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Perceptions of Classroom Learning Experiences: High and Low-Proficiency First-Year Students in Streamed and Mixed-Ability Classes

Brian McMillan

Abstract

Many foreign and second language programs place students in streamed classes according to their level of proficiency in the target language in order to facilitate learning and teaching. Creating relatively homogeneous classes can allow teachers to better tailor lessons to the ability level of the students in each class (Ansalone, 2003; Liu, Wang & Parkins, 2005). In mixed-ability classes, on the other hand, higher-ability learners have the opportunity to assist their lower-ability peers, which can produce learning gains for all. It is also argued that lower-proficiency learners will feel less stigmatized in mixed-ability classes. While numerous studies have examined the effects of streaming in various other contexts, few studies have been conducted to date within the context of L2 learning. Following a review of the relevant literature, this paper reports the results of a survey exploring the perceptions of both higher and lower-proficiency first-year students regarding their learning experiences in streamed and mixed-ability classes. A number of topical issues connected to teaching and learning in streamed and mixed-ability classes, as well as possible directions for future research, are also discussed.

Introduction

Aída asserts that “a basic educational principle is that new learning should be based on prior experiences and existing skills” (2000, p. 3). With this basic educational principle in mind, many foreign and second language programs place stu-

dents in streamed classes according to their level of proficiency in the target language in order to facilitate learning and teaching. Jones and Harris define streaming as “the practice of dividing up a group of students on the basis of previous educational experience or achievement, and subjecting the different subgroups to different educational experiences” (1990, p. 21). Creating relatively homogeneous classes can allow teachers to better tailor lessons to the proficiency level of the students in each class (Ansalone, 2003; Liu, Wang & Parkins, 2005). On the other hand, advocates of mixed-proficiency classes believe that teachers can, even given a wide range of ability levels, meet the needs of each learner by providing differentiated instruction (Burriss & Garrity, 2008), and that students will also be supported in their learning through peer tutoring. It is also argued that streaming may have a stigmatizing effect on lower-proficiency learners, potentially causing them social or emotional harm and leading to demotivation.

This paper will first review previous research covering a range of issues related to the learning experiences of higher and lower-ability learners. Due to the fact that much of the previous research in this area has been conducted in contexts other than that of L2 learning, we will then consider in more detail the findings of two studies which report on the implementation of streaming systems in EFL programs at Japanese universities. The main focus of this paper is a report of the findings of a survey of first-year students in the English department (ED) and Intercultural Communication (IC) department at KUIS. The questionnaire data for this study was collected during the 2008-2009 academic year, at which time first-year ED classes were streamed, whereas the IC students were placed in mixed-ability classes.

In the context of the present study, the terms “ability” and “proficiency” are used synonymously. That is to say, the term “ability” does not refer to a learner’s *ability to learn the L2, but rather their present level of ability or proficiency in the target language*. This study takes the view that all learners, given adequate time and opportunity to learn, are capable of achieving high levels of proficiency. Following the definition proposed by Jones and Harris (1990), “ability” will thus be used here to refer to learners’ “previous educational experience or achievement” in English.

Literature Review

Socio-affective effects

All groups, whether streamed or multi-level, first go through a “forming” stage during which learners try to find their place in the class “hierarchy” (Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003, p. 14). EFL learners are often expected to use the target language during this forming stage; however, they may fear making mistakes and being made fun of, or may feel lost when they don’t understand what is said by the teacher or their classmates. Learners often compare themselves to their peers, “many of whom appear to be more competent and proficient” (Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003, p. 15). We might expect, then, that this forming stage would be more stressful for lower-proficiency learners in mixed-ability classes who find themselves working alongside highly proficient classmates. Yet at the same time, stronger students may worry about performing a task too well and making others feel bad or being viewed as a show-off. Ryan (2008) reports that Japanese university students are always trying to “read the air” of the classroom, and peer pressure may lead higher-proficiency learners to conceal their more advanced skills for fear of being called names such as “geek” or “nerd” (Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003, p. 36). For

example, students may affect a strong L1 accent, since speaking like a native speaker may be viewed, consciously or unconsciously, as a sign of no longer belonging to one's L1 peer group (Aída, 2000; Lefkowitz & Hedgcock, 2002; see also Mills, Swain & Weschler, 1996 at the end of this section).

One argument often made against streaming is that students placed in lower-ability classes may develop an inferiority complex, which may lead to demotivation. In fact, the findings from a host of studies have been mixed. Liu, Wang and Parkins (2005) provide a list of studies which have shown streaming to have a negative effect on students' self-esteem and academic self-concept (e.g., Marsh et al, 1995; Noland & Taylor, 1986), others which indicate a negligible effect (e.g., Kulik, 1985; Kulik & Kulik, 1992), and still other studies which have shown that streaming can have a positive effect on students' academic self-image (e.g., Yehezkel & Resh, 1984).

Liu, Wang and Parkins (2005) suggest that for streamed students who understand the streaming process, across-group comparisons may be strongest immediately after placement, since they do not yet have any basis for comparing themselves with their classmates. Thus students placed in lower-ability streamed classes may initially form a more negative academic self-concept. However, Liu, Wang and Parkins suggest that, over time, students are more likely to compare themselves with their own classmates. In their study, while lower-ability students had a more negative academic self-concept immediately after streaming, they were found to have a more positive academic self-concept than their higher-ability counterparts three years later. Liu, Wang and Parkins suggest that this reversal might be attrib-

utable to a more competitive classroom environment, or less personal student-teacher relationships in higher streams, while students in lower streams may have more opportunity to experience success, consistent with the big-fish-little-pond (BFLP) effect.

