Teacher Perspectives on Student Placement in University EFL Programs

Brian McMillan & Paul Joyce

Abstract

In many language programs, students are placed in streamed, relatively homogeneous classes according to their proficiency in the target language. However, proponents of mixed-ability classes believe that through forming mixed-ability groups lower-proficiency learners feel less stigmatized, and that both higher- and lower-proficiency learners benefit from peer tutoring. This paper reports on the results from a survey that explored the perceptions of 31 EFL teachers at four Japanese universities regarding streamed and mixed-ability first-year EFL classes. Most teacher-participants expressed a preference for teaching streamed classes, citing advantages related to the effectiveness of instruction, appropriateness of materials, student motivation, and the quality of learner-learner interaction.

Key words: Class placement, Student placement, Streaming, Mixed ability Classes, Teacher perspectives

Introduction

The placement of students into class groups at the beginning of the students' period of study is an organizational cornerstone of university second language (L2) learning programs. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that university EFL programs employ a wide variety of approaches to forming classes, which points to a lack of consensus upon the factors underlying placement decisions. For example, in some programs, the intention is to divide learners by their ability in the target language (TL) in order to form relatively homogeneous, streamed classes. In other programs, incoming students are tested and the results are used to form mixed-ability classes (MACs), with a fairly equal distribution of high-, intermediate-, and lower-proficiency learners in each class. Unsurprisingly, mirroring the lack of agreement among tertiary level EFL programs on the appropriate placement procedure for L2 classes, there is a lack of clarity in the literature on the advantages and disadvantages of different placement methods. To help address the issue, this paper investigates the approaches to EFL class formation used at four Japanese universities, with a particular emphasis upon the perspectives of classroom teachers. After first exploring different perspectives on placement in the literature, the study proceeds to analyze the views of 31 native-speaker EFL teachers on the relative merits of streamed classes and MACs. Finally, a number of recommendations are proposed for teachers and program managers, along with directions for future research.

Motivation and psycho-social effects

In the field of general education, proponents of MACs argue that streaming may have a stigmatizing effect on lower-ability learners, potentially causing demotivation. While streamed students placed in lower-ability classes may initially form a relatively negative academic self-concept, Liu, Wang and Parkins (2005) found that Singaporean high school students in lower-tier streams had a more positive academic self-concept three years after placement than their higher-ability counterparts, consistent with the big-fish-little-pond (BFLP) effect. The BFLP effect (Marsh, 1987) predicts that students in higher-achieving schools or programs who compare themselves

with their more able peers will develop lower academic self-concepts. Thus lower-proficiency learners working alongside highly proficient classmates in MACs may feel insecure about their abilities in the TL. Indeed, learners with a low self-perceived proficiency in the TL are most likely to experience foreign language (FL) anxiety (MacIntyre, Noels & Clement, 1997), and dominant class members may have a demoralizing effect on other students, reinforcing feelings of inadequacy (Ainslie, 1994; Maddalena, 2002). On the other hand, higher-proficiency students may conceal their more advanced skills to avoid standing out in MACs; for example, they may affect a strong L1 accent, since native-like pronunciation may be viewed as a sign of no longer belonging to one's L1 peer group (Lefkowitz & Hedgcock, 2002). However, the BFLP effect may be smaller for older students who employ coping strategies, such as making fewer comparisons or shifting comparison targets (Dai & Rinn, 2008). Moreover, motivation may increase if learners identify with their more-able peers and believe that they can catch up through their own efforts (Murphey & Arao, 2001). Thus, from the perspective of motivation and psycho-social effects, it is unclear whether a streamed or MAC approach to placement is more beneficial to tertiary level L2 students.

Learner-learner interaction

A further means of evaluating different placement methods is to examine the effect that they have upon learner-learner interaction. Matthews-Aydinli and van Horne (2006) suggest that in MACs, "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" (p. 1; see also Jacobs, 2009). Supporting the idea that different-proficiency pairs can collaborate effectively, Storch (2001) found that of three pairs of adult ESL students, the most collaborative was also the pair with the greatest proficiency difference (low and upper intermediate), while the closest in terms of proficiency (low and intermediate) interacted in a non-collaborative fashion. Furthermore, Watanabe (2008) found that three ESL adult learners preferred working with a partner who shared many ideas, and concluded that proficiency

differences are not the primary factor determining the nature of peer assistance.

