A Case Study of Grouping in Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language Context

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The multi effects of the grouping were rarely discussed under the context of the TCFL. This essay is to examine the application of grouping by language proficiency and within-class grouping based on a case study. It aims to find out an optimal grouping system in the TCFL classroom based on the practical experience. It begins with a brief introduction on the history of TCFL and the objectives of this essay. A theoretical evidence of adopting grouping in MFL context is followed in the second section. On the basis of provided background information, grouping by language proficiency and within-class grouping are discussed and analysed with the case study in the following sections. Then it comes to the conclusion of the effects of these groupings in TCFL and recommendations for future researches.

Keywords: TCFL, grouping, language proficiency, within-class

Introduction

In all cases, students in class are placed in some forms of grouping throughout their school life. Grouping, whose theories have been continuously developed by western researchers, has become a very common strategy used in different subjects, with intention of facilitating teaching and learning. Kutnick and Rogers (1994) proposed that grouping strategies which teachers decide to adopt are various from whole class to small groups, to dyads, to individuals. Thus “every pupil in a class can be seen as being involved in a range of pupil groups that may (to a greater or lesser extent) affect her/his learning potentials” (p. 2). But it appears that researchers paid more attention to its impacts on scientific subjects than foreign language teachings, including Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language (abbreviated as “TCFL” hereafter) that concerns. Grouping in TCFL plays a very important role for improving students’ Chinese proficiency, developing the insights to Chinese culture, as well as other educational issues beyond academic attainment. Its applications and effects in TCFL are significant, and worth discussing and comparing with those in the generic subjects. This concept was observed in action for one year in a TCFL classroom in the Philippines. Results of observation and analysis of grouping approaches to TCFL were concluded.

In order to better understand this topic, it is useful to briefly introduce the development of TCFL as a modern discipline. With the development of China over the past decades, the Chinese language has gained increasing popularity in modern foreign language learning across the world. TCFL is associated with this trend and became one of the most important branch disciplines of Modern Foreign Language Education in the 1950s

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for the sake of dissemination of culture and to meet the increasing demands of Chinese language learning worldwide in a scientific and developmental way. The theory system of TCFL originated from the old fashioned Modern Foreign Language Education system, but unfortunately has not yet caught up with the latest progress. Up to year 2000 in which the Chinese linguist X. Liu published *An Introduction to Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language Education*, TCFL was still at the stage of grammar-translation method domination in class.

The relatively short history of TCFL is only of the reasons for fewer researches on the subject in regard of grouping. The other reason is that TCFL teachers favour the traditional Grammar-translation Method for teaching, which was conversely acknowledged rather ineffective by the west. The Grammar-translation Method for most of foreign languages teaching in China has dominated the pedagogical system, where grammar is merely taught as product to the students in the language teaching. It has been well documented (Doughty & Pica, 1985) that teacher-fronted presentation restricts both the amount and nature of learner interaction results. Grouping strategies was not recognised as a useful tool until the introduction of new pedagogical methods such as Communicative language teaching and Context-based teaching method.

Related Works: Grouping in MFL Context

For the purpose of discussing the issues with reference to a wider context, previous studies on grouping in Modern foreign language (MFL) education, of which TCFL is one of the subdivisions, have been surveyed. Grouping as one of the strategies for improving learning has begun to be adopted since the early 1990s and many improvements have been introduced along the way. Nowadays, the groupings of students are used commonly in the school context for a lot of subjects, as well as MFL. Then it comes to the question, “Why grouping was used in MFL?” According to Mohan and Smith (1992), grouping, as a means of facilitating second language acquisition, has two theoretical bases.

The Input/Interaction Perspective

It can be tracked back to Krashen’s input hypothesis of second language acquisition, which was considered the most important concept in second language acquisition. Krashen (1981) proposed the input for learner needed to be one step beyond learner’s current stage of linguistic competence and comprehensive. It was developed and supplied by Long (1983) and Swain (1985; 1995), who stressed the need for “comprehensible output” where learners interacted and negotiated and clarified meaning to produce input that was comprehensible and manageable to them. Grouping encourages the interaction within the class, meanwhile stimulates learners’ language acquisition. Integrationists argued that “the more the learners engaged with each other in attempts to clarify and check their understandings of the meaning by questioning and confirming the comprehension of what was being said, the more likely it was that acquisition would take place” (Chen & Hird, 2006, p. 209). As Doughty and Pica (1985) found, this process would occur more easily when the students were placed in small peer groups.