A long list of studies have examined the BFLP effect (see Marsh & Craven, 2002 for a review), which predicts that students in higher-achieving schools or programs will tend to develop lower academic self-concepts as they compare themselves with more able peers. However, Marsh (1987) notes that the BFLP effect might be smaller for older students, as they are better able to assess their own skills in comparison with the performances of their classmates and also have a broader frame of reference.

Dai and Rinn (2008) point out that BFLP studies have overlooked the influence of culture and local contexts, as well as the active role played by the learner in making social comparisons. For example, students who do not compare favorably with others may employ coping strategies, such as making fewer comparisons or shifting their comparison targets. Upward social comparisons can also have positive effects if the learners identify with, or are inspired by, more-able peers and believe that they can catch up through their own efforts (see Murphey & Arao, 2001; Dörnyei, 2001).

Learner-learner interaction

Matthews-Aydinli and Van Horne (2006, p. 1) suggest that in multi-level classes, “those with limited proficiency have an opportunity to interact with more proficient

English speakers, and advanced learners benefit by using their English skills to help lower level students negotiate meaning.” Several studies support the idea that different-proficiency pairs can collaborate effectively. Storch (2001) analyzed the interaction patterns of three pairs of students and found that the most collaborative pair was also the pair with the greatest proficiency difference (low and upper intermediate), while the pair which was closest in terms of proficiency (low and intermediate) interacted in a non-collaborative fashion. Yule and Macdonald (1990) found that different-proficiency pairs were more collaborative when the lower-proficiency partner was assigned a more dominant task role. Watanabe (2008) found that two of three intermediate-level adult Japanese English language learners preferred working with a higher-proficiency partner rather than with a lower-proficiency peer. As might be expected, patterns of interaction were more collaborative when the three worked with their preferred partners. The two participants who felt negatively about interacting with their lower-proficiency partner said it was because their partner did not share many ideas. Watanabe concludes that all three participants “expressed their preference for working with the peer who ‘shared many ideas,’ *regardless of their partner’s proficiency level*” (p. 627, italics in original). She further adds that “proficiency differences do not seem to be the decisive factor in affecting the nature of peer assistance” (p. 627); however, this is perhaps an overgeneralization, based on data from just a few students. Furthermore, it stands to reason that a learner’s ability to cooperate and contribute meaningfully while working on a collaborative task is closely tied to proficiency (see Lesser, 2004) – *especially if learners are expected to use the target language exclusively.*

In fact, findings from a number of recent studies support the idea that judicious L1 use can act as a conversational lubricant, actually improving target language comprehension and production (Butzkamm, 1998) – especially for lower-proficiency learners dealing with content that is cognitively complex (Jacobs & Goh, 2007; Swain & Lapkin, 2000; Swain *et al.*, 2009; see also van Lier, 2006).

A number of other studies have found that different-proficiency learners do not always collaborate effectively. Cooperative learning can hold many benefits for students in both streamed and mixed-ability classes; however, the teacher cannot simply assume that effective collaboration will take place. Collaborative skills should be taught in order to maximize the benefits of cooperative learning in support of L2 acquisition (Gobel, 2006; Jacob, *et al.*, 1996; Lim & Jacobs, 2001). Matthews-Aydinli and Van Horne also recognize that peer-assistance does not always happen automatically: “Students with lower language skills and those who are generally less vocal may naturally segregate themselves from the more outspoken or advanced-level students. This prevents the quiet or lower level students from getting the extra help they may need” (2006, p. 2; see also MacIntyre *et al.*, 1998 on willingness to communicate). Even when teachers arrange pairs or groups to promote cross-level peer assistance, learners may “pursue their own agenda, which (...) might be at odds with those of the teacher or of other learner participants” (Chavez, 2007, p. 164; see also Storch, 2007). In classroom-based studies, Foster (1998), Foster and Ohta (2005), and Eckerth (2009) all found relatively few examples of negotiation for meaning in learner-learner interaction. This may be partly due to the fact that, as Foster suggests, some students may perceive pair or group work as a “light-hearted and informal part of class” (1998, p. 19). Students

may also pretend they have understood their partner or simply let communication problems pass rather than engage in negotiation which can be “painstaking, frustrating, and face-threatening” (Eckerth, 2009, p. 121; see also Mills, Swain & Weschler, 1996). Kowal and Swain (1994; 1997) found that two students with very different proficiency levels (low and upper-middle) interacted according to a dominant/passive pattern, with the stronger student doing most of the work while the weaker student was too intimidated to make any real contribution.

