placed. Freshmen are placed based on their grades on the English portion of the JCEE and sophomores are placed based on how they did in their Lab I course.
Ming Chuan College	There is also a partial placement program, i.e., an elite class. About 5% of the students are chosen to be placed into 2-3 elite classes ² based first on how they did on the mid-term and final and then at an interview.

² There are approximately 25-30 students in one class.

<i>Universities without a placement program</i>	
There is not any ability grouping at the following schools: National Taiwan University, National Normal University, National Chung Hsin University, National Tsing Hua University, National Cheng Kung University, National Chung Shan University, Tamkang University, Chung Yuan Christian University, and Providence University.	
<i>Others</i>	
Catholic Fu-Jen University and National Central University	There is no placement for the Lab course although they do have an ability grouping system for the Freshman English course.
National Chiao Tung University	Used to have a placement program for their lab course. Students were tested into one of three levels. Teachers also noted that the ability-grouped classes were a lot easier to teach. However, in a restructuring move, the Lab course was integrated into Freshman English and with that the placement testing ended.
<i>Number of students in one class at different universities</i>	
Central University: 35-55	Culture University: 50-60
Cheng Chi University: 30	Normal University: 30
Cheng Kung University: 15-55	Providence University: 64
Chiao Tung University: 55	Soochow University: 50-60
Chung Hsin University: 40	Taiwan University : 30
Chung Shan University: 30-40	Tamkang University: 60
Chung Yuan Christian University: 30-64	Tsing Hua University: 44
	Tung Hai University: 30

2.2.2 Mainland China: An Enforced Policy

In Mainland China, according to Chang Ch'uan, (1993), there are often great discrepancies in students' language scores on the Mainland China's

standardized college entrance exam. This has also caused great difficulties for college teachers. They complain that they can never 'feed' students with better abilities enough whereas students of poor abilities complain that they can't 'take in' what was taught to them. Therefore a system has been adopted in which there are six grades. College students are placed in appropriate grades based on their test scores. The system is unique in that students can skip grades if they perform exceptionally well. Students with poor abilities can start at an even lower grade, i.e., pre grade one and two. Also, students are required to take a standardized national test when they finish the fourth and sixth grades to see if they have reached a certain level of language competency. The teachers all felt quite positive about the ability grouping despite some complaints from students.

2.2.3 America: Ability Grouping Thriving

In order to find out about language education in American colleges, data was collected through e-mail communication. We asked teachers and administrators who subscribed to the Language Learning and Technology International Information Forum (LLTI) whether they used ability grouping to place students into language classes. The responses were mostly consistent. L. A. Stone of UC Irvine claimed, "absolutely no college or university in the United States groups language students by their age or class level (freshman, sophomore, etc.). Students are always placed in classes based on their 'ability'" (personal communication, April 24, 1994). M. Ledgerwood of State University of New York at Stony Brook stated, "Almost all universities/colleges and all I know of personally have a placement policy. For some this policy is based upon high school language study only (how many years) but for most there is some kind of placement and/or proficiency test used" (personal communication, April 22, 1994). B. Parkhurst, of Boston University also stated,

At Boston University, students entering the language study program must all take a placement exam which serves to place them into the

appropriate language study level... Only if a student has had no prior exposure to or study of a foreign language may s/he enter the first semester language course without taking a placement test.... The test is not infallible, but it helps group students according to ability. With nearly 2,000 students taking languages each semester, we could not manage without this system. (personal communication, April 25, 1994)

J. Shoaf of University of Florida further pointed out,

In Spanish, French, Latin, and German, (languages commonly taught in high schools here) the departments have adopted placement tests of the sort that can be scored by machine....On the other hand, if a student knows some Italian, Russian, Japanese, Chinese...the student decided, with help from advisors and faculty members, what course is the best for resuming study. These languages do not, to my knowledge, use a standard test to place students. (personal communication, April 22, 1994)

The pervasiveness, in spite of the effort required, of the use of ability grouping in American university language classrooms bears witness to the perceived benefits of ability grouping in language teaching and learning. Some respondents feel that by grouping students in a language classroom, the course materials and the activities and tasks designed can more accurately address their students' specific needs at their current stage of learning.

2.3 Discussions of the Ability Grouping System

Despite the thriving popularity of ability grouping with respect to language learning in Taiwan, Mainland China and the United States, there are some criticisms of the ability grouping system.

Some doubt has been raised that ability grouping is a panacea for the problem. E. Chan of Malaysia responded to our e-mail question:

What happens after the placement test.... My suspicion, after 20

years of ESL teaching, is that there may not be much difference in any final test scores or written samples no matter which approach is used, if the course materials do not address the needs of the students. These needs can be taken care of even in ungraded classrooms with mixed abilities. Will any placement system remove individual differences? (personal communication, April 25, 1994)

Although criticisms of the tracking/ability grouping system in secondary education are not largely relevant to ability grouping in college language courses, some people feel that grouping students might cause the same kind of psychological impact on students as the tracking system. Therefore, they are still worth considering here. In the United States, in recent years, the tracking system has undergone strong criticism due to its possible impact on minority groups. It has been argued that grouping practices deny equal access to education (Wheelock & Hawley, 1993). Braddock and Slavin (1992) also claimed that analysis of data from the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 provided the largest and best-controlled multi-year study of ability grouping ever conducted. The analysis showed that placing students in homogeneous groups based on their academic performance is ineffective, harmful to many students and damaging to interracial relations and a democratic society. Research on the effects of ability grouping on middle school students found very few effects in achievement for high, average, and low level students in 27 studies (Slavin, 1993).