The Language Socialisation Perspective

This justification for grouping focuses on the effect of grouping which encourages learners to develop the ability to use language in a way that allowed them to function within a social context and become competent members of social groups (Chen & Hird, 2006). “This perspective on the language that can happen when students work in groups extended the input/interaction explanation and went beyond its psycholinguistic view” (Ibid., p. 209).

The complementary nature of the two aspects allows a better complete understanding to be gained regarding the use of language in a particular grouping, in this case, grouping by language proficiency and within-class grouping. It is worth noting that discussion in this study examining the advantages and disadvantages of grouping is based on personal work experience, and therefore maybe of limited use only for grouping in the wider context serving MFL.

The Case Study: Grouping by Language Proficiency in CLCIP

During May 2007 to April 2008, the author was selected by the university as one of the volunteers to the Philippines for the final year work placement of teaching Chinese language, and was then assigned to Chinese Language and Culture Institute of the Philippines (CLCIP) located in Manila, where the observation and research of grouping was taken place. CLCIP is a non-profit organization for providing Chinese language training, aiming to bridge the Chinese culture with the Philippines. It is popular for people from all walks of life, with school students in the majority. There were about 150 students varied in age, career, education background, learning ability and Chinese language proficiency. Based on the results of the entrance test of their Chinese language proficiency, they were allocated to four levels, i.e. beginner, intermediate level, advanced level and business Chinese, and divided into classes with a size of 10 to 15 students for each. Students at each level were taught by the same teacher with relevant teaching materials and strategies.

The entrance tests involved a paper test, which mainly focused on students' writing and listening competencies, and an interview about also their language experience, learning preference, motivation and expectation. The reading and character writing were not included in the assessment for beginners, because of the complexity of Chinese writing system that is generally difficult for this level. For students with more experience of Chinese learning, a simply test on grammar, character writing and short passage writing would be given for determining their language levels more appropriately.

The way of dividing the students into different levels was recognised as grouping by linguistic proficiency, for the sake of facilitating teachings and learning in the class. This type of grouping is used in almost all the language schools. However, it was observed to have both positive and negative effects in TCFL class, in comparison to streaming and mix-ability grouping. These effects are discussed in the following sections, and lead to a conclusion of whether grouping by proficiency is good enough for language institutes.

Grouping by Language Proficiency Versus Streaming

Grouping of students based on entrance tests in the case can be misleading and confusing with streaming, which was defined as "differentiating [students] between classes on the basis of homogeneity of ability" by Kutnick and Rogers (1994, p. 9). For streaming, pupils are divided into different classes within any year, corresponding to their learning abilities ranged from high, middle to low (*ibid.*). Hence it is a transverse grouping across a same knowledge level. Grouping by proficiency and streaming both divide students into classes according to their test results, and are used for the purpose of treating different levels pertinently. The key difference of the grouping from streaming was those Chinese language learners were divided on the basis of their language proficiency instead of learning abilities (see Figure 1). Some language schools elsewhere did adopt streaming in teaching as they further divided the students at one level into top, middle and bottom classes, whereas CLCIP only used grouping by proficiency. Business Chinese and advanced level represented high-proficiency students, intermediate level represented the middle proficiency and beginner level represented the low proficiency.

Figure 1. Illustration of the difference between streaming and grouping by proficiency.

There have been many arguments against streaming applied in education, especially in secondary and primary school. Ireson and Hallam (2001) thought that students on bottom streams are more likely to be affected in their self-esteem, attitudes, engagements and attainment, as the result of being labelled and stigmatised by teachers. Grouping by proficiency in CLCIP did not show these negative impacts. Apparently the teachers received very little complain from students about their class division, because very importantly students were not judged by their learning abilities, hence felt less inferior if they were asked to join the low level class.

Streaming was also claimed for making negative impacts on educational opportunity, achievement and attributes towards school (Ireson & Hallam, 2001). Very often students on top streams that are considered to have higher abilities receive more attentions and better educational supports than the others. As a subsequence of these unbalanced treatments, bottom stream students would find harder and feel less confident for achievements. This is also the cause of the increasing gap between streams. CLCIP avoided these deficiencies by providing students equal supports, mainly including teachers and textbooks.