Differentiated instruction and student achievement

Streaming in general education – also known as “tracking” in the U.S. – has often resulted in discrimination against minority students and students from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Burris and Garrity (2008) affirm that all students should have access to a rich and challenging curriculum. They explain how the detracking reform in the Rockville Centre School District in New York resulted in the near-elimination of the district’s achievement gap between minority and majority students. For example, at one high school, prior to detracking in 2000, only 32% of minority students were awarded an honors diploma; by 2005, after detracking, that rate jumped to 92% in mixed-ability classes. Burris & Garrity assert that “detracking (...) can be clearly beneficial, especially for students who were underserved in low-track classes” (p. 13-14). The authors emphasize that teachers should adopt a constructivist, student-centered approach, using *differentiated instruction* to ensure that *all* students are appropriately challenged. Teachers can differentiate instruction by adjusting the content, the learning process or the final product, thus offering a range of activities or variations on the same activity (see Richards & Omdal, 2007; Tomlinson, 2001). Burris and Garrity further stress that

detracking is a multi-year process which, to be successful, requires intensive and on-going professional development.

The difficulty of implementing differentiated or individualized instruction is documented in a study by Hacker & Rowe (1993; see also Hallam & Ireson, 2005), who examined changes in classroom learning experiences when secondary level science classes were detracked. When the change was made from streamed to mixed-ability classes, the nine teacher-participants were found to be largely unsuccessful in providing personalized learning activities, despite substantial in-service training. In mixed-ability classes, the teachers tended to “teach to the middle” (p. 230) and classroom interactions were found to be of lesser quality for both low and high-ability students (particularly for high-ability students).

A number of studies have shown streaming to be effective in reducing secondary school drop-out rates (see Liu, Wang & Parkins, 2005). Other studies have found that high-ability students in streamed classes attain higher levels of achievement (Kulik & Kulik, 1992; Lejk, Wyvill & Farrow, 1999), and that their achievement may drop when lower-ability students are integrated into the same class (Jones & Harris, 1990).

Streaming in EFL programs at Japanese universities

Because many of the above studies were conducted in other educational contexts, some findings may or may not be applicable to the L2 learning environment at KUIS. A search of the literature revealed only two studies which reported on reactions to streaming from EFL students and teachers in Japan. In the most recent

of these, Gillis-Furutaka and Sakurai (2002) surveyed English learners and teachers regarding the implementation of a standardized curriculum and streaming system in the English department at Kyoto Sangyo University. In their paper, Gillis-Furutaka and Sakurai offer no rationale for implementing their streaming system, other than to say: “Now that all students were following the same courses, *it made sense to try to place them in classes of roughly the same level*” (p. 117, italics added). It seems that the researchers felt that the reasoning behind the adoption of a streaming system was obvious. While a number of areas needing improvement were identified, most students and teachers viewed the new streaming system positively. Gillis-Furutaka and Sakurai provide the following summary of the teacher questionnaire responses:

Generally speaking, [the instructors] were in favour of streaming from the point of view of lesson planning and preparation as well as teaching. With students of a variety of levels in the same class, instructors often have to prepare two or more lessons to be carried out simultaneously if they are to meet the needs of all the students in their class. Some instructors prefer a little variety of level in a class so that the stronger students can be called on to assist or explain to the weaker students (p. 118).

Gillis-Furutaka and Sakurai also surveyed students. Overall, students agreed with the practice of streaming and appreciated the chance to study with students of the same level. However, it is difficult to interpret some of the reported results: 34.9% said that being with *students they could work well with* was the “most important” factor to them in their English lessons, while being with students of the same level of ability or motivation was most important for 18.7% and 19.9% respectively. Similar

to the point made earlier about Watanabe's (2008) findings, there could be a connection between "level of ability" and "ability to work well with" (e.g., "I can work well with this person because they understand me and are able to express their ideas clearly in English"). Furthermore, the format of this question leaves something to be desired as learners might have thought that "level of ability" was very important, but their response was limited to selecting only one "most important" factor.

In an earlier study, Mills, Swain and Weschler (1996) reported on the implementation of a placement system at Kyoritsu Women's University used to stream approximately 300 first-year students into three broad levels of proficiency. In the years before streaming began, teachers of mixed-ability classes had been faced with a "dilemma" (p. 1):

Teach to the level of the more proficient students and the rest of the class would feel lost and frustrated; teach to the lower-level students, and the others would feel unchallenged and bored; teach to the middle, and nobody would be satisfied.

Interestingly, there is no mention of implementing differentiated instruction as a way of overcoming this dilemma; again, as in Gillis-Furutaka and Sakurai's (2002) report, streaming is presented as an obvious solution.

Mills, Swain and Weschler (1996) also contend that participation and the class dynamic may suffer in mixed-ability classes, particularly in Japanese contexts where it has often been noted that, "the nail that sticks out gets hammered down" (p. 1):

Stronger students may feel hesitant to display their knowledge in front of the group for fear of appearing egotistical while the poorer students may be reluctant to display their ignorance for fear of appearing stupid.

Mills, Swain and Weschler (1996) are also somewhat skeptical of the benefits which may be gained through different-proficiency peers assisting each other in mixed-ability classes (p.2):

While this logic may hold in theory, our experience has been that especially in Japan, students in practice simply don't interact that way, perhaps because of the greater cultural value placed on saving face. And even if they did actively seek a form of peer instruction, there is still enough variation left within [streamed classes] to allow for that type of interaction.