According to Lo Li's study in 1986, the fixed grouping system which started in Taiwan in 1969 also received strong criticism. In this system, secondary school students were first ranked from best to worst based on their intelligence and academic standing and then organized into classes with students of similar ability. Students who were placed in 'bad' classes lost their self-esteem and became demotivated whereas students in 'good' classes were anxious to keep up their good performance. In 1985, the Ministry of Education enforced a new policy of subject area ability grouping, i.e., for the first year students, there should not be any kind of organization based on students' abilities;

whereas for the second year students, his/her abilities in some specific subjects would be evaluated and in each subject s/he would be placed with classmates of comparable ability. Lo Li concluded that most students felt positive about the subject area ability grouping. However, the practice of grouping students in secondary schools has still remained an unresolved issue and schools nowadays vary a great deal in their ways of placing students.

Although there has been strong criticism of ability grouping in secondary schools in America and Taiwan, placing students based on their abilities for college English courses in Taiwan is still applicable for several reasons.

First of all, even though all students have had at least six years of English language training before they enter college, their proficiencies vary widely. Some of them might have had the experience of living in the target language environment and be fluent in the language, whereas some might even have problems pronouncing words correctly. Pairing up these two kinds of students for practice on the same lesson is frustrating for both parties. Through the use of ability grouping placement, these two kinds of students can at least be placed into different classes so that teachers can make necessary adjustments on the syllabus and then provide them with more individualized instruction. E. Chan of Malaysia proposed that “students’ needs can be taken care of even in ungraded classrooms with mixed abilities.” Her theory is valid provided that the size of the class is kept small, which makes it easier to address the needs of most students. But if a teacher is faced with a class of more than fifty students in one class, some individual differences must be dealt with.

Secondly, the concern about the possible impact on minority groups is not relevant to the situation in Taiwan because Taiwan is basically a homogeneous community. In this situation, it is very difficult for ability grouping to become confused with racial stereotyping. Further, as Confucius said, we should teach students in accordance with their aptitude. This does not contradict the belief in equal educational

opportunities for all (Lo Li, 1986) and the argument that grouping practices deny equal access to education (Wheelock & Hawley, 1993). Students are not being denied what they should get; instead they are getting the things they really need at the moment. If students still have problems comprehending simple questions such as “What do you do for a living?” there is no point in having them listen to BBC news broadcast.

Finally, In order to revitalize the system, Hereford (1993) has suggested that

ability grouping could be used beneficially by reassessing grouping assignments frequently, varying instructional levels and pace, assigning groups based on demonstrated needs and abilities, grouping students for only one or two subjects, and using ability groups to teach specific skills. (p. 50)

Crosby & Owens (1993, p. 3) also stated that evidence showed “that ability grouping is maximally effective within classrooms when it is done for only one or two subjects and students are studying in heterogeneous classes for most of the day.” This kind of flexibility and mobility contrasts sharply with the inflexibility of the system that has been employed at the language center of Soochow University. For these reasons, the author has set out to investigate with the hope of developing a more appropriate system that meets the specific needs of our students.

2.4 The Ability Grouping Study at Soochow

Unlike the system in many other countries, the language lab course at universities in Taiwan is a self-contained course. At Soochow University, all students are required to take it for two years to improve their English listening and speaking abilities, and they receive credits for taking the course. Prior to the 1993-1994 academic year, the Lab classes had been organized based on students’ years/majors, and there were usually 50 to 70 students in one class. Students of good ability often complained that

the courses were not challenging enough whereas students of insufficient ability complained that the course materials were too difficult and teachers expected too much of them. Since most of the teachers of the Lab course also showed frustration with current Lab program, beginning the 1993-1994 academic year, a new practice for organizing students into the Lab Course II was implemented. Students of 4-5 different majors were arranged to have the Lab Course II in the same class period. Their grades on standard portions of the Lab Course I test were keyed into the computer as a basis for placement into three levels. We used students' grades as a basis for placement into three levels for two reasons. First and foremost, as M. Ledgerwood of State University of New York at Stony points out

very few people are pleased with the test they use and teachers are also aware that students can 'cheat' on purpose to place in a level lower than they should. This forces faculty to do a measuring of students progress anyway, in a less-organized manner and forces enrollment changes. (personal communication, April 25, 1994)

In a similar vein, D. Webb of California State University says, "Testing can't spot sandbaggers because we can only trust that those who take a test will do their best" (personal communication, April 25, 1994). Another reason for using grades is the huge amount of administrative work involved in giving placement tests to almost 3,000 students. Finally, to minimize the influence on students' self-esteem, the classes were named in such a way that the distinction in level was not obvious.