In CLCIP, the teachers' choice on the teaching level depended on their preference, strength and schedule, none of which were related to students' language learning ability. This voluntary-based allocation reduced the effects of self-esteem issues for teachers in the same way for students. There was also no discrimination from teachers against low level classes, although another factor must be taken into account—the teachers volunteered to undertake the work placement in the first place. Teachers automatically treated the students equally and paid more attentions to slow learners. Moreover, they stuck to the level to maximise the benefit of familiarising themselves with a same type of students.

Textbooks and teaching plans were provided corresponding with students' Chinese proficiency. The textbooks included Beginner I, Beginner II, Intermediate I, Intermediate II, Advanced and Business Chinese. And they were applied accordingly for the needs of learning during the progress. For example, Chinese characters were taught from Beginner II, while Chinese phonetic alphabets were used throughout Beginner I, in order to ease the burden on beginners. Despite the differences in teaching materials, students got the same cares in the study. Different language features were emphasised along with the rising of the level. More time was

spent on pronunciation correction at the beginner level, since the four tones in Chinese make the language spoken very difficult for foreign learners. Complex linguistic structures and grammatical features were paid more attentions when the level was going up. These measures ensured that students were given equal opportunities to catch up the path of lessons.

While preventing the disadvantages of streaming, grouping by proficiency contained a very important positive factor of streaming, that was to reduce the spread of ability within the class, making it easier for teacher to match their teaching to pupils' level of academic ability (Ireson & Hallam, 2001). In casual conversations with the students after class, they claimed the satisfaction with schedule of progress and the teaching contents. Most of the students were pleased studying with the peers of similar ability. From these points of view, grouping by proficiency had significant advantages over streaming.

Grouping by Language Proficiency for Classroom Activities

Grouping by proficiency was also observed to have advantages in classroom activities. Redondo (2000) suggested that the educational issues beyond academic attainment which were needed to be addressed (Hallam, 1996), can be achieved more efficiently by teaching MFL to groups in homogeneous by some activities. For instance, in some culture lesson, students were engaged in whole-class or small group discussion in Chinese (for intermediate and advance level) or English (for beginner) on issues related to some cultural topics, e.g. the traditional food, clothing and so on. It ensured that students equipped with similar linguistic skills can fully participate in the same language task with teachers' instructions.

Some negative impacts of grouping by proficiency were inevitably found in practice. Getting inaccurate test results was the first problem leading to mistakes in grouping some of the students. Besides, because of the limited number of levels, there were also difficulties in dividing the students whose Chinese language proficiency laid on the boundary of two levels and whose language skill development was uneven. These impacts need to be considered respectively.

Obviously the entrance test could only reveal students' Chinese language proficiency to a very approximate degree. With possibilities of over-estimating or under-estimating some of them, students that were grouped to a wrong level by mistake felt uncomfortable during the study. In the case that one student had much higher proficiency level than the rest of the class, both she and the class were not satisfied. For the student, little progress was made and her learning interest seemed decreased. Simultaneously, most of the class were discouraged by the gap between them and the more able one. Misplacing contains negative effect on students' motivation which is especially important for a foreign language learner suggested by Krashen (1981). This issue could only be overcome by making the grouping flexible in the way that students can be relocated if teachers discovered or the students claimed for the mistake. It then brought the questions of "how can we make sure teachers and students are aware of this mistake" and "how can we make sure that students will ask to be relocated when they realise this mistake happening to them". In the author's class, students were encouraged to request re-allocation in this kind of circumstance, while the author watched very carefully on their status of language proficiency. When a mistake in grouping was identified, teachers observed and re-assessed on students' performance in class and classwork prior to the re-allocation. However, these measures may not always be feasible. It was observed that students whose levels were under-estimated or over-estimated by the test tended to stay in the given class. On the other hand, teachers might not be able to know the updated status of all the students at all time.

For the students whose Chinese language proficiency laid between beginner and intermediate level or intermediate and advanced level, they had disadvantages from that they had to be allocated to one of the existing levels, normally the higher one, with which sometimes could not be coped. When the level was higher or lower than their self-estimate of their learning potential, their self-esteem and attitudes could be negatively affected. To deal with this problem, students were given an opportunity to take a couple of lessons in both levels for a taste of the contents, and make decision of which level was more suitable for them on the basis of their self-estimate and the teacher's suggestion.

