



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Lack of English proficiency among secondary school graduates is a significant issue in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) as English is the medium of instruction in federal universities. Due to this, one-third of the UAE government's university budget is spent on remedial courses that seek to develop the English-language skills of incoming university students (Salem & Swan, 2014).

This policy paper examines research conducted in 2014–2015 on the English language learning experiences of female students enrolled in the remedial Foundation program at a federal institute in Ras Al Khaimah, UAE. The results of the study indicate that the UAE's current class grouping policy at the secondary school level disadvantages lower-performing students and needs to be reexamined. This paper recommends that the current policy be revised to group students in English classes according to their English-language abilities.

# The Need for Ability Grouping in English Classes in Public Schools in the UAE

*Christine Howling*

## Introduction

Despite receiving twelve years of English-language instruction during their primary and secondary education, the majority of Emirati secondary school students graduate without sufficient English-language skills to be directly admitted to higher education programs, where the language of instruction is English (Gjovig, 2013). Even as the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has seen great improvements over the last decade in Common Educational Proficiency Assessment (CEPA) scores used by federal universities for admissions and placement, in 2013 80% of high school graduates scored below the required CEPA score needed to gain direct entry to university (Rjovig, 2013). To address the students' poor performance, a third of the 2014 federal budget for tertiary education was spent on remedial activities, such as the English Foundation year programs (Salem & Swan, 2014). Although the results of the UAE Ministry of Education 2020 strategy of educational reform (Ministry of Education, 2010) are yet to be seen, the reality of students' achievement levels means that further measures need to be taken.

Currently, the UAE groups students at the secondary school level by their overall performance and not by their aptitude in each specific subject. This is a process known as tracking or streaming, which has led to classes comprised of students with varying ability levels. This policy paper looks at the impact of the UAE's current student grouping policy on English-language acquisition and analyzes its role in student preparedness for university. It begins with an overview of the student class grouping policy debate before discussing the findings of a recent study on the English-language learning experiences of female university Foundation students at a federal institute in Ras Al Khaimah, UAE. The study's findings support revising the current class grouping policy to a tiered approach to structuring English-language classes in pre-tertiary education. They also highlight issues relevant to successful implementation of such a policy, which could lead to a greater number of students who are proficient in English when they graduate from secondary school. This would reduce the need for Foundation programs and would support the Ministry of Education's revised plan<sup>1</sup> to eliminate the need for Foundations by 2021 (Pennington, 2017).

<sup>1</sup> The previous Ministry of Education plan was to eliminate the need for Foundation programs by 2018 (Salem & Swan, 2014).

## Student Grouping Methods

The current pre-tertiary education policy in the UAE involves tracking, a system wherein students are divided by their overall performance and exam scores. Students in UAE primary and secondary schools are placed into either an "advanced" or "common" track. Both of these systems mean that the students are not assigned to specific courses based on their aptitudes in those subjects. However, Mustafa's (2002) study of schoolteachers, graduates, and professors in the UAE noted many challenges to teaching and learning in local schools, including mixed-ability class grouping. These challenges led to negative Student Attitudes and motivation. The literature shows that grouping students in a different way may help to improve student motivation and progress.

Other methods for grouping students with different ability levels include "grouping" or "setting," and "within-class grouping." While the efficacy and impact of the methods are highly debated by scholars, practitioners, and administrators, each method similarly aims to increase the uniformity of ability levels among students in a particular class setting so that the instructor can more effectively match content and instruction to the students' levels of academic ability (Sukhnandan & Lee, 1998). Tracking and setting aim to increase the achievement levels of students by placing them in class settings according to their ability levels, with tracking focusing on overall ability and setting focusing on subject-specific proficiency. In contrast, within-class grouping seeks to divide a class of students with different proficiency levels into smaller groups of students who have similar ability levels (Lou et al., 1996). Table 1 outlines the advantages and disadvantages of each method.