According to Mills, Swain and Weschler, teachers at Kyoritsu Women's University were overwhelmingly positive in their appraisal of the newly implemented streaming system (1996, p. 1-2):

(W)e have found that as the course progresses, it is much easier to appropriately adjust the teaching methodology based on the more clearly homogenous and evident response of our students (...) We can adjust the pace of the class and pay more attention to individual students who might otherwise feel too embarrassed to ask for help. Disciplinary problems which usually stem from the extremes of boredom or frustration are less likely to arise and disrupt the class. Evaluation is made more accurate and efficient (...) Classroom management is simplified, a more congenial atmosphere pervades the room and ultimately, we have been freed to create a true learning environment.

Mills, Swain and Weschler (1996) further describe the advantages of streaming in terms of being able to provide students with more level-appropriate learning activities (p. 2):

At the lower level, the student ... can benefit from the increased use of controlled practice activities (...) providing her the opportunity to practice the basic mechanics of grammar, listening comprehension and pronunciation, knowing that those around her are all doing the same (...) Meanwhile, in higher level classes, students can be challenged with a greater emphasis on open-ended practice, and freer discussion. The content of the course can be broadened and deepened to include higher level grammatical points, academic topics (...) Finally, since the teacher has to spend less time explaining basic terms in such classes, the pace of the class can be accelerated and thus the students can be kept stimulated.

These last two studies highlight important issues in the debate over streaming in EFL/ESL programs. However, it was determined that a more in-depth survey might provide a richer understanding of students' learning experiences in streamed and mixed-level classes, with a specific focus on the KUIS context.

The Present Study

The fit between learners' beliefs and perceptions and what teachers consider to be effective learning activities can play a central role in classroom L2 acquisition (Brown, 2009; Garrett & Shorthall, 2002); Casanave (2009) suggests that teachers ought to carefully consider their students' perspectives as they work toward improving their teaching practice. In light of this, and given the ongoing debate over the relative advantages of streamed and mixed-ability classes, it was deter-

mined that the following research question would be addressed: *Based on responses to a Likert-scale questionnaire, how do the perceived classroom learning experiences of high and low-proficiency learners in streamed classes compare with those of their counterparts in multi-level classes?*

Methodology

Context and Participants

All of the participants were full-time English language major undergraduates in their first year of study, either in the IC department or the English department (ED). At the time of data collection (2008-2009), students from both departments were placed into their first-year classes based upon their KEPT scores. In the case of the ED students, the learners were divided into four different proficiency streams, and these proficiency groups were sub-divided to form relatively homogeneous classes. In contrast, the IC students were placed into multi-level classes, each with a fairly equal distribution of high, intermediate and lower-proficiency students in each class. It should also be noted that teachers and students in both departments are officially expected to follow an English-only policy. While some teachers strictly enforce this policy, other teachers may allow limited amounts of the students' L1 to be used for scaffolding English comprehension and production.

Research Design

Questionnaires were distributed to students in 12 classes – six streamed ED classes, and six mixed-ability IC classes. Of the streamed ED classes, surveys were completed by three classes from the most proficient of the four ability bands, and

three classes from the lowest proficiency band. The survey was primarily composed of statements relating to the learners' perceived ability to participate and learn successfully in streamed and mixed-ability classes, with participants responding on a four-point bi-polar scale from *strongly agree to strongly disagree*. The questionnaire contained a total of 27 items, however, only student responses from the 20 questions most relevant to the research question are reported here. The questionnaire items were provided in both English and Japanese and the respondents were also provided with space to record any additional comments they might have. The questionnaire was administered approximately two weeks before the KEPT test, at the end of the students' first academic year at KUIS. The present analysis will focus on a subset of the data collected from all participants from the six streamed ED classes (n=135) and the six mixed-ability IC classes (n=107); for the purposes of this paper, the 25 students with the highest proficiency scores and the 25 students with the lowest proficiency scores in each department were selected. This type of purposive sampling was employed in order to consider the perspectives of students who, hypothetically, would have been in the "bottom tier" class and those who would have been in the "top tier" class, had a streaming system been in place in the IC department. Hereafter these IC students will be referred to as the "mixed-ability – low proficiency" group (MALP) and the "mixed-ability – high proficiency" group (MAHP). For comparison's sake, the survey responses from the 25 ED students with the lowest KEPT scores (streamed – low proficiency, or SLP) and the ED students with the 25 highest proficiency scores (streamed – high proficiency, or SHP) were also selected for analysis. The average overall KEPT scores for these four groups are shown in Table 1:

TABLE 1 – KEPT Scores for MALP, MAHP, SLP and SHP Groups

Dept.	n	Group	Average KEPT Score
ED	25	SHP (streamed – high proficiency)	657.5
	25	SLP (streamed – low proficiency)	349.5
IC	25	MAHP (mixed-ability – high proficiency)	607.4
	25	MALP (mixed-ability – low proficiency)	376.9

Results

As can be seen in Table 2, ED and IC students had different perceptions of their own level of proficiency relative to that of “most other students” within their class. In the IC department, most MALP students recognized that their English skills were “a little weaker” (48%) or “much weaker” (36%), while 44% of MAHP students felt that they were “a little stronger” than most of their classmates.