However, it stands to reason that a learner's ability to collaborate effectively is closely tied to proficiency (Lesser, 2004)—especially if learners are expected to use the TL exclusively. As also noted by Matthews-Aydinli and van Horne (2006), students that have less developed proficiency skills or are less outspoken may naturally separate themselves from more highly proficient or more vocal learners; thus in MACs, lower-proficiency learners may not be willing or able to participate actively when working in pairs or groups with higher-proficiency peers. A number of studies show that learners at different levels of proficiency do not always collaborate effectively (e.g., Gobel, 2006; Lim & Jacobs, 2001). Students are often reticent to engage in negotiation for meaning, which they may view as "painstaking, frustrating, and face-threatening" (Eckerth, 2009, p. 121). Indeed, several studies have shown that students tend to prefer being placed in relatively homogeneous classes (e.g., Joyce & McMillan, 2010; Gillis-Furutaka & Sakurai, 2002; Mills, Swain & Weschler, 1996). Therefore, as was the case with motivation and psycho-social effects, there is a lack of clarity on the relationship between different placement methods and the resulting learner-learner interaction. Consequently, to shed more light on this issue, the efficacy of different placement methods was explored from the teacher's perspective.

Teacher perspectives

Previous research has covered a range of issues related to streaming in general education; however, few studies have examined teacher perspectives within the context of L2 learning and teaching. Westwood (2002) found that EFL teachers at the primary level teaching classes that contain a wide range of TL proficiencies often encourage peer assistance, but rarely adapt activities or materials to try to match the multifarious learning needs and preferences within their classes. Reid, Clunies-Ross, Goacher, and Vile (1982) and Hallam and Ireson (2008) found that British secondary teachers considered mathematics and modern languages to be least appropriate for MACs; in another study, it was also found that there was a clear correlation

between teachers' views on streaming and the grouping methods used in their own schools (BBC, 1998). With respect to EFL teachers at Japanese universities, only two small-scale studies have reported reactions to the implementation of streaming systems. Gillis-Furutaka and Sakurai found that most instructors at Kyoto Sangyo University "were in favour of streaming from the point of view of lesson planning and preparation as well as teaching" (2002, p. 118). Similarly, Mills, Swain, and Weschler (1996) report that teachers at Kyoritsu Women's University preferred teaching streamed classes in which learners were afforded a more positive, motivating learning environment with more level-appropriate learning activities. The authors contend that participation and the class dynamic may suffer in MACs, particularly in Japanese contexts where it is often noted that, "the nail that sticks out gets hammered down" (ibid., p. 1). While expressing reservations regarding the actual benefits of peer instruction in MACs, Mills, Swain, and Weschler also note that there is still enough variation left within streamed classes to allow for peer assistance.

Given that many of the above studies were conducted in contexts outside of tertiary level EFL learning, the present study employed a questionnaire to further investigate the beliefs of university EFL instructors regarding the advantages of streamed classes versus those of MACs. For consistency, the participants were each asked to relate their opinion on streaming to their first-year classes. For the purposes of this study, the following research questions were addressed:

- Do teachers prefer teaching first-year classes containing homogeneously streamed or mixed-proficiency students?
- Does the streaming method for a teacher's current first-year classes influence their preference for a homogeneously streamed or mixed proficiency class?
- What reasons underlie teachers' placement preferences?

A further aim of the present study was to shed light on the placement procedures used at different university EFL programs in Japan—an area of program management which is sometimes not made clear to students or even teachers.

Methodology

Participants and teaching contexts

Thirty-one native speaker EFL instructors employed at four universities in Japan participated in the study. All of the teacher-participants possessed qualifications in TEFL/TESL at the master's degree level or above. The length of the instructors' overall teaching experience ranged from 2 to 16 years.