**Table 1. Advantages and Disadvantages of Grouping Methods**

Advantages	Disadvantages
<b>Tracking</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Easy to implement.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tends to benefit only high achievers at the secondary level (Sukhnandan &amp; Lee, 1998; Gamoran, 2002; Callahan, 2005).</li> <li>• Can have a negative psychological impact on low-level students (Sukhnandan &amp; Lee, 1998; Ireson et al., 1999; MacIntyre &amp; Ireson, 2002).</li> <li>• Students may be misplaced in some subject-specific classes that are not appropriate to their level (see Pishghadam &amp; Khajavy, 2013, for a review).</li> </ul>
<b>Grouping/Setting</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reduces the negative psychological impact of placement on students (Slavin, 1987).</li> <li>• Students more likely to be placed in a class appropriate to their ability levels (Gamoran, 2002).</li> <li>• Has a positive effect on the achievement levels of students with of low-, medium-, and high-ability levels (Slavin, 1987).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Success depends on each school's resources, namely the number of specialist staff employed (Sukhnandan &amp; Lee, 1998).</li> </ul>
<b>Homogenous Within-Class Grouping</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tends to be the most beneficial for learners of all levels (Sukhnandan &amp; Lee, 1998).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Class size determines the efficacy of the groupings (Lou et al., 1996; Sukhnandan &amp; Lee, 1998).</li> <li>• Puts extra pressure on teachers, requires differentiated instruction adapted to the needs of each group (Lou et al., 1996).</li> <li>• Reduces the instructional and interactional time pupils have with teachers (Sukhnandan &amp; Lee, 1998).</li> </ul>

When implemented properly, grouping together students with similar abilities helps to maintain interest and incentive as well as reduce the likelihood of failure (Slavin, 1990), thereby increasing students' self-confidence and motivation. For examples, Newfield and McElyea's study (1983) of 58,000 high school students concluded that ability grouping led to improved achievement and attitude toward subject areas for both regular and remedial classes (as cited in Yildiran & Tugal, 2004). Furthermore, a study by Khazaenezhad et al. (2012) of 320 English-language students found that students in homogenous ability groups performed significantly better than those in random groupings. These studies highlight the importance of properly researching, designing, and implementing class-grouping methods for student success, with their results being particularly relevant for both remedial and English-language courses.

## Methodology

This mixed methods study aims to identify the differences between the pre-tertiary English-learning experiences of high and low-ability students as well as to identify any significant differences between these students' English-learning experiences during primary, secondary and tertiary education. The participants consisted of 34 students who responded to two questionnaires. Five Pre-Foundation level university students agreed to more in-depth one-on-one interviews that focused on the differences among student experiences as determined by their ability levels.

All participants were female students who entered the Foundation program of a federal institute in Ras Al Khaimah, UAE in August 2014. The Foundation program is comprised of four levels of English instruction, based on Student Ability. At the time of the study, however, two levels of instruction, known as Pre-Foundation courses,

had been added, creating a six-tiered system within the Foundation program. This study surveyed students from the highest and lowest levels of the Foundation program. Table 2 summarizes the 34 participants' language levels. All participants had a minimum of 12 years of English instruction through their primary and secondary schooling.

## Findings

### Differences Between High and Low-Level Students' Experiences in Pre-Tertiary English Classrooms

Overall, the surveyed students with a low level of English ability characterized their experiences in pre-tertiary education English classes more negatively than did students with a higher level of English ability. Furthermore, akin to Mustafa's (2002) findings about schools in the UAE, all interviewees spoke negatively of the mixed-ability classes to which they were assigned in primary and secondary school, highlighting specific feelings and instances that they found harmful.

As a result of their placements in mixed-ability classes, some of the low-level students reported feeling isolated, incompetent, and neglected. These feelings were compounded as the students experienced difficulties while they perceived that their classmates did not struggle academically. For example, one participant reported feeling that she "was the only one that couldn't get it, that couldn't understand (Student A)." The students with greater English-language ability were also reported as receiving more attention from instructors, which made the lower-level students feel neglected. As one participant explained, "In school sometimes they will have, you know, stronger students, so they will get all the attention (Student A)."

