

## ABILITY GROUPING AND INCLUSIVE PRACTICE IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING

**Katarína Vančíková, & Dana Hanesová**

*Faculty of Education, Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica (Slovakia)*

### Abstract

There is no doubt that inclusive education has become a global agenda, an important topic discussed at international level, and a political objective responding to the problems and challenges of the modern world, such as multiculturalism, ever growing social inequality across the world as well as within countries. Inclusive education has also become a generally accepted and closely monitored criteria for assessing the quality of educational systems around the globe. In the context of these facts, it is important to analyse in more depth the problems of segregation in education and ability grouping at the level of both the education system and the school. Researchers are trying to find an answer to the question whether ability grouping really brings benefits to all children or only to individuals. In the paper, the authors reflect on the extent to which ability grouping of children can be considered as a strategy for inclusive practice. Against the background of existing research findings, they analyse the possibilities and models of grouping children in the context of foreign language teaching in primary education. They conclude with a recommendation to strengthen differentiated teaching at the classroom level, respecting not only the level of foreign language proficiency but also other characteristics of the pupils. They also present the possibility of creating specialised programmes beyond the normal teaching time for children who are significantly ahead. At the same time, they point to the risks of creating elite classes or fixed elite groups in relation to the social and learning climate of the school and the broader concept of social inclusion. The authors' contribution responds to the trend of segregation in education in Slovakia and provides impulses for the development of inclusive school policy, culture, and practice.

**Keywords:** *Inclusive education, ability grouping, foreign language teaching, primary education, segregation in education.*

---

### 1. Introduction

The subject of our paper is ability grouping at the school level, where we can observe two types of this practice: 1) between-class grouping and 2) within-class grouping. We define ability grouping in agreement with J. A. Kulik (1992) as a practice that places learners into classrooms or small groups based on an initial assessment of their levels of readiness or ability. In the case of foreign language teaching or second language (L2) teaching, pupils are grouped based on their current level of L2 acquisition. This division is always hierarchical and encourages competitive rather than cooperative behaviour. This redistribution results in the emergence of groups that have their own attributes - high-performing learners (high-ability group, gifted children), low-performing learners (low-ability group) or group of learners who perform slightly behind the high group (middle ability group).

The creation of ability groups is most often done to achieve better academic results for pupils. The effects of this practice (not only on academic performance) are more often studied at the secondary or higher education level (see Khazaeezhad, Barati, & Jafarzadeh, 2012; Naddafi, Vosoughi, & Kowsary, 2019; Wu, Tsai, & Chiu, 2018; Liu, 2009; Kim, 2012). The results are not consistent. However, several suggest that this practice might not produce the expected results in terms of progress in language proficiency for all groups of learners but may have a negative impact on learners' self-esteem. We also base this theoretical analysis of ability grouping in L2 learning in primary education on the results of two second-order meta-analyses that mapped 100 years of research on ability grouping on K-12 pupils' academic achievement (Steenbergen-Hu, Makel, & Olszewski-Kubilius, 2016), as well as research that highlights the experience of this practice in early years and primary education (Webb-Williams, 2021; Roberts-Holmes, & Kitto, 2019; Gripton, 2020; Hallam et al., 2003). Drawing on numerous research studies and the developmental characteristics of primary school children, we seek to answer the questions:

1. Why does ability grouping in primary education need to be carefully considered?
2. How to do between-class grouping in foreign language teaching in a way that brings it closer to the principles of inclusion?

3. How to reinforce the principles of inclusive education when applying within-class grouping?

## 2. Why ability grouping in primary education should be carefully considered

Ability grouping is a commonly used practice in schools. It is used in all subjects but more often only in selected subjects - mainly in mathematics, first language, and foreign language classes. In particular, advocates of ability grouping argue for the need to tailor learning to the different ability levels of pupils to achieve the highest possible standards in each group (Kim, 2012). Working in a homogeneous group, they argue, allows the teacher to tailor tasks and learning materials to pupils' abilities, thus creating conditions for better use of pupils' intellectual resources (Sorensen and Hallinan, 1986).