The classes within the four schools were each composed of around 25 students. However, the student placement procedures varied considerably across the different institutions. In the case of University A, the first-year students from all departments were each administered a proficiency test that contained Reading, Writing, Listening, and Speaking sections. The learners' performance on this test was equivalent to scores of between 70 and 183 on the TOEFL Computer-Based Test (see Bonk, 2001). However, the various departments within the university each utilised the placement results from the test differently. In the case of Department 1, on the basis of their performance on all four sections of the test, the most proficient 76 students were placed into three high level streamed classes. The remaining 310 learners were placed into 12 MACs that each contained an equal number of higher-, mid-, and lower-proficiency students. In Department 2, the 74 students were streamed into three streamed classes of relatively homogeneous proficiency, purely based upon their performance on the Speaking section of the test. Lastly, in Department 3, the overall test results were used to place 157 students into six MACs, each with a similar number of high-, mid-, and lower-proficiency students.

At University B, the first-year students were placed using the *Computerized Assessment System for English Communication* (CASEC) (for more details see Hayashi, Nogami, Maeda & Ikeda, 2004). On the basis of their performance on the test, the approximately 1100 first-year students were placed into three proficiency bands. Within each band, the students were mixed to ensure that there was an equal number of high-, mid- and lower-proficiency students within each class. When converted onto a TOEIC scale, the vast majority of the students scored between 150 and 700 points.

In the case of University C, the 700 first-year students in the English language program were streamed based upon their TOEIC Bridge test scores. As was the case with University B, the learners were placed into three proficiency bands. However, the learners at University C were placed into classes with those of the closest possible proficiency. The vast majority of students' scores fell between 150 and 700 points on the TOEIC scale.

Lastly, at University D, the 200 students in the first-year program were divided into four proficiency bands based upon their performance on the TOEIC Bridge test. As was the case with University B, the high-, mid-, and lower-proficiency students within each proficiency band were evenly distributed across classes.

As was described above, across the language programs at the four universities, there were differences in the size of the student populations, the range of proficiency levels, and the placement procedures. However, in order to address the research questions, each program of study was classified as using a streamed or mixed-ability approach to placement (see Table 1).

Data collection

The data for this study were collected in two ways. Firstly, in order to clearly understand the streaming procedures at the various universities, interviews were conducted with a member of staff who was closely familiar with the placement procedure at each institution. Secondly, for the purpose of gauging the opinion of teachers towards the placement procedure used at their school an online survey was used (see Appendix 1). The respondents to the questionnaire were

teachers who were known to the researchers and therefore more willing to participate. However, although the sample group of respondents was not the result of planned stratified sampling, the views of the participants on streaming were not known to the researchers prior to the data being collected, and the survey was submitted anonymously. Therefore, there was no reason to believe that the respondents would respond differently to a random sample from the same population.

After some preliminary questions relating to each teacher's background experience and qualifications, the questionnaire focussed on the participants' attitudes towards student placement. In order to investigate research questions one and two, the teachers' responses to two statements were focused upon. The participants responded to the statements on a five-point Likert scale (*strongly agree*, *agree*, *neither agree nor disagree*, *disagree*, and *strongly disagree*). For the purposes of the statistical analyses, the feedback was converted into an interval scale from one (strongly agree) to five (strongly disagree). To address research question three, the teachers were also asked to explain the basis for their beliefs about student placement through an open-ended survey item. To identify patterns in the data, the reasons were categorized and overarching labels were selected to describe groups of reasons.

Results

Research Question One: Teacher Preference for Student Placement

As can be seen in Table 2, the teachers indicated a preference for a streamed teaching environment. In the case of item one, on average, the teachers

Table 1: The streaming policy at the participants' universities

Institution			Placement method	Participants
University A	Dept. 1	High Band	streamed	3
		General Band	mixed	11
	Dept. 2		streamed	3
	Dept. 3		mixed	6
University B			streamed	4
University C			streamed	3
University D			streamed	2

Table 2 : Descriptive results for questionnaire items one and two (n = 31)

Questionnaire items	mean	SD
1) I prefer teaching classes with a narrow range of proficiency to classes with a wide range of proficiency.	2.10	1.01
2) I prefer teaching streamed classes to mixed-ability classes.	2.35	1.17

reported favoring classes with a narrow range of proficiency (M = 2.10, SD = 1.01). Likewise, for item two, streamed classes were found to be preferred over non-streamed groups (M = 2.35, SD = 1.17). The differences in the mean values for item one (M = 2.10) and item two (M = 2.35) perhaps reflect differences in the participants' understanding of the terms *streamed* and *mixed-ability classes*. This is unsurprising given the range of placement methods used at the various institutions where the participants worked.

In order to determine whether the teachers expressed a statistically significant preference for a streamed teaching environment, the mid-point of the response scale (neither agree nor disagree) was converted into the value 3 and one-sample t-tests were performed with 3 as the test value. There was found to be a statistically significant difference between the test value and the mean for item 1 ($t(30)$ = 4.97, $p < .001$, d = .89) and item 2 ($t(30)$ = 3.07, $p < .01$, d = .55). Therefore, the results indicated that teachers preferred teaching streamed classes to mixed-proficiency groups.

Research question two: the relationship between the teacher preferred placement method and the placement method for their current classes

In order to address this research question, the respondents were first classified by the placement method used for their current classes and their

answers to item 1. As can be seen in Table 3, the majority of both the instructors teaching streamed classes (henceforth streamed teachers) (86%) and those teaching unstreamed classes (henceforth MAC teachers) (59%) indicated that they favored classes with a narrow proficiency range. However, a much larger proportion of the MAC teachers responded that they had no preference (24%) or would rather teach a class containing a wide range of proficiencies (18%) compared to the streamed teachers (no preference, 14%; wide proficiency range, 0%).

(See Table 3)

The pattern of results found for item 1 was repeated for item 2. As is displayed in Table 4, both sets of teachers most frequently indicated a preference for streamed classes. However, the streamed teachers showed a stronger interest in streamed classes and more aversion towards unstreamed groups (streamed, 71%; no preference, 29%, unstreamed, 0%) than MAC teachers (streamed, 41%; no preference, 35%, unstreamed, 24%).

To explore the relationship between teaching preference and class currently taught, an independent t-test was conducted on the results. For item 1, streamed teachers expressed a stronger preference for a group with a narrow proficiency range (M = 1.79, SE = .19) than MAC teachers (M = 2.35, SE = .28). However, this difference was non-significant, $t(29)$ = -1.59, p = .08. Similarly, for item

Table 3 :   Responses to item 1 – I prefer teaching first-year classes with a narrow range of proficiency to classes with a wide range of proficiency. (n = 31)

Preference	Streamed Teachers	MAC Teachers	Overall
Narrow proficiency range	12 (86%)	10 (59%)	22 (71%)
No preference	2 (14%)	4 (24%)	6 (19%)
Wide proficiency range	0 (0%)	3 (18%)	3 (10%)
Total	14 (100%)	17 (100%)	31 (100%)

Table 4 : Responses to item 2 – I prefer teaching streamed classes to non-streamed classes. (n = 31)

Preference	Streamed Teachers	MAC Teachers	Overall
Streamed Classes	10 (71%)	7 (41%)	17 (55%)
No preference	4 (29%)	6 (35%)	10 (32%)
MACs	0 (0%)	4 (24%)	4 (13%)
Total	14 (100%)	17 (100%)	31 (100%)

two, on average, the streamed instructors favored streamed classes (M = .93, SE = .22) more than the MAC teachers (M = 2.71, SE = .32). Yet, there was not found to be significant difference between the responses of the two groups, $t(29)$ = 1.92, p = .10. Although the results were not found to be statistically significant, this is unsurprising given the small sample size.

Research question three: reasons for teachers' preferences

Thirty of the thirty-one teachers provided reasons and comments to support their beliefs about student placement. In total, the participants offered 68 responses with an average of 2.27 (SD = 1.28) per contributor. As shown in Table 4, there were 17 teachers who expressed a preference for streamed classes. The most frequently mentioned reason (see Table 5) was *Student materials* (11 comments). Teachers commented that materials for streamed classes were more suitable for the learners and easier to make. For example, Teacher 18 noted: "It is easier to manage and create materials for all the class when everyone is roughly at the same proficiency." The second most common reason was *Student needs* (nine mentions). Teacher 24 noted, "The students get more out of a class when everyone is at about the same level of ability, the teacher can teach to a more narrowly focused level of curriculum." Thirdly, eight teachers who favored streamed classes mentioned *Learner-learner interaction*. This category includes the notions that lower-proficiency students feel inhibited by higher proficiency students and that an unfortunate aspect of unstreamed classes is that higher proficiency students have to help others. For example, Teacher 15 noted, "I felt that higher proficiency students often resented the 'teacher' role that they sometimes 'fell' into with other students". A further reason noted by teachers who preferred streamed classes was *Classroom management* (seven comments). *Classroom management* is used here to cover comments that concerned teacher classroom language, deciding student groups, and lesson planning. For instance, Teacher 11 asserted: "It's simply easier to teach to a narrower competency band. Not so much extempore scaffolding is needed. Monitoring is simpler. No need to build so much redundancy into teacher instruction." The final reason offered by teachers who preferred streamed classes was *Motivation* (seven comments). A typical comment from those who justified their selection on this basis was: "It [taking unstreamed classes] is demotivating for the higher level students as they become complacent in their ability. There is less of a challenge for them to really push themselves and improve." (Teacher 10). As well as citing advantages of streamed classes, several of the *Streamed preference* instructors also felt there could be advantages to unstreamed classes in certain situations. For instance, they noted a lack of *Motivation* in low-proficiency streamed groups as being problematic (6 comments). For example, Teacher 18 noted, "Low proficiency often equates to low motivation. It's tough to teach them."

Table 5

The four teachers who favored unstreamed classes gave two reasons for their preference (see Table 5). The first was *Motivation* (two comments). While some *Streamed preference* instructors remarked upon certain disadvantages of streaming for lower-proficiency groups, *Unstreamed preference* teachers were far more effusive about mixed-proficiency classes having a positive effect on student motivation: "Lower level students push themselves to try to achieve the same proficiency as their higher level classmates. Higher level classmates push themselves in their weak areas" (Teacher 12). These teachers also made reference to what has been characterized as *Learner-*

Table 5 : Reasons given in support of streamed or unstreamed classes

	Teacher Preference		
	Streamed prefer-ence	No preference for streamed or unstreamed	Unstreamed pref-erence
Streamed: Advantages			
Student materials	11	0	0
Student needs	9	1	0
Learner-learner interaction	8	0	1
Classroom management	7	1	0
Motivation	7	0	0
Unstreamed: Advantages			
Motivation	6	2	2
Learner-learner interaction	0	0	3
Classroom management	0	2	0
Other Issues			
Placement test	2	5	1

learner interaction (three comments), arguing that in MACs students can learn to develop social cohesion: "In a non setted class they pull together, the stronger students gain social and management skills by helping the others, the weaker students find out how to make the most of their abilities ..." (Teacher 5).

Ten teachers did not declare a preference for streamed or mixed-ability classes; five of these teachers, rather than mentioning advantages or disadvantages relating to either placement method, supported their choice with reference to *Placement test* issues. The overriding theme of these responses was summarized by Teacher 26:

In a perfect world, where streaming would lead to classes with students with similar proficiency levels, I would prefer streamed classes. However, depending on the type of testing that has guided the streaming ... I have found that there are still wide ranges of proficiency levels in any given class.

Since the five comments were from teachers at three different universities, this issue was not confined to one particular program.

Discussion

The majority of instructors teaching in both streamed and unstreamed programs believed that students would be better served in relatively homogenous classes. *Streamed preference* teachers believed that lessons, materials, and instructions could be better tailored to the students' current level of proficiency in streamed classes. These results are consistent with findings from two previous studies involving EFL teachers at Japanese universities (Gillis-Furutaka & Sakurai, 2002; Mills, Swain & Weschler, 1996) and from other contexts (e.g., Hallam & Ireson, 2008; Reid, et al., 1982). Considering the wide range in proficiency within each of the programs, the more advanced learners would stand to profit more from free conversation, more challenging written and aural input, and a more autonomous approach to learning, whereas the lower-proficiency students would likely benefit from the teacher playing a more prominent role by modeling, drilling, and more closely monitoring student communication (e.g., Garrett & Shorthall, 2002; Lesser, 2004), and from judicious L1 support