Finally, it is a very common phenomenon in any language classroom that students' language skills across listening, speaking, reading and writing, grammatical and cultural understanding and communicative competence are developed unevenly. In terms of Chinese teaching, it was found that people generally are better at speaking than writing. Lessons from intermediate level were compiled with Chinese characters. Therefore students were required to be capable with recognising and writing certain amount of characters in order to cope with them. During the work placement, there were students whose listening and speaking competence had met the requirements, but characters recognition and writing were still below the standards. As the result, they had to stay in the original low levels. This surely decelerated their learning speed towards higher level, and influenced the confidents of their capacities. The problem remains unsolved until further research is carried out. These issues associated with grouping based on language proficiency also happen to various language schools worldwide. Since the grouping strategy is widely used and yet has no better alternatives, the issues are worth further studies from both psychological and pedagogical perspectives, to understand the full scale of the problem and minimise the negative effects.

Groupings in Classroom

Subsequent to grouping of school students by language proficiency, the classes of each level naturally form the mix-ability groups. Students in the research's beginner classes were similar in the Chinese language level, but varied in age, career, and education background. This implies their strengths, abilities and learning styles were different from one to one. Therefore within any of the classroom, mix-ability teaching was implemented and had some minor influences as far as the teacher was aware.

Compared to mix-ability grouping, within-class grouping came as a more remarkable phenomenon. With communicative language teaching approaches, which emphasised on linguistic knowledge as well as communicative competence, numerous group works were carried out. In the author's class, they mainly comprised three types of task-based activities: dyad work, small group work and whole-class work. The detailed descriptions are presented as following:

Dyads: two pupils working or playing together. This grouping is used predominantly in cognitive studies and peer tutoring (Kutnick & Rogers, 1994, p. 9). In the class, dyad group works included: simulating dialogue from textbook, role play and discussion in pairs. Students were asked to practice a two-person dialogue in pairs, after the dialogue was taught. Partners monitored and corrected each other's pronunciation. They then would be asked to act out the conversation in front of the class.

Small group: usually 4 to 6 pupils together for seating and/or learning purposes. This grouping is predominantly used in co-operative learning studies (Kutnick & Rogers, 1994, p. 9). When a taught dialogue or a role play game involved more than two people, small group conversation practice was assigned to students.

Whole-class: all pupil members of a class whose actual number, age, gender and ability mix will be decided by school and education authority policy. Some examples of whole-class group work would be paragraph reading and discussions on movies that were recently shown to the class.

Within-class groupings were accompanied with different types of tasks that the teachers designed for students. Generally it promoted interactions in the classroom and motivated the students for the language learning. When it was combined with the tasks, the objectives as observed were more easily achieved. It is recommended to be used for language teaching, provided that teachers based on the tasks carefully think about the size of the group and which students should be taken into the group in advance. These issues need to be considered for the sake of maximising the benefits and improving the teaching quality.

Within-class grouping works were set under the condition of that the whole class was a mix-ability group. Ireson and Hallam (2001, p. 10) defined the term “within-class grouping” as “pupils are grouped within the class on the basis of ability”. Therefore one of the important premises of within-class grouping was to recognise the ability distribution in the class. Having been aware of the student ability distribution, teachers at the some point would need to counterbalance the ability gap amongst students for higher teaching and learning efficiency. Within-class grouping was adopted to manage classroom activities. The students were divided into small group, triads or dyads for various language tasks. Whichever form of the grouping is used, it enables the teacher to work with a group of pupils together, rather than work individually (Ireson & Hallam, 2001). Clearly, within-class grouping is a task-oriented strategy, and is designed according to the lessons and tasks which are given to assist the lessons.

There were 5 types of Chinese lessons, i.e. speaking, grammar, listening, writing and Chinese culture. Students sometimes were regrouped in different lessons. For lessons of listening, which required less interaction in the class, students were usually seated by preference. Whereas for grammar and speaking lessons, in which students must communicate more frequently with each other and the teacher, mixed ability students were usually placed in one group. As Galton (1990) summarised groups should be arranged and changed according to subject and other needs; pupils working in collaborative groups have the opportunity to explain and teach each other; small groups should allow a positive environment in which the shy and timid child may best respond (Kutnick, 1994).