Analyses of the supporting arguments suggest that many teachers practice ability grouping to respect the principle of equity, which refers to the school's role to fulfil each pupil's individual potential and to create opportunities for them to reach their personal best. However, in the context of the philosophy of inclusive education, the value of human dignity and tolerance should also be emphasised (Vančíková, Porubský, & Kosová, 2017). Respecting the value of human dignity means removing the categories of WE and THEY and eliminating the risk of any labels that co-create the child's image of their self-worth. Tolerance refers to the need to create a safe and respectful environment in which rivalry and competition are suppressed at the expense of peer learning and cooperation. Inclusive discourse rejects words such as *above average*, *problematic*, *below average*, and *underachieving*. In an inclusive school, there are no able and unable pupils, talented and untalented, successful or unsuccessful. In light of these value pillars, ability grouping seems problematic, especially in primary education, where we are working with children at a sensitive age of forming relationships with themselves and the world around them. The risks of ability grouping become more tangible when we consider the close relationship between children's developmental characteristics and the laws of social comparison.

Competitive behaviour is typical of younger school-age children. School ethnographic research has shown (Doubek, 2005; Bittnerová, 2005) that primary school children in Lower Elementary use a variety of competitive social and communicative strategies through which they try to consolidate their position in the group. These strategies are not infrequently hurtful in nature. It is common to see ridicule, gossiping, boasting, bragging and name-calling in children's groups at this age. School achievement is an important aspect of competition, especially in a group of girls. Thus, school failure inevitably affects children's social life at a time when they are forming stronger social bonds through which they form an image of their social attractiveness or unattractiveness. Acceptance and rejection of group membership (which may even be like an alliance) is, for the child at this age, the answer to the question of their worth. Their formal inclusion in a group directs them towards significant objects of social comparison.

Social comparisons have long been shown to be pivotal to self-evaluations (Webb-Williams, 2021). Many children are unable to maintain their positive self-image, which has spill over effects on their school performance because self-efficacy comes into play (see Schunk et al., 2008; Usher and Pajares, 2008), which is closely related to learners' expectancy-value beliefs "understood as the anticipatory predictions and forecasts that pupils make in an attempt to anticipate their actions, emotions and outcomes in a new educational situation" (Doménech-Betoret, Abellán-Roselló, & Gómez-Artiga, 2017, p. 9).

Self-efficacy is one of the most influential independent variables on learners' performance and achievement, which is also true in foreign language learning (Raooft, Hoon Tan, & Heng Chan, 2012; Jabbarifar, 2011). In doing so, it turns out that the personal experience of success is vital in foreign language learning and the so-called vicarious experience. "Learners should be provided with opportunities to observe their friends and classmates do tasks successfully; these opportunities help learners to foster positive beliefs about themselves" (ibid., p. 67). Meanwhile, the effectiveness of the teacher's work and the quality of classroom interactions play an essential role in stimulating learners to put effort into completing the assigned tasks (ibid.).

As Webb-Williams (2021) notes, researchers have identified that social comparisons can result in positive and negative effects depending on whether they are perceived as contrasts or assimilations (see Mussweiler et al., 2004). When a social comparison target is perceived as a contrast, one compares and focuses on the differences between oneself and the object being compared. In the case of assimilation, the comparison results in an attempt to get closer to the reference object (Webb-Williams, 2021). Contrast can cause a reduction in group identification and lower self-esteem in the low group as they compare themselves to so-called better groups (upward comparisons) (Smith et al., 1994). At the same time, these pupils lose the opportunity to compare themselves with better ones within their group and, therefore, the opportunity to learn and grow. Downward comparisons occur within them as part of assimilation. "Individuals focus on the similarities between themselves and the lower comparison target leading to increased anxiety and self-doubt" (Webb-Williams, 2021, p. 4). Increased anxiety and self-doubt may be a reason why there is a poorer learning climate, higher levels of resignation and less

progress in learning in groups (cf. Gamoran, 1992). Social comparisons are central to forming academic self-concepts, even in high-ability groups. Indeed, there are higher levels of rivalry and predation in these groups, which causes discomfort. Being ranked among the best does not necessarily enhance self-esteem and self-efficacy; on the contrary, it may cause feelings of inadequacy. Researchers of the so-called Big Fish Little Pond Effect (Marsh & Hau, 2003; Trautwein et al., 2009; Liem et al., 2013) repeatedly confirmed that "children evaluate themselves more favourably against low-ability others than comparing to higher performing others which can lead to negative feelings about their own ability" (Webb-Williams, 2021, p. 4).

