

Introduction

A mass of literature (e.g., Milis, 1998; Slavin, 1993) informs that ability grouping is effective in English teaching (Office For Standards in Education [OFSTED], 1998) and learning (Gamoran, Nystrand, Berends, & LePore, 1995). Nevertheless, numerous variables and hindrances lie in the way of implementing ability grouping, which lead to debates on grouping practises with regard to their efficacy, feasibility, and socio-economic equity (Loveless, 1999). The body of research and reviews documented in journals, published in the US, Europe and other parts of the world tends to pertain to elementary, middle, and high schools (e.g., Cheung & Rudowicz, 2003; Ireson, Hallam, & Plewis, 2001; Slavin, 1987, 1990, 1993), as is also the case with Taiwanese research (e.g., Cheng & Shih, 2007; Chiang, 2003; Hsu, 2006; Kuan, 2016; Lin, Zhang, & Chen, 2009; Shih, 2005; Yang, 2009). Relatively few studies have been carried out in the context of the higher education system, especially in the area of teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL).

Following a previous study (Su, 2010)¹ which explored English placement practise and instruction from the perspective of technological university students in Taiwan, the present study aims at reviewing the literature related to ability grouping, especially in the context of higher education, in order to build a basis for an in-depth analysis and discussion

¹ The present study was a follow-up enquiry following Su's (2010) study where suggestions had pointed out a need of "interview surveys" and "classroom observations" "to probe into the ability grouping practise" in addition to "a questionnaire enquiry" "to explore teachers' perception of the same placement issue" (p. 25).

of the enquiry into TEFL ability grouping practise for non-English majors from a teacher's perspective, and ultimately developing a conceptual map of English ability grouping for non-English majors in the context of Taiwanese higher education.

Literature Review

Theories that Uphold Ability Grouping

The rationale of ability grouping could be traced back to Davis–Moore theory, a principal assertion within the structural functionalist paradigm of sociological theory proffered by Davis and Moore (1945). Structural inequality in, for example, inherited wealth and family power induces the functional necessity of stratification in the social structure; this contributes to positive effects in society that embraces technocratic, meritocratic, and democratic features. With a functional mechanism, a society allocates its constituents in divergent social positions and prompts them to accomplish the duties of these positions. However, a modern society that presumably provides equal opportunities for its individuals and, paradoxically, places importance of ascribed status before valuing achieved status is inherent of inequality. When the structural functionality theory is tapped into education, it would not be hard to fathom that educational systems offer learners equal opportunities in order for them to strive for securing a meritocratic position (Kuan, 2006).

One might consider the theoretical concepts of Habermas and Durkheim as resonations of labelling theory (Goffman, 1963). Habermas emphasises transforming the world by attempting to arrive at a more just,