**Table 2. Participants' English-Language Ability**

Student Ability Level			Number of Students Surveyed
University Level	CEPA Score	CEFR	
Pre-Foundation 1	130-139	A1	10
Pre-Foundation 2	140-149	A1+	12
Foundation Level 4	170-179	B1/B2+	12
<b>Total</b>			<b>34</b>

Note. CEFR = The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages

The low-level students also reported feeling more anxious than their higher-level peers at a statistically significant rate ( $p = .007$ ). The students were uncomfortable giving answers in class because they feared humiliation and negative feedback. For instance, one student reported that when she got something wrong the teacher became angry, while another said, "The students, for example, they make fun of what [I] said and they make comments," and that she was "afraid of what [the other students] would think (Student B)."

## Differences Between Students' English-Learning Experiences During Pre-Tertiary and Tertiary Education

Students' experiences differed significantly between their Foundation courses and their pre-tertiary instruction. Overall, the students reported having more positive experiences in their Foundations courses and that they even enjoy their English instruction more than in their pre-tertiary classes.

The Pre-Foundation students interviewed described several advantages to being placed in a class in Foundation that was suitable for their ability level. First, students reported that the content of their respective Foundation courses was appropriate, stating that they learned the basics in a manner that they could understand. This contrasts to their reports of feeling overwhelmed with the courses' level of difficulty in their pre-tertiary English classes. Students also reported that Foundation teachers took them step-by-step while trying to scaffold and support learning so that they could understand grammar and vocabulary.

The second benefit of placing students in a class with peers of a similar level is that students felt more comfortable and confident in the classroom. One student reported that, in relation to her classmates in her Foundation class, she felt "as though we are all the same, so [I am] more confident giving answers in class (Student A)." Students did not report feeling isolated or incompetent, stating they felt as though they could "cope with" their classmates.

The study's results support Deci and Ryan's (1985) self-determination theory and Bandura's (1977) theory of self-efficacy, described in more detail in the next section, as students reported feeling more motivated after seeing progress in their abilities. According to one student, she did not feel as though she was wasting her time attending the Foundation class. In the program, she felt she was in an environment in which she could understand and communicate, unlike in primary and secondary school. Another student reported that she was happy because she felt as though she was learning

more in Foundation than she had during her pre-tertiary studies. Perceiving progress implies that students' beliefs about their self-confidence have improved as their psychological need for competence has been met; as a result, their motivation to perform in their courses should also improve (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Deci & Ryan, 2002). These perspectives may also explain the reported increase in student enjoyment at a statistically significant rate ( $p = .001$ ).

However, the three students with the lowest English abilities did not experience the same degree of improvement as the other students. They reported being uncomfortable giving answers in class as they were worried they would be criticized by their teacher and peers, with one student saying, "[I'm] uncomfortable, because [I] think [my] answer will be wrong (Student B)." These feelings may have stemmed in part from a negative experience with a teacher in primary school, which the student highlighted during her interview. This experience is still affecting her self-confidence 10 years later.

Her account exemplifies how students of low proficiency tend to harbor negative feelings stemming from their learning experiences for longer than high proficiency students do (Falout & Maruyama, 2004). It shows the extent to which demeaning evaluations and negative feedback can affect an individual's motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000) and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986). Such negative interactions seem particularly harmful for students who have low levels of proficiency. These students may need more time and additional academic and personal support in order to experience the same benefits as the other low-level students in the Foundation program.

## Implications for English-Language Learners

The results of the study indicate that the UAE's current class grouping policy at the secondary school level disadvantages lower-performing students. These findings are supported by the literature, which presents theories that consider the relevant factors the participants highlight as negatively affecting their English-language learning experiences.

Most motivation theories agree that the feeling of making progress and being able to cope with classroom content affect a student's self-efficacy or self-confidence, which in turn affects their motivation. According to Bandura's (1986) socio-cognitive theory of self-efficacy, the most important factor is performance accomplishments or "mastery experience." Performance

accomplishments imply that, as learners experience success and achievement through their efforts, their belief in self-efficacy will increase. This has important consequences for learning in the classroom, as Bandura theorized that an individual's beliefs about personal competence (1) determine the effort he or she will expend on an activity and (2) determine the degree of perseverance and resilience he or she will demonstrate when faced with difficulty (1977, 1986). Ryan and Deci (2002) assert that an environment that supports an individual's experience of competence and autonomy, and is related to their needs promotes the most voluntary and substantive form of motivation and engagement in activities—including enhanced performance and persistence.