TABLE 2

Q1	Compared to most other students in my class, my English skills are ...				
	much stronger	a little stronger	about the same	a little weaker	much weaker
MALP	0 (0%)	1 (4%)	3 (12%)	12 (48%)	9 (36%)
SLP	0 (0%)	1 (4%)	12 (48%)	11 (44%)	1 (4%)
MAHP	1 (4%)	11 (44%)	10 (40%)	3 (12%)	0 (0%)
SHP	1 (4%)	4 (16%)	14 (56%)	6 (24%)	0 (0%)

By comparison, only 16% of SHP students felt they were “a little stronger” than most of their classmates, while 56% thought they were “about the same.” It seems, then, that students may have a fairly accurate sense of their own level of proficiency compared to that of their classmates.

Peer Assistance and Peer-Peer Interaction

Looking at Table 3 (Q2), MALP students felt most strongly that they received “a lot of help” from stronger classmates; most SLP students also agreed, although it is important to note that, for both of these lower-proficiency groups, 12% and 16% respectively disagreed. Interestingly, the SHP students also agreed strongly that they received a lot of help from stronger classmates (40% strongly agreed and 36% agreed). On the other hand, most MAHP students reported that they did not receive a lot of help from stronger classmates (40% disagreed and 12% strongly disagreed). While these results suggest common patterns of classroom interaction, they also reflect the number of students with “stronger” skills in each class. For example, there would have been fewer “stronger” students in IC classes, thus MAHP students would naturally have been more likely to give, rather than to receive, assistance.

TABLE 3

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Q2	I get a lot of help from students in my class whose English skills are stronger than mine.			
MALP	10 (40%)	12 (48%)	3 (12%)	0 (0%)
SLP	3 (12%)	18 (72%)	4 (16%)	0 (0%)
MAHP	5 (20%)	7 (28%)	10 (40%)	3 (12%)
SHP	10 (40%)	9 (36%)	6 (24%)	0 (0%)
Q3	I learn a lot from students in my class whose English skills are stronger than mine.			
MALP	8 (32%)	14 (56%)	3 (12%)	0 (0%)
SLP	4 (16%)	17 (68%)	4 (16%)	0 (0%)
MAHP	7 (28%)	12 (48%)	3 (12%)	3 (12%)
SHP	12 (48%)	13 (52%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Q4	When working with my classmates, I push myself to use my English skills at a high level.			
MALP	1 (4%)	5 (20%)	16 (64%)	3 (12%)
SLP	0 (0%)	10 (40%)	13 (52%)	2 (8%)
MAHP	1 (4%)	7 (28%)	14 (56%)	3 (12%)
SHP	4 (16%)	11 (44%)	10 (40%)	0 (0%)

Again looking at Table 3 (Q3), a large majority in all four groups reported that they were learning a lot from their stronger classmates. While these responses are slightly different than those for item 2, responses to item 3 may indicate that students feel they benefit in their learning from more general contact with stronger classmates. In other words, students may feel that they are “learning a lot” simply by observing and listening to their peers, even when not interacting or being directly assisted. Looking at item 4, only the majority of SHP students felt they were “pushing themselves to use their English skills at a high level” when working with classmates (16% strongly agreed and 44% agreed). By contrast, the majority of MAHP students did not feel that they were using their English skills at a high level during pair or group work (56% disagreed and 12% strongly disagreed). Interestingly, 76% of MALP students also disagreed or strongly disagreed. As mentioned earlier, MAHP students likely spend more time working with students whose English skills are less advanced than their own, and thus may not feel that they are “pushing” themselves; on the other hand, MALP students, even when working with higher-proficiency peers, may not be contributing much during pair or group discussions.

Table 4 (Q5) shows that MAHP students tended to agree quite strongly (20% strongly agreed and 72% agreed) that they often helped their weaker classmates, while SHP students were more evenly split in their responses. Again, this could be due to SHP students having fewer classmates with weaker skills; SHP students may be collaborating effectively with their similar-proficiency peers, but do not feel they are assisting as much, or “helping by explaining.”

TABLE 4

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Q5	I often help classmates whose English skills aren't as strong as mine by explaining things to them.			
MAHP	5 (20%)	18 (72%)	2 (8%)	0 (0%)
SHP	0 (0%)	15 (60%)	10 (40%)	0 (0%)
Q6	Helping classmates who have weaker English skills than me helps me to improve my English.			
MAHP	10 (40%)	13 (52%)	1 (4%)	1 (4%)
SHP	7 (28%)	15 (60%)	3 (4%)	0 (0%)

Looking at item 6, Both MAHP and SHP students strongly agreed that helping weaker classmates helped them to improve their English.

As shown in Table 5 (Q7), nearly half of MAHP students disagreed with the statement "When I help my classmates, I always use English" (40% disagreed and 8% strongly disagreed). This was similar to the response given by SHP students, 36% of whom acknowledged that they sometimes used their L1 when helping classmates. However, the two groups differed markedly in their explanation as to why they used Japanese during peer-peer interaction. Looking at item 8, most MAHP students reported that they sometimes needed to use Japanese so that weaker students would be able to understand them (64% agreed and 24% strongly agreed); in contrast, 56% of SH students disagreed and 8% strongly disagreed with this statement.

TABLE 5

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Q7	When I help my classmates, I always use English.			
MAHP	0 (0%)	13 (52%)	10 (40%)	2 (8%)
SHP	3 (12%)	13 (52%)	9 (36%)	0 (0%)
Q8	When working with my classmates, I sometimes need to explain things in Japanese so that students with weaker English skills can understand me.			
MAHP	6 (24%)	16 (64%)	3 (12%)	0 (0%)
SHP	0 (0%)	9 (36%)	14 (56%)	2 (8%)

In Table 6 (Q9), we see that all MALP and SLP students felt that they sometimes needed to use Japanese to express their ideas, while most MAHP students (88%) and a considerable majority of SHP students (64%) also agreed with this statement.

TABLE 6

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Q9	When working with my classmates, I sometimes need to use Japanese to express my ideas.			
MALP	2 (8%)	23 (92%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
SLP	1 (4%)	24 (96%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
MAHP	1 (4%)	21 (84%)	3 (12%)	0 (0%)
SHP	1 (4%)	15 (60%)	8 (32%)	1 (4%)
Q10	I want my class to be strictly English only.			
MALP	1 (4%)	11 (44%)	13 (52%)	0 (0%)
SLP	6 (24%)	12 (48%)	6 (24%)	1 (4%)
MAHP	8 (32%)	10 (40%)	6 (24%)	1 (4%)
SHP	10 (40%)	11 (44%)	4 (16%)	0 (0%)
Q11	Other students in my class use too much Japanese.			
MALP	2 (8%)	5 (20%)	14 (56%)	4 (16%)
SLP	1 (4%)	11 (44%)	12 (48%)	1 (4%)
MAHP	8 (32%)	6 (24%)	11 (44%)	0 (0%)
SHP	3 (12%)	3 (12%)	9 (36%)	10 (40%)

Looking at item 10, SHP, MAHP and SLP students generally favored having a strict English only rule in their class; however, MALP students were much more divided, with 52% disagreeing. Finally, in response to item 11, MALP (72%) and SHP students (76%) tended not to feel that their classmates were speaking too much Japanese; SLP students were fairly evenly split (48% agreed or strongly agreed), while 56% of MAHP students felt that others used too much Japanese (32% strongly agreed and 24% agreed).

Motivation and affective factors

As can be seen in Table 7, groups from both departments tended to agree that having stronger classmates motivated them to work harder (Q12); however, both MAHP and SHP students agreed more strongly with this statement (52% and 56% respectively).

TABLE 7

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Q12	Having students in my class whose English skills are stronger than mine motivates me to work harder.			
MALP	5 (20%)	16 (64%)	4 (16%)	0 (0%)
SLP	9 (36%)	13 (52%)	3 (12%)	0 (0%)
MAHP	13 (52%)	9 (36%)	3 (12%)	0 (0%)
SHP	13 (52%)	12 (48%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
13	I feel embarrassed when I speak English in class because other students can speak much better than I can.			
MALP	7 (28%)	11 (44%)	6 (24%)	1 (4%)
SLP	3 (12%)	13 (52%)	8 (32%)	1 (4%)
MAHP	1 (4%)	5 (20%)	16 (64%)	3 (12%)
SHP	1 (4%)	9 (36%)	11 (44%)	4 (16%)

Perhaps higher-proficiency students view their slightly stronger peers as near peer role models (Murphey & Arao, 2001); MALP students, however, agreed least strongly (only 20% strongly agreed, while 16% disagreed), which may indicate that some of these students perceive stronger classmates as possessing a level of proficiency which they may not be able to attain themselves.

Looking at item 13, 44% of MALP students agreed, and 28% strongly agreed, that they felt embarrassed when speaking English in class; SLP students responded similarly, although only 12% strongly agreed. On the other hand, most MAHP and SHP students tended to disagree, although slightly more SHP students reported feeling embarrassed.

Table 8 (Q14) shows that 44% of MAHP students agreed or strongly agreed that they sometimes spoke with a katakana accent so that weaker students could understand them, while only a 20% of SHP students agreed with this statement. Looking at item 15, fewer MAHP students (28%) reported that they sometimes spoke with a katakana accent to avoid being perceived as showing-off, but this was higher than the number of SHP students who agreed (16%).

TABLE 8

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Q14	When working with my classmates, I sometimes feel I need to speak with a katakana accent so that students with weaker English skills can understand me.			
MAHP	3 (12%)	8 (32%)	11 (44%)	3 (12%)
SHP	0 (0%)	5 (20%)	12 (48%)	8 (32%)
Q15	When working with my classmates, I sometimes speak with a katakana accent because I don't want other students to think I'm showing off.			
MAHP	2 (8%)	5 (20%)	12 (48%)	6 (24%)
SHP	0 (0%)	4 (16%)	10 (40%)	11 (44%)

Comprehension, participation and preferences

Table 9 (Q16) shows that a significant number of MALP students (40%) felt that they had trouble participating in class activities due to the fact that they were unable to clearly understand their classmates, while SLP and higher-proficiency students reported much less difficulty in this area (only 16% agreed). Looking at item 17, almost all higher-proficiency students and most lower-proficiency students said that they were able to understand the materials used in class, although 28% of MALP and 20% of SLP students felt that their lack of understanding could hamper their ability to participate. In response to question 18, the streamed SLP and SHP students expressed strong agreement with the idea that the level of their class was appropriate for their level of English skills (SLP= 88% and SHP=84% agreed or strongly agreed); however, while most MALP and MAHP students also agreed, an important percentage (32%) of each of the mixed-ability groups disagreed or strongly disagreed.

TABLE 9

Q16	It is difficult for me to participate in class activities because I have trouble understanding what my classmates are saying.			
MALP	0 (0%)	10 (40%)	14 (56%)	1 (4%)
SLP	0 (0%)	4 (16%)	18 (72%)	3 (12%)
MAHP	0 (0%)	1 (4%)	16 (64%)	8 (32%)
SHP	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	13 (52%)	12 (48%)
Q17	It is difficult for me to participate in class activities because I have trouble understanding the materials.			
MALP	1 (4%)	6 (24%)	16 (64%)	2 (8%)
SLP	0 (0%)	5 (20%)	17 (68%)	3 (12%)
MAHP	0 (0%)	1 (4%)	16 (64%)	8 (32%)
SHP	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	13 (52%)	12 (48%)
Q18	I feel that the level of my class is appropriate for the level of English skills I have.			
MALP	1 (4%)	16 (64%)	8 (32%)	0 (0%)
SLP	3 (12%)	19 (76%)	2 (8%)	1 (4%)
MAHP	2 (8%)	15 (60%)	6 (24%)	2 (8%)
SHP	9 (36%)	12 (48%)	4 (16%)	0 (0%)

As shown in Table 10 (Q19), the higher-proficiency students were, as might be expected, much more confident that they were able to understand their teacher (MAHP=68% and SHP=64%). Most lower-proficiency students felt that they understood “most” or 75-95% of what their teacher said, although a significant proportion of MALP students (20%) felt that they understood less than 75% of teacher talk. While it may have been difficult for students to estimate these percentages, students who felt that they were able to comprehend less than 75% of what their teacher said would likely have felt lost quite often in class.

TABLE 10

19	In Freshman English / EIC1 class ...		
	I can understand almost everything my teacher says (95%+)	I can understand most of what my teacher says (75–95%)	I often have trouble understanding my teacher (less than 75%)
MALP	1 (4%)	19 (76%)	5 (20%)
SLP	3 (12%)	21 (84%)	1 (4%)
MAHP	17 (68%)	7 (28%)	1 (4%)
SHP	16 (64%)	9 (36%)	0 (0%)

Finally, students were asked whether, given the choice, they would prefer to be in a streamed or a mixed-ability class (see Table 11). SLP, MAHP and SHP students all clearly favored being placed in a streamed class (68%, 72% and 84% respectively). More MALP students said they would have preferred to be in a streamed (24%) rather than a mixed-ability class (12%), however, most expressed no preference either way.

TABLE 11

Q20	If I could choose, I would prefer to be ...		
	in a streamed class	in a mixed-ability class	I don't have a preference
MALP	6 (24%)	3 (12%)	16 (64%)
SLP	17 (68%)	3 (12%)	5 (20%)
MAHP	18 (72%)	3 (12%)	4 (16%)
SHP	21 (84%)	1 (4%)	3 (12%)

Discussion

Some tentative findings can be drawn from the data collected, while in some areas further questions present themselves. Students in both departments seemed to

have a fairly accurate sense of awareness of their own level of proficiency in relation to that of their classmates (Q1). While MALP, SLP and SHP students felt that they received a lot of help from stronger students, more than half of MAHP students felt that they did not benefit from a lot of peer assistance (Q2). However, in general, most MAHP students still felt that they learned a lot from stronger classmates (Q3 – 48% agreed and 28% strongly agreed). In light of their responses to question 2, it seems that MAHP students felt that what they learned from stronger peers was gained in more regular communicative exchanges, or simply through listening and observing rather than through peer-peer instruction per se. With only a small number of high-proficiency learners in each IC class, MAHP students may not have much opportunity to interact with similar or higher-proficiency peers. Nearly all MAHP students agreed that they often helped weaker students (Q5) and that they improved their own English by doing so (Q6). While this may be, MAHP might also benefit from more interaction with similar or higher-proficiency peers. This is supported by the fact that amongst SHP students, 36% agreed and 40% strongly agreed that they received a lot of help from stronger classmates (Q2), and they all agreed (52% agreed and 48% strongly agreed) that they learned a lot from their higher-proficiency peers; more MAHP students also tended to feel that they were not pushing themselves to use their skills at a high level when working with classmates (Q4). To shed more light on this, it would be interesting to know how often similar and different-proficiency students are actually paired or grouped together and future research could include observations of students working on collaborative tasks.

Almost all MAHP students (92% agreed or strongly agreed) and a majority of SHP

students (60%) felt that they often helped weaker classmates; however, nearly half of MAHP students and 36% of SHP students disagreed with the idea that they always used English to do so (Q7). 88% of MAHP students agreed or strongly agreed that they used Japanese so that weaker students could understand them (Q8), whereas only 36% of SHP students agreed with this statement. *All* lower-proficiency students, and most higher-proficiency students (MAHP=88%, SHP=64%) agreed or strongly agreed that they sometimes needed to use their L1 to express their ideas (Q9). Despite this acknowledgement, most SLP, MAHP and SHP students also said that they wanted their class to be strictly English only (Q10), although, 28%, 28% and 16%, respectively, disagreed, and 52% of MALP students disagreed. This would obviously be an area worthy of further investigation. In addition, while 56% of MAHP students agreed or strongly agreed that some of their classmates used too much Japanese, only 24% of SHP students felt this was the case (Q11). This suggests that while the L1 has at least some role to play in all classes, it may be a more important resource in mixed-ability classes – and MAHP students who would prefer to use English as much as possible may feel frustrated by these higher levels of L1 use.

A significant proportion of MAHP students agreed (32%) or agreed strongly (12%) that they sometimes spoke with a katakana accent in order to help weaker classmates understand them (Q14). Slightly fewer MAHP students agreed (20%) or agreed strongly (8%) that they sometimes used a katakana accent to avoid appearing to be a show-off (Q15). This suggests that for MAHP students the conditions for practicing pronunciation may not be as favorable as for SHP students in more homogeneous classes. This seems to be supported by lower-proficiency students'

responses to item 16: MALP students reported having more difficulty understanding their classmates (40% agreed) than did SLP students (16% agreed); however, comprehension difficulties could of course also be due to a lack of knowledge of the more advanced vocabulary used by higher-proficiency classmates.

While most students in all groups felt that their class was appropriate for their level of English skills, 32% of MALP students and 32% of MAHP students did not feel that their class was suited to their level of proficiency (Q18). While only an educated guess, it seems likely that these MAHP students felt that they were not sufficiently challenged, while the MALP students probably felt the class was too difficult for them. As a further indication of this, 20% of MALP students reported having great difficulty understanding their teacher (Q19). Finally, all but the MALP students expressed a strong preference for being placed in a streamed class (Q20), while most MALP students (64%) expressed no preference. This ambivalence may reflect the fact that, as novice language learners, and learners who likely did not experience a great deal of success in their high school English classes, MALP students really were not sure what would be best for them. Or, perhaps they felt that there were pros and cons to both streamed and mixed ability classes.

Selecting a cross-section of the 25 highest and lowest-proficiency students from both departments provided a representative snapshot of perspectives from different classes; however, there were a limited number of participants in each group. It should also be noted that participants were asked to provide their student ID num-

bers in order to match the questionnaires with students' KEPT scores, which may have had some effect on student responses. On the whole, the data tend to suggest several advantages associated with streaming for both lower and higher-proficiency students. However, the present study was intended to be exploratory in nature and the results may raise as many questions as they provide answers, suggesting a number of areas for future research. Some of the questionnaire items used here might be improved upon – however, interviews with students and classroom observations would provide a much richer account of learners' day-to-day experiences. Furthermore, a survey assessing teachers' views would provide another valuable perspective on this topic – one which, to date, has received surprisingly little research attention.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, a number of ideas gleaned from the literature will be presented which may be of interest to teachers who find themselves teaching either streamed or mixed-ability classes.

In some programs, an attempt is made to minimize any feelings of inferiority or superiority by not telling students which level they are in, or even whether or not there is a streaming system in place (see Mills, Swain & Weschler, 1996). However, a number of authors have argued that a program's mission and procedures should be made clear to students from the outset. Matthews-Aydinli & Van Horne (2006) suggest that teachers should talk with students directly about the multilevel nature of mixed-ability classes (using the L1 as necessary), and invite feedback from students about their experiences (see Brown, 2009). For

streamed classes, Gillis-Furutaka and Sakurai (2002) suggest that the rationale behind streaming should be explained clearly to all students. If students have a clear picture of their level of proficiency, they can then set tangible, achievable learning goals. Teachers can help students to maintain a positive, yet realistic self-concept (Neihart, 2007) and outlook by emphasizing that L2 learning is incremental (Dweck, 2000; Burris & Garrity, 2008), and that students can, with a reasonable amount of effort, advance to higher levels of proficiency (for more on “effort attributions” see Dörnyei, 2001; see also Carpenter *et al.*, 2009). Teacher expectations regarding peer assistance and negotiation of meaning should be made explicit and strategies practiced to help students work and learn together more effectively (Brown, 2009; Jacob *et al.*, 1996).

Murphey & Arao (2001) explain how more proficient learners can act as important near peer role models. To some degree, this may be a built-in feature of mixed-ability or even streamed classes, but teachers may want to explicitly guide students in their choice of role models or comparison targets. Where classes are streamed, teachers could, as suggested by Hallinan (1994), combine classes of different levels on a regular basis to encourage peer-assistance and minimize any possible negative effects connected to streaming. Looking at the other side of the streaming coin, Burris & Garrity (2008) suggest that rather than *streaming teachers* by assigning high-stream classes to the most experienced teachers, teaching assignments should be dispersed across streams, thereby “send(ing) the signal that all students’ education is important” (p. 59).

In her recent article on perspective taking, Casanave (2009) suggests that

teachers should try to imagine what it would be like to be students in their own classrooms, and that teachers can gain important insights by reflecting on their own language learning experiences. Many KUIS teachers have studied one or more other languages, or are learning Japanese now in free classes offered by the university. As reflective practitioners, and as beginner, intermediate or advanced-level language learners ourselves, we should carefully consider how we would feel, and how we could learn most effectively, in either streamed or mixed-ability classes.

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