2.4.1 Subjects

A total of 2,448 sophomores who had the Lab Courses I & II both in a major/year based grouping situation and ability grouping situation were surveyed in January, 1994. There were 746 students in the low level, 1100 students in the intermediate level, and 590 students in the high level.

2.4.2 Instrument

A survey³ on ability grouping for the lab course at Soochow was used for the investigation. The printed survey was given in Chinese, and consisted of seventeen questions, which dealt with the students' attitudes towards ability grouping. Students were asked to compare the situation of ability grouping and major/year based grouping in the following areas: in-class interaction, teacher evaluation, pace of teaching, pressure in class, student motivation in learning, validity of the placement, its effectiveness for language training, and students' general response to ability grouping.

2.4.3 Measurement

For each of the seventeen questions listed in the survey, students were asked to choose one answer from five choices to show whether certain aspects of the program were beneficial to them or not. Answer 1 to each question indicated a strong negative reaction on the part of the students, and answer 2 slightly negative, 3 neutral, 4 a slightly positive reaction, and 5, a strong positive reaction by the student.

2.4.4 Data Analysis

The quantitative analysis of this study involved several statistical procedures using the SPSS/PC+ program: (1) descriptive statistics, including frequency, means and standard deviations, were computed to summarize the students' responses to ability grouping; (2) the chi-square statistic was used to examine and discern the relationship between students' choices of the answers for each question across the variable—whether they were in low, intermediate and high level.

2.4.5 Result & Discussion

Based on the results of the analysis, five tables of analysis have been

³ See Appendix 1 for the questions together with its English translation.

made. Table 2.2 shows the chi-square value, significance, mean and standard deviation for each question. Table 2.3 shows the total number and percentage of students who chose the first, the second, the third, the fourth and the fifth answer to each question. Table 2.4 gives the breakdown of number and percentage of students in three different levels who chose the first, the second, the third, the fourth and the fifth answer to each question. Table 2.5 shows statistical significance between the two variables: different levels of students and how they choose the answers. Table 2.6 shows whether there is a significant difference between two levels (low vs. intermediate, intermediate vs. high, low vs. high) for each question. 2448 students were surveyed and 2211 responses were analyzed. Those excluded are due either to non-response or anomalous response.

Discussion of Table 2.2

The obtained chi-square statistic shows a significant difference ($X^2=.000$, $p<0.05$). This indicates that students have strong preference for some particular answers. Their choices were not evenly distributed among the five answers; rather, they tended to concentrate around particular answers.

The means of students' answers to the 17 questions fall in the range of 2.9 to 3.5 which indicates that in general, many students don't have strong opinions towards ability grouping. However, in some areas, they show preference towards being placed into different levels.

Discussion of Table 2.3

A closer look at some of the significant differences will provide us with a better picture of how they viewed ability grouping.

<i>Only a small segment of students answered negatively in regards to ability grouping.</i>	
Question 3	9.7% of the students felt since they had been placed into different levels, their teachers' evaluation of them

	had been more unfair.
Question 4	9.7% of the students claimed that their teacher had had demands for their learning that had been more unreasonable.
Question 6	15.4% of the students indicated that because the students had about the same level of ability, it had been more difficult to work in groups.
Question 14	12.4% of the students thought that their teacher's way of teaching had reflected the level of students more inaccurately.
Question 15	18.5% of the students disagreed that there were more advantages than disadvantages to ability grouping.
Question 18	20.5% of the students disagreed that if they had the choice, they would choose to be placed based on their abilities.
<i>Students felt less positively about ability grouping.</i>	
Question 5	Since students of approximately the same level of ability had been placed into the same classroom, 35.7% of them felt that the discussions had been more boring.
Question 7	Since students of approximately the same level of ability had been placed into the same classroom, 39.7% felt that there had been greater pressure in class.
<i>A large segment of students felt there was no difference.</i>	
Question 1	53.8% pointed out that since they had been placed into different levels, the pace their teacher had set had been about the same as before.
Question 2	38% felt that the amount of supplementary materials and their level of difficulty had been about the same as before. We had expected the teachers to slow down while teaching low level classes and speed up for high level classes. This shows that teachers need to be more sensitive to the needs of a particular group of students.

Question 8	48.7% of the students indicated that since being placed into different levels, they had learned about as effectively as before in terms of listening skills.
Question 9	51.2% felt that they had learned about as effectively as before in terms of speaking skills.
Question 10	43.9% thought that it had been about as difficult as before for them to understand the contents of the lessons.
Question 11	41.3% felt they had been about as motivated as before to learn English.
<p>These responses can be attributed to the fact that teachers still preferred to use the same set of text materials and gave the same standard listening test even though students were placed into three different levels. It's very likely that students would not feel positive about their learning when the change in the placement procedures was not reflected in curriculum design and student evaluation.</p>	
<i>Non-comparison questions.</i>	
Question 13	21.2% of the students didn't feel that they had been placed into the right level.
Question 16	40.4% agreed that there should be a standard test for placing them into different levels.
Question 17	54.7% agreed that there should be different course materials for different levels.