### 3. How to make between-class ability grouping more inclusive

Despite the numerous research studies that point to the risks of between-class ability grouping, this practice is not infrequently used in foreign language teaching. Children arrive at school with varying levels of foreign language proficiency, depending on their language learning experiences in kindergarten but also the conditions of the family environment (bilingual families, travel, and the like), which leads school principals to decide to group pupils with the same level of language together, across classes. The pairing can also take the nature of cross-grade grouping. Even in this case, it is possible to make the practice more inclusive. Based on research and case studies, several recommendations can be made:

- *Keep educational pathways open to all.* Between-class grouping should not evolve into the practice of creating classes for gifted children or so-called levelling classes. If children are divided into ability groups as part of a foreign language lesson, they should return to their mainstream classes when the lesson is over.
- *Use between-class grouping in extracurricular after-school classes.* Pupils may not perceive ability grouping within standard classes as beneficial. A qualitative study by Y. Kim (2012) showed that in addition to uncertain outcomes, pupils feel discomfort at having to leave their class, their friends, find transfers chaotic, and their attitude towards the practice is rather negative. However, they have a positive perception of extra EFL classes. They seem to perceive grouping according to their level of foreign language proficiency in the afternoon as an opportunity rather than a threat; this is not only for lower-ability pupils but also gifted ones (Steenbergen-Hu, Makel, & Olszewski-Kubilius, 2016).
- *Reorganise groups.* The qualitative shift in ability grouping is contingent on the groups' openness. Pupils' performances may change during the year depending on various external or internal factors. Continuous monitoring of their current language skills will allow for group reorganisation, dampening feelings of unfair treatment in grouping (cf. Kim, 2012).
- *Ensure sufficient teacher rotation.* Pupils and teachers alike should not remain locked in groups. This recommendation can be built on findings confirming that teacher-centred education is more prevalent in low groups while learning is more active in other groups. One reason for this may also be the quality of the teacher. In the case of foreign language teaching, it is imperative to refrain from placing less experienced or even less linguistically skilled teachers in low-ability groups. The rule of 'best teachers to best and weakest to weakest' needs to be reconsidered.
- *Make sure your foreign language teaching curriculum is inclusive.* Any grouping of pupils according to ability only makes sense if the learning process is tailored to the needs of each group. Research confirms that the expectations of pupils, parents, and teachers are not always met in this regard, and pupils do not always see different learning practices in different groups (Kim, 2012). Each group needs a different type of learning materials and learning tasks. However, this does not mean that the expectations of pupils' learning progress should be differentiated. Low expectations from low groups can lead to the routinisation of children's expectations and limitations themselves (Roberts-Holmes, & Kitto, 2019).

### 4. How to make within-class ability grouping more inclusive

Within-class ability grouping can be seen as an inclusive practice in some circumstances. In this case, too, several recommendations can be formulated:

- *Inclusion in groupings must not be permanent.* Having children work in stable groups increases the risk of routinising ideas about the self and can lead to unwanted labelling. Experience with this practice has shown that some children have come to perceive the classroom in terms of the categories with which the groups have been labelled (Gripton, 2020). Thus, as noted above, ability grouping can negatively affect the social climate of the classroom and increase the risk of intergroup tension or favouritism or rejection of individuals. It is, therefore, crucial that groupings constantly be changing and that groupings should be subject to systematic ascertainment of the current level of development of those skills to be developed

in the classroom. Particularly in the case of foreign languages, each child may be dominant in a different area (reading, speaking and so on) or topic, thereby creating an opportunity for each child to experience a sense of achievement. Changing groups can also be done at regular intervals (e.g. every two weeks, see Hove & Phasha, 2022), thus reducing the risk of misplacing a pupil based on current problems that may not always be obvious (family situation, problems with a friend and the like).