A useful analysis of the learning tasks found in classroom has been presented by Norman (1978), who describes five types of learning tasks: incremental, restructuring, enrichment, practice and revision. Incremental—introduces new ideas, procedures or skills or demands recognition and discrimination, and practice—demands the tuning of new skills on familiar problems (cited from Kutnick, 1994, p. 16), are often undertaken in TCFL. In practice, incremental task was represented as a group discussion about a culture topic in Chinese. Practice task was represented as role play and a lot of speaking exercises. Particular grouping may maximize or hinder pupil learning tasks. Bossert, Barnett and Filby (1985) clarified that effective learning should allow the existence of a relationship between group interaction and classroom tasks. “The teacher is required to structure both group interdependence and task differentiation appropriately” (Kutnick, 1994, p. 20).

The Other Considerations of Within-class Grouping

The within-class groupings discussed previously were generically set from the point of view of dealing with the class based on tasks. However, there were some other considerations on individual’s personality, habit, culture background and preference taken into account in real teaching. One of the difficult tasks for teachers

while adopting within class grouping is to know her/his students as best as possible in terms of their ability, learning preferences, personal strengths and weakness (Redonodo, 2000). That's because teachers have adopted within-class grouping on the basis, for example, of pupil differences and their learning preferences in order to avoid conflicts between teaching and learning styles, as well as to cater for a diverse range of preferred learning styles in any one group (ibid.). With these considerations, within-class groupings of small number of people sometimes had to be carefully designed or adjusted accordingly.

Three more types of within-class grouping were used in the case: neighbourhood grouping, grouping by gender and mix-ability grouping for small number of students. Neighbourhood grouping means students were grouped by seat, as neighboured students usually knew each other better and felt more comfortable for working with each other. In terms of gender, students' personalities and culture backgrounds were dominated in the grouping. It was perceived that some Pilipino female students were feeling shy about completing a dialogue with a male peer. Hence it would be a better idea to group them with same genders in order to release the pressure. Mix-ability grouping of small number of students, which was normally adopted in grammar and speaking lessons, was to ask more able students and less able students to sit together and form a group. More able students were adjusted to match with less able students, in order that less able students might be able to benefit from more able students, and reduce the competition in the class (Redondo, 2000).

Besides, students who were not confident about their Chinese language skills tended to use mother tongue in class conversations and was less willing to undertake class tasks. It was necessary for teachers to continuously build a group working environment and students habit of working in groups, so that the interiority of students might be reduced. Within-class grouping can be based on a range of different pupil attributes, of which ability may be one (Redondo, 2000), in order to cater the differentiations in the class and all kinds of grouping practices. It encouraged dynamic interactions within the class, whereas sometimes teachers' supervise might be needed during the group work.

Conclusion

By the case study and discussing some examples from the case, the effects of grouping by language proficiency and within-class grouping have been analysed in a TCFL context. Limitations of the essay must also be examined to verify the results. Firstly the studied case is purely dependant on the work experience. It might not be a good idea to assume that these groupings are also used in the other Chinese language schools and the other schools' modern foreign language subject. Hence the findings are rather limited. Secondly, the case study was based on the participant's observation, which might not be comprehensive and objective.

Despite these facts, the conclusion of that these groupings had contributed to the development of students' Chinese language competence has been drawn from this study, although there are still some issues to be considered for maximising the benefits. These are how to improve grouping by proficiency, how to ensure teachers' awareness of student abilities and how to build a good grouping work environment such that every student can get the advantages. For mix-ability grouping that was briefly mentioned, it was observed that it is not suitable in the school similar with CLCIP. The application of mixed ability grouping in TCFL still needs to be further studied.

Further research on the other groupings in TCFL context is also essential, as Chinese language is gaining popularity worldwide. One of points that may be concerned is the relationships between diversity of learning purposes and groupings. Aspects of Chinese language knowledge according to the purposes will be emphasised

different in correlative groups. This might increase the complexity of within-class grouping. Grouping strategy for improving teaching quality and students' attainment remains the important role in TCFL and the other language teachings. However as Hallam (1996, p. 2) proposed the "grouping of pupils is only one of several factors affecting the learning environment of the classroom. The quality of instruction and the curriculum are central". Quality of teaching and teachers' pedagogic skills cooperated with appropriateness and effectiveness of groupings can better provide the students with the opportunity to achieve excellence and reach their potential in Chinese as foreign language learning.

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