Discussion of Table 2.4

There is significant difference in the percentages of answers across the variable—whether students are in low, intermediate or high level classes.

<i>Overall comparison of the three levels</i>		
<p>Low level students answered more positively towards ability grouping—the fourth answer, indicating preference for ability grouping, is the most popular among the five choices for fourteen out of the seventeen questions.</p>	<p>Intermediate and high level students answered less positively towards ability grouping. They didn't feel the change of placement had had great impact on their learning.</p>	
	<p>The largest segment of intermediate level students felt there was no difference for ten out of the seventeen questions.</p>	<p>The largest segment of high level students felt there was no difference for nine out of the seventeen questions.</p>
<i>Low level contrasted greatly with intermediate and high level</i>		
<p>Question 5</p>	<p>42.5% of low level students felt the discussions had been more interesting while only 32.6% of intermediate level students and 30.9% of high level students felt this way. One explanation for this might be that the low-level students felt more motivated to discuss because they worked with people of comparable abilities and didn't feel intimidated by students of better abilities. High and intermediate level students had a mixed response. It has been suggested by some of the teachers that intermediate students felt the discussions were not as interesting because the better students had been assigned to another class and were not able to offer constructive comments to make the discussion more interesting.</p>	
<p>Question 7</p>	<p>63.8% of high level students and 44.2% of intermediate level students felt more pressure in class, whereas only 14.2% of low level students felt more pressure. This is exactly what we had in mind in placing students into different levels - to reduce pressure for low level</p>	

	students and to provide more challenge for higher level students.
Question 13	62.3% of low level students and 42.6% of high level students felt they had been placed into the right level, whereas only 32.1% of intermediate students felt this way. This is also what we had expected before placing students, because the placement into different levels didn't make too much difference for intermediate students.
Questions 17 & 18	62.1% of low level students have a stronger desire to have different materials for different levels than intermediate, 52.6%, or high, 49.4%, level students, and that a much higher percentage of low level students, 75.1%, than intermediate, 47.2%, or high, 50%, level students prefer to be placed. As teachers often aim at students of average level of ability in major/year based grouping, low-level students' needs are easily ignored. In order to help them better, we need to restructure the program to try to provide individualized instruction for different levels. This is also because teaching all students with the same materials, goals and strategies would inevitably result in frustrated students.

Discussion of Tables 2.5 and 2.6

Table 2.5 shows great statistical significance between the two variables: different levels of students and how they choose the answers. If the F Prob. is less than 0.05, it means that there is strong significance.

In order to better find out how the students of two different levels vary in their choices of answers, we use a T-test to compare the low level and the intermediate level, the low level and the high level, and the intermediate level and the high level. If the probability is less than 0.05, it means there is great significance. A closer look at Table 2.6 shows that

high level students vary significantly from low level students for every question. The same inconsistency also shows between intermediate students and low students. However, intermediate and high students vary significantly only for questions 1 (the pace their teacher set), 3 (their teacher's evaluation of them), 6 (easy to work in groups), 7 (pressure in class), 8 (learn listening skills), 10 (understand the contents of the lessons), and 13 (placed into the right level).

2.5 Implications & Conclusion

This study has demonstrated the effect students perceived in the practice of ability grouping for college language lab programs. As indicated in the survey results, low level students show a strong preference for ability grouping. The majority felt that they had been appropriately placed, that they were under less pressure, that they had the right amount and right level of difficulty of supplementary materials, that they were more motivated, that it was easier for them to work in groups and understand the content of the lesson, and that their teachers' way of teaching better reflected their level. They also felt they had better improved their listening and speaking skills in the ability grouping system than in the major/year based system. They thought there were more advantages to ability grouping than major/year based grouping, and would choose ability grouping if they had a choice.

Intermediate and high level students were less positive as a group, and they had some reservations about ability grouping. Nevertheless, some of their responses were still positive. A majority of them felt though they were more pressured, the teachers' demands were more reasonable and the teacher's way of teaching better reflected their level. They also felt somewhat more positive about their learning to speak and listen in the ability grouping system than major/year based grouping. Almost half of them indicated that there were more advantages to ability grouping than major/year based grouping and would choose ability

grouping if they had a choice.

The results of the survey have affected the structure of the Lab program. As a large percentage of the students (54.7%) thought that there should be different course materials for different levels, and for low level students the figure (62.1%) was even higher, starting the 1994-1995 academic year, we chose a set of easier core text materials for low level students, and for intermediate and high level students, we used the same set of materials we used the year prior to that. This difference was also reflected in the test questions for the low-level students. Then in the 1995-1996 academic year, we chose more challenging materials and tasks for the high-level students. This change of text materials also led to the change in the difficulty level of the test questions for high-level students.

When asked whether there should be a standard test rather than being placed according to how they did in Lab Course I, 29.3% of the students felt it didn't matter. 40.4% agreed that there should be a standard test whereas 30.3% disagreed. Further, the use of students' previous test scores runs contrary to the belief that a placement test should identify proficiency, as opposed to achievement. It should not measure what an individual has achieved through specific classroom instruction but rather to assess what an individual can and cannot do (See Appendix 1 of Chastain, 1988, for full explanation). As a result, starting the 1994-1995 academic year, a placement test was administered to a total of approximately 3,000 students to measure their general proficiency in the language. Moreover, instead of requiring all students, regardless of their abilities, to take the course, students can test out of the courses by scoring on a placement test or similar proficiency tests administered at the beginning of the year. Other options can also be offered, such as studying abroad in a country where English is spoken.

With all the changes made, in January 1996, a survey of 2794 sophomores who were then currently taking the Lab course was conducted to find out whether they felt the ability grouping system facilitated their learning. 23% of the students strongly agreed. 43% of the

students agreed. 23% of the students felt there was no difference. 7% of the students disagreed. 2% of the students strongly disagreed. Compared to the study result in 1994, students in general showed more preference towards the ability grouping practice. This difference could be attributed to the curriculum changes that were made to the Lab course.

Similar to the findings at Soochow University, Huang's (1998) extensive study of the Freshman English programs for non-English majors at 17 universities in Taiwan found the majority of the subjects also favored placing students according to proficiency level. As most students felt positive about the ability grouping system, the practice of placing students based on their abilities has continued to this date at Soochow University, and students have been placed prior to their enrollment in the Listening Comprehension and Oral English course.

Table 2.1

Soochow freshmen's performances on the English portion of the Joint College Entrance Exam in the 1991-1992 academic year (Shown by Department)

Department/ Grade	above 60	50-59	40-49	below 39	Total No. of Students
Chinese	44 36.7%	32 26.7%	32 26.7%	12 10%	120 100%
History	23 38.3%	23 38.3%	10 16.7%	4 6.7%	60 100%
Philosophy	25 41.7%	22 36.7%	10 16.7%	3 5%	60 100%
Political Science	86 71.7%	23 19.2%	7 5.8%	4 3.3%	120 100%
Sociology	37 61.7%	18 30%	2 3.3%	3 5%	60 100%
Social Work	82 68.3%	28 23.3%	9 7.5%	1 0.8%	120 100%
Music	5 22.7%	9 40.9%	4 18.2%	4 18.2%	22 100%
Japanese	115 95.8%	5 4.2%	0 0%	0 0%	120 100%
German	58 96.7%	0 0%	2 3.3%	0 0%	60 100%
Physics	16 26.7%	20 33.3%	16 26.7%	8 13.3%	60 100%
Chemistry	21 35%	16 26.7%	12 20%	11 18.3%	60 100%
Micro-biology	9 15%	19 31.7%	11 18.3%	21 35%	60 100%
Psychology	19 38%	14 28%	9 18%	8 16%	50 100%
Total	540	229	124	79	972
Percentage	55.6%	23.5%	12.7%	8.1%	100%

Table 2.2

Question	Chi-Square	Mean	SD
1	2131.721 ***	2.9611	.8096
2	1420.152 ***	3.1348	.8572
3	2078.212 ***	3.4021	.7750
4	2245.111 ***	3.5739	.7841
5	875.993 ***	2.9747	1.0172
6	1907.823 ***	3.2773	.8041
7	770.667 ***	2.9100	1.0540
8	2264.446 ***	3.2592	.7401
9	2531.776 ***	3.2836	.7091
10	1843.710 ***	3.1836	.7855
11	1279.283 ***	3.2117	.9410
13	1014.780 ***	3.2754	.9894
14	2550.253 ***	3.5590	.8081
15	1156.745 ***	3.3944	.9702
16	356.493 ***	3.1633	1.1639
17	1108.472 ***	3.4640	.9968
18	879.755 ***	3.4374	1.0922