- *Allow permeability.* Flexibility in grouping practice is also related to the design of the learning environment in each group. Therefore, it is imperative that a group that includes pupils with lower levels of knowledge or skills does not adopt a teacher-centred model that puts pupils in a passive role as task performers. Research suggests that children placed in low-ability groups are denied access "to the opportunities for self-regulation that formed part of the requirement for participation in the other groups and limited their opportunity to express understanding beyond the level ascribed to them" (Roberts-Holmes, & Kitto, 2019, p. 859).
- *Focus more on mastery learning than on pupil performance.* If within-class grouping practices are to be successful, teachers must differentiate instruction (Kulik, 1992; Kulik, 1995 as cited in Tieso, 2010). Teachers must adopt a new form of classroom management to create a learning environment sensitive to individual levels (Tieso, 2010). Managing work in diverse groups implies moving away from a textbook-dominated curriculum. Setting up a learning environment also requires well-developed diagnostic skills to help the teacher identify not only ability level but also learning style, the dominant type of intelligence, learning pace, and the like.
- *Respect factors other than children's abilities when setting up groups.* Children's experiences of ability grouping are varied. As demonstrated in C. Gripton's research (2020), some aspects of classroom life are compelling for individual children and others, on the other hand, do not even notice. For some children, relationships with friends are more critical, while others are more sensitive to the place of learning. The author, therefore, recommends that we include a wide range of factors, including friend relationships, when deciding on grouping. A prerequisite of inclusive grouping practice is not just to look at children's level of acquired knowledge or skills but to seek to understand their needs and to be sensitive to how they perceive their inclusion in the group.
- *Include the voice of the child.* The above recommendations are overarched by the principle of strengthening the child's voice in education. Children should be heard and directly involved in the power and responsibility of the decision-making process (Shier, 2001), including deciding in which group they will be placed.

## 5. Conclusion

The practice of ability grouping is not so rare in primary school foreign language teaching. Especially in countries where the principle of segregation blocks horizontal and vertical permeability in education, it is necessary to pay more attention to this phenomenon. Slovakia is one such country (Hall, et al., 2019). This paper aims to discuss the risks of this practice in primary education settings and to direct the readers' attention to strategies that can contribute to strengthening inclusive education in foreign language teaching.

### Acknowledgements

The contribution is the output of the research task within the Project KEGA Creation of a web portal for methodological support of foreign language teaching in primary education No. 011UMB-4/2022.

### References

- Bittnerová, D. (2005). Hra. In Pražská skupina školní etnografie, *Psychický vývoj dítěte od 1. do 5. třídy* (pp. 54-58). Praha: Karolinum.
- Doménech-Betoret, F., Abellán-Roselló, L., & Gómez-Artiga, A. (2017). Self-Efficacy, Satisfaction, and Academic Achievement: The Mediator Role of Students' Expectancy-Value Beliefs. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 8(X), 1-12.
- Doubek, D. (2005). Zábava a volný čas. In Pražská skupina školní etnografie, *Psychický vývoj dítěte od 1. do 5. třídy* (pp. 58-60). Praha: Karolinum.
- Gamoran, A. (1992). Synthesis of Research/Is Ability Grouping Equitable? *Educational Leadership*, 50(2), 11-17