When students are placed in classes that demand engagement beyond their abilities, their psychological need for competence through achievement will not be met. In addition, students will often compare themselves to peers within their classes, meaning that students with low English-language proficiency will likely feel inadequate in classes of mixed ability levels (Bandura, 1977; Bandura, 1986; Marsh, 2005) as the results of this study show. The combination of these two factors results in a decrease in learners' beliefs in their self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986). Such beliefs can be self-perpetuating because students' anticipations of failure and anxiety cause increased stress, resulting in the inadequate performance that they fear (Pajares, 1997).

Failure may have a greater impact on students with low levels of proficiency who tend to respond with self-denigration (Falout et al., 2009). This effect can further reduce students' self-efficacy beliefs and increase their anxiety levels (Legault et al., 2006). Systemic failure can be detrimental for self-efficacy and lead to a lack of motivation, whereby students lose their drive to learn a language and may become disruptive in class. This dynamic creates a difficult environment for the language instructor and may demotivate other students, further complicating the learning environment in mixed-ability classrooms.

The questionnaire results and interview comments suggest that the psychological need for competence does not appear to have been met for the students with low ability levels before these individuals entered tertiary education. However, once placed in a class appropriate to their ability levels and receiving suitable instruction and support in the Foundation program, the students gained confidence and started to enjoy learning English. Therefore, there seems to be a need to reassess the ways in which language classes in pre-tertiary education are formed in order to allow low-level

students to strengthen their self-efficacy and make more progress in learning English before they graduate high school.

## Policy Recommendations

Although a small study, the findings presented combined with the existing literature make a strong case for using a grouped approach to create English language classes in the pre-tertiary educational system. Grouping English classes around ability levels would mitigate many of the challenges low-performing students currently experience under the existing track-based approach. The change would also enable teachers to teach more effectively, possibly increasing the number of students who gain direct entry into university and improving their performance once they are there. Additionally, a grouped approach would likely improve the confidence and motivation of lower ability students, enabling them to make more academic progress and graduate with higher levels of proficiency. This in turn would reduce the need for lower levels of remediation within Foundation programs.

To implement a successful grouping approach based on students' language abilities, policymakers should consider several additional factors:

### Supportive Environment

Students require a supportive environment in order to learn effectively (Callahan, 2005). However, several studies have found conditions in low-level classes lacking in support for learners (Oakes, 1985, and Valenzuela, 1999, as cited in Callahan, 2005). Students in this study as well as in Mustafa's (2002) study of UAE schools also reported this as a problem. Creating classes of students with comparable language abilities would potentially reduce the fear of negative peer criticism.

### Motivated Teachers

For low-level classes to function effectively, teachers must be motivated to teach low-achieving students (Gamoran & Weinstein, 1998) and maintain high expectations of what those students can achieve (Gamoran, 2002). Eccles and Roeser (2009, p. 406) maintain that "when teachers hold high general expectations for Student Achievement" and "students perceive these expectations, students learn more" and "experience a greater sense of self-worth and competence as learners." This process would increase student's self-efficacy and encourage their perseverance when they face difficulty (Bandura, 1986).



## Distribution of Qualified Teachers

A significant problem found with grouping and streaming is that less experienced and less qualified teachers tend to be assigned to classes with students who have relatively low ability levels (Sukhnandan & Lee, 1998). This arrangement produces poorer quality instruction for students in lower levels and magnifies the achievement disparity between high- and low-performing sets of students. Therefore, it is important for school systems not to systemically assign less qualified teachers to lower-performing course sections. Although the linguistic content of low-level English-language courses may seem less challenging than the content of high-level courses, the skills teachers need to teach lower-level classes are not.

## Quality Instructional Content

The content of instruction is also important. Several studies have found that in high-ability classes, teachers taught higher-order skills such as critical thinking, concept acquisition, and independence; in low-ability classes, teachers focused on lower-order skills such as memorization (Hacker et al., 1991, as cited in Sukhnandan & Lee, 1998; Callahan, 2005; Gamoran, 2009). This differentiation increases achievement inequality as it inhibits students in low-level classes from acquiring higher-order skills.

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