Note: * $p \leq .05$ ** $p \leq .01$ *** $p \leq .001$

Table 2.3

	A 1	A 2	A 3	A 4	A 5	Total
Question 1: The pace the teacher set	52	588	1311	385	100	2436
	2.1	24.1	53.8	15.8	4.1	100%
Question 2: Amount & difficulty level of supplementary materials	40	575	928	828	69	2440
	1.6	23.6	38.0	33.9	2.8	100%
Question 3: Teacher's evaluation	35	201	1078	977	127	2418
	1.4	8.3	44.6	40.4	5.3	100%
Question 4: Teacher's demand for my learning	23	213	737	1286	171	2430
	.9	8.8	30.3	52.9	7.0	100%
Question 5: Classroom discussions	162	709	708	758	100	2437
	6.6	29.1	29.1	31.1	4.1	100%
Question 6: Conducting group work	52	325	1008	995	57	2437
	2.1	13.3	41.4	40.8	2.3	100%
Question 7: Pressure in class	190	778	664	682	122	2436
	7.8	31.9	27.3	28.0	5.0	100%
Question 8: Effect of learning to listen	40	284	1187	894	32	2437
	1.6	11.7	48.7	36.7	1.3	100%
Question 9: Effect of learning to speak	42	212	1246	904	30	2434
	1.7	8.7	51.2	37.1	1.2	100%
Question 10: Grasp of contents of lessons	40	425	1069	869	30	2433
	1.6	17.5	43.9	35.7	1.2	100%
Question 11: Motivation in learning English	131	352	1006	795	150	2434
	5.4	14.5	41.3	32.7	6.2	100%
Question 13: Placed into right level	112	403	846	859	208	2428
	4.6	16.6	34.8	35.4	8.6	100%
Question 14: Teacher's teaching reflects abilities of Students	35	268	582	1409	132	2426
	1.4	11.0	24.0	58.1	5.4	100%
Question 15: More advantages than disadvantages	93	355	735	1001	238	2422
	3.8	14.7	30.3	41.3	9.8	100%
Question 16: Should have a standard test for placement	195	538	710	622	357	2422
	8.1	22.2	29.3	25.7	14.7	100%
Question 17: Different materials for different levels	97	326	673	1024	299	2419
	4.0	13.5	27.8	42.3	12.4	100%
Question 18: Prefer to be placed based on one's ability	136	337	534	975	332	2314
	5.9	14.6	23.1	42.1	14.3	100%

Note: A1(a strongly negative reaction), A2(a slightly negative reaction), A3(neutral), A4(a slightly positive reaction), A5(a strongly positive reaction) The most popular responses are in bold type.

Table 2.4

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L1-Low: 746/ 30.6% L2-Intermediate: 1100/45.2% L3-High: 590/ 24.2%

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Q	level	A1		A2		A3		A4		A5	
		Ss	%	Ss	%	Ss	%	Ss	%	Ss	%
1	L1	12	1.6	135	18.1	375	50.3	185	24.3	39	5.2
	L2	30	2.7	315	28.6	602	54.7	118	10.7	35	3.2
	L3	10	1.7	138	23.4	334	56.6	82	13.9	26	4.4
2	L1	8	1.1	124	16.6	184	24.7	400	53.6	30	4.0
	L2	24	2.2	306	27.7	483	43.8	266	24.1	24	2.2
	L3	8	1.4	145	24.5	261	44.2	162	27.4	15	2.5
3	L1	1	.1	28	3.8	250	33.9	415	56.2	44	6.0
	L2	18	1.6	97	8.8	529	48.1	396	36.0	59	5.4
	L3	16	2.8	76	13.1	299	51.5	166	28.6	24	4.1
4	L1	5	.7	46	6.2	168	22.6	421	56.5	105	14.1
	L2	14	1.3	108	9.8	376	34.2	550	50.0	51	4.6
	L3	4	.7	59	10.1	193	32.9	315	53.8	15	2.6
5	L1	18	2.4	188	25.2	224	30.0	282	37.8	35	4.7
	L2	92	8.4	348	31.6	302	27.4	317	28.8	42	3.8
	L3	52	8.8	173	29.4	182	30.9	159	27.0	23	3.9
6	L1	8	1.1	55	7.4	235	31.5	422	56.5	27	3.6
	L2	28	2.5	190	17.2	525	47.6	345	31.3	14	1.3
	L3	16	2.7	80	13.6	248	42.2	228	38.8	16	2.7
7	L1	15	2.0	91	12.2	152	20.3	437	58.4	53	7.1
	L2	94	8.5	393	35.7	356	32.4	209	19.0	48	4.4
	L3	81	13.8	294	50.0	156	26.5	36	6.1	21	3.6
8	L1	3	.4	36	4.8	342	45.7	354	47.3	13	1.7
	L2	27	2.5	162	14.7	588	53.5	309	28.1	13	1.2
	L3	10	1.7	86	14.6	257	43.6	231	39.2	6	1.0
9	L1	4	.5	22	2.9	366	49.1	341	45.7	13	1.7
	L2	29	2.6	112	10.2	586	53.3	359	32.7	13	1.2
	L3	9	1.5	78	13.2	294	49.9	204	34.6	4	.7
10	L1	4	.5	46	6.1	270	36.1	415	55.5	13	1.7
	L2	25	2.3	197	18.0	518	47.2	345	31.4	12	1.1
	L3	11	1.9	182	31.0	281	47.8	109	18.5	5	.9
11	L1	13	1.7	50	6.7	262	35.1	343	46.0	78	10.5
	L2	77	7.0	196	17.8	475	43.2	300	27.3	51	4.6
	L3	41	7.0	106	18.0	269	45.7	152	25.8	21	3.6
13	L1	7	.9	61	8.2	213	28.6	355	47.7	109	14.6
	L2	71	6.5	232	21.2	438	40.1	307	28.1	44	4.0
	L3	34	5.8	110	18.6	195	33.0	197	33.3	55	9.3

Note: A1(a strongly negative reaction), A2(a slightly negative reaction), A3(neutral), A4(a slightly positive reaction), A5(a strongly positive reaction)
The most popular responses are in bold type.

L1-Low: 746/ 30.6% L2-Intermediate: 1100/45.2% L3-High: 590/ 24.2%

Q	level	A1		A2		A3		A4		A5	
		Ss	%	Ss	%	Ss	%	Ss	%	Ss	%
14	L1	1	.1	53	7.1	135	18.2	496	66.8	57	7.7
	L2	20	1.8	135	12.3	317	29.0	575	52.6	47	4.3
	L3	14	2.4	80	13.6	130	22.0	338	57.3	28	4.7
15	L1	14	1.9	44	5.9	181	24.5	383	51.8	118	15.9
	L2	50	4.6	219	20.0	360	32.9	394	36.0	70	6.4
	L3	29	4.9	92	15.6	194	32.9	224	38.0	50	8.5
16	L1	74	10.0	172	23.3	242	32.8	173	23.4	77	10.4
	L2	86	7.9	243	22.2	301	27.5	288	26.3	176	16.1
	L3	35	5.9	123	20.8	167	28.3	161	27.3	104	17.6
17	L1	19	2.6	85	11.5	176	23.8	334	45.2	125	16.9
	L2	52	4.8	164	15.0	302	27.7	460	42.2	113	10.4
	L3	26	4.4	77	13.1	195	33.1	230	39.0	61	10.4
18	L1	11	1.5	41	5.7	127	17.7	359	50.1	179	25.0
	L2	76	7.3	202	19.3	275	26.3	397	37.9	97	9.3
	L3	49	8.9	94	17.1	132	24.0	219	39.8	56	10.2

Note: A1(a strongly negative reaction), A2(a slightly negative reaction), A3(neutral), A4(a slightly positive reaction), A5(a strongly positive reaction)

The most popular responses are in bold type.

Table 2.5

	F-Value
Question 1	33.7609 ***
Question 2	72.2369 ***
Question 3	64.6603 ***
Question 4	38.8834 ***
Question 5	21.6974 ***
Question 6	66.9967 ***
Question 7	297.8209 ***
Question 8	50.5067 ***
Question 9	34.6303 ***
Question 10	137.1830 ***
Question 11	88.2696 ***
Question 13	104.8216 ***
Question 14	32.6002 ***
Question 15	75.5569 ***
Question 16	11.1411 ***
Question 17	15.1547 ***
Question 18	104.9015 ***

Note: * $p \leq .05$ ** $p \leq .01$ *** $p \leq .001$

Table 2.6

	levels	Sig.	levels	Sig.	levels	Sig.
1	Low	***	Low	***	Intermediate	**
	Intermediate		High		High	
2	Low	***	Low	***	Intermediate	
	Intermediate		High		High	
3	Low	***	Low	***	Intermediate	***
	Intermediate		High		High	
4	Low	***	Low	***	Intermediate	
	Intermediate		High		High	
5	Low	***	Low	***	Intermediate	
	Intermediate		High		High	
6	Low	***	Low	***	Intermediate	**
	Intermediate		High		High	
7	Low	***	Low	***	Intermediate	***
	Intermediate		High		High	
8	Low	***	Low	***	Intermediate	**
	Intermediate		High		High	
9	Low	***	Low	***	Intermediate	
	Intermediate		High		High	
10	Low	***	Low	***	Intermediate	***
	Intermediate		High		High	
11	Low	***	Low	***	Intermediate	
	Intermediate		High		High	
13	Low	***	Low	***	Intermediate	***
	Intermediate		High		High	
14	Low	***	Low	***	Intermediate	
	Intermediate		High		High	
15	Low	***	Low	***	Intermediate	
	Intermediate		High		High	
16	Low	**	Low	***	Intermediate	
	Intermediate		High		High	
17	Low	***	Low	***	Intermediate	
	Intermediate		High		High	
18	Low	***	Low	***	Intermediate	
	Intermediate		High		High	

Note: * p<.05 ** p<.01 *** p<.001

Appendix 2.1

「英語聽講實習」程度分級上課問卷調查

請將您的選項（只能選一項）劃計記在答案卡上相對號碼的位置。
另外，答案卡請千萬不要摺疊。完成作答後，將題目卷與答案卡一併繳回。謝謝您!

- 一.能力分班後，老師授課速度(播放錄影帶、錄音帶的次數；對單字、片語的講解；做練習等等)_____我的程度。
1.非常不符合 2.不太符合 3.符合 4.較符合 5.非常符合
- 二.能力分班後，補充教材的份量及其難易程度_____我的需求。
1.非常不符合 2.不太符合 3.和以前一樣符合 4.比較符合 5.非常符合
- 三.能力分班後，老師的評分標準_____。
1.非常不客觀公平 2.不客觀公平 3.和以前一樣 4.比較客觀公平 5.非常客觀公平
- 四.能力分班後，老師對我在學習上的要求_____。
1.非常不合理 2.不合理 3.和以前一樣 4.合理 5.合理多了
- 五.能力分班後，因同學來自不同科系，所以上課討論_____。
1.非常無趣 2.較無趣 3.和以前一樣 4.較有趣 5.非常有趣
- 六.能力分班後，同學們程度相當，所以分組活動進行起來_____。
1.非常困難 2.較難 3.和以前一樣 4.較易 5.非常容易
- 七.能力分班後，同學們程度相當，上課時的心理壓力_____。
1.非常大 2.較大 3.和以前一樣 4.較小 5.非常小
- 八.能力分班後，我在英語聽力方面的學習效果_____。
1.非常差 2.較差 3.和以前一樣 4.較好 5.非常好
- 九.能力分班後，我在英語口語方面的學習效果_____。
1.非常差 2.較差 3.和以前一樣 4.較好 5.非常好

- 十.能力分班後，我對課程內容的瞭解上_____。
- 1.無法掌握 2.較難掌握 3.和以前一樣 4.較易掌握 5.完全掌握
- 十一.能力分班後，我學習英文的興趣_____。
- 1.大為降低 2.稍稍降低 3.跟以前一樣 4.稍稍提升 5.大為增加
- 十三.能力分班後，我被編入適合我程度的班級。
- 1.非常不同意 2.不同意 3.無意見 4.同意 5.非常同意
- 十四.能力分班後，老師的教學方式與以前相比，_____反映學生的程度。
- 1.非常不能 2.不能 3.一樣 4.較能 5.非常能
- 十五.我認為分級上課的優點多於缺點。
- 1.非常不同意 2.不同意 3.無意見 4.同意 5.非常同意
- 十六.我認為大二英聽分班應舉行統一考試，而非以一年級英聽成績為分班標準。
- 1.非常不同意 2.不同意 3.無意見 4.同意 5.非常同意
- 十七.我認為分班後各級應使用不同的教材。
- 1.非常不同意 2.不同意 3.無意見 4.同意 5.非常同意
- 十八.若我有選擇的機會，我寧願選擇能力分班教學。
- 1.非常不同意 2.不同意 3.無意見 4.同意 5.非常同意

The English translation of the survey questions

1. Since I have been placed into different levels, the pace my teacher has set has been _____ to my level. (i.e., the number of times the video and audio tapes are played, the explanation of new words, phrases, and expressions, and the exercises assigned)
a. much more inappropriate b. more inappropriate c. about as appropriate as before d. more appropriate e. much more appropriate.
2. Since I have been placed into different levels, the amount of supplementary materials and their level of difficulty has been _____.
a. much more inconsistent with my needs b. more inconsistent with my needs c. about the same as before d. more consistent with my needs e. much more consistent with my needs.
3. Since I have been placed into different levels, my teacher's evaluation of me has been _____
a. much more unfair b. more unfair c. about the same as before d. fairer e. much fairer.
4. Since I have been placed into different levels, my teacher has had demands for my learning that have been _____.
a. much more unreasonable b. more unreasonable c. about the same as before d. more reasonable e. much more reasonable.
5. Since I have been placed into different levels, the students from different departments have been mixed in the same classroom. Because of this, the discussions have been _____
a. much more boring b. more boring c. about the same as before d. more interesting e. much more interesting.
6. Since I have been placed into different levels, because the students have about the same level of ability, it has been _____ to work in groups.
a. much more difficult b. more difficult c. about as difficult as before d. easier e. much easier.
7. Since I have been placed into different levels, because the students have approximately the same level of ability, there has been _____ pressure in class.
a. much greater b. greater c. about the same amount of d. less e. much less.
8. Since being placed into different levels, I have learned _____ in terms of listening skills.
a. much less effectively b. less effectively c. about as effectively as before d. more effectively e. much more effectively.

9. Since being placed into different levels, I have learned _____ in terms of speaking skills.
a. much less effectively b. less effectively c. about as effectively as before d. more effectively e. much more effectively.
10. Since I have been placed into different levels, it has been _____ for me to understand the contents of the lessons.
a. much more difficult b. more difficult c. about as difficult as before d. easier e. much easier.
11. Since being placed into different levels, I feel I have been _____ to learn English.
a. much less motivated b. less motivated c. about as motivated as before d. more motivated e. much more motivated.
13. I feel I have been placed into the right level.
a. strongly disagree b. disagree c. unsure d. agree e. strongly agree.
14. Since I have been placed into different levels, my teacher's way of teaching has reflected the level of the students _____.
a. much more inaccurately b. more accurately c. about the same as before d. more accurately e. much more accurately.
15. I think there are more advantages than disadvantages to organizing classes based on students' abilities.
a. strongly disagree b. disagree c. unsure d. agree e. strongly agree.
16. I think placing students into different levels, there should be a standard test rather than placing students according to how they did in Lab Course I.
a. strongly disagree b. disagree c. unsure d. agree e. strongly agree.
17. I think there should be different course materials for different levels.
a. strongly disagree b. disagree c. unsure d. agree e. strongly agree.
18. If I had the choice, I would choose to be placed based on my abilities.
a. strongly disagree b. disagree c. unsure d. agree e. strongly agree.

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