- Gripton, K. (2020). Children's lived experiences of 'ability' in the Key Stage One classroom: life on the 'tricky table'. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 50(5), 559-578.
- Hall, R., Dráľ, P., Fridrichová, P., Hapalová, M., Lukáč, S., Miškolci, J., & Vančíková, K. (2019). *The Analysis of Findings about the State of the Education System in Slovakia*. Bratislava: MESA10., 2019. Retrieved 04 10, 2023, from: <https://en.todarozum.sk/analysis/>
- Hallam, S., Ireson, J., Lister, V., Chaudhury, I. A., & Davies, J. (2003). Ability Grouping Practices in the Primary School: A survey. *Educational Studies*, 29(1), 69-83.
- Hove, N., & Phasha, N. T. (2022). Teachers' perceptions of ability grouping in the face of policy on inclusion: A case of Johannesburg metropolitan mainstream primary schools. *South African Journal of Childhood Education*, 12(1), 1-9.
- Jabbarifar, T. (2011). The Importance Of Self-Efficacy And Foreign Language Learning In The 21st Century. *Journal of International Education Research*, 7(4), 117-126.
- Khazaenezhad, B., Barati, H., & Jafarzade, M. (2012). Ability Grouping as a Way towards More Academic Success in Teaching EFL - A Case of Iranian Undergraduates. *English Language Teaching*, 5(7), 81-89.
- Kim, Y. (2012). Implementing ability grouping in EFL contexts: perceptions of teachers and students. *Language Teaching Research*, 16(3), 289-315.
- Kulik J. A. (1992). *An analysis of the research on ability grouping: Historical and contemporary perspectives*. Storrs, CT: National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented.
- Liem, G. A. D., Marsh, H. W., Martin, A. J., McInerney, D. M., & Yeung, A. S. (2013). The big-fish-little-pond effect and a national policy of within-school ability streaming: Alternative frames of reference. *American Educational Research Journal*, 50(2), 326-370.
- Liu, H. J. (2009). Exploring Changes in Academic Self-Concept in Ability-Grouped English Classes. *Chang Gung Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 2(2), 411-432.
- Marsh, H. W., & Hau, K. T. (2003). Big-fish-little-pond effect on academic self-concept: A cross-cultural (26-country) test of the negative effects of academically selective schools. *American Psychologist*, 58(5), 364-376.
- Mussweiler, T., Ruter, K., & Epstude, K. (2004). The ups and downs of social comparison: mechanisms of assimilation and contrast. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 87(6), 832-844.
- Naddafi, F., Vosoughi, M., & Kowsary, M. A. (2019). Inspecting Mixed-Ability Group Challenges within Iranian EFL Public High Schools: An Exploratory Study. *International Journal of Foreign Language Teaching & Research*, 7(27), 125-145.
- Steenbergen-Hu, S., Makel, M. C., & Olszewski-Kubilius, P. (2016). What One Hundred Years of Research Says About the Effects of Ability Grouping and Acceleration on K-12 Students' Academic Achievement: Findings of Two Second-Order Meta-Analyses. *Review of Educational Research*, XX(X), 1-51.
- Raofi, S., Hoon Tan, B., & Heng Chan, S. (2012). Self-efficacy in Second/Foreign Language Learning Contexts. *English Language Teaching*, 5(11), 60-73.
- Roberts-Holmes, G. & Kitto, E. (2019). Early years ability grouping and the pedagogical constraints upon children's learning identities. *International Journal of Primary, Elementary and Early Years Education*, 47(7), 854-861.
- Schunk, D. H., Pintrich, P. R., & Meece, J. L. (2008). *Motivation in Education: Theory, Research and Applications*. Upper saddle River, NJ: Merrill-Prentice Hall.
- Shier, H. (2001). Pathways to participation: Openings, opportunities and obligations. *Children & Society*, 15(2), 107-117.
- Smith, H. J., Spears, R., and Oyen, M. (1994). The influence of personal deprivation and salience of group membership on justice evaluations. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 30, 277-299. doi: 10.1006/jesp.1994.1013
- Sorensen, H., & Hallinan, S. (1986). Effects of ability grouping on growth in academic achievement. *American Educational Research Journal*, 23(4), 519-542.
- Tieso, C. L. (2010). Ability grouping is not just tracking anymore. *Roeper Review*, 26(1), 29-36.
- Trautwein, U., Lüdtke, O., Marsh, H. W., & Nagy, G. (2009). Within-school social comparison. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 101(4), 853-866.
- Usher, E. L., & Pajares, F. (2008). Sources of self-efficacy in school: critical review of the literature and future directions. *Review of Educational Research*, 78(4), 751-796.
- Vančíková, K., Porubský, Š., & Kosová, B. (2017). *Inkluzívne vzdelávanie – dilemy a perspektívy*. Banská Bystrica: Belianum.
- Webb-Williams, J. L. (2021). Teachers' Use of Within-Class Ability Groups in the Primary Classroom: A Mixed Methods Study of Social Comparison. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12(X), 1-16.
- Wu, Ch., Tsai, Ch., & Chiu, Y. (2018). A Longitudinal Analysis of Ability Grouping with College EFL Learners. *TESOL International Journal*, 13(1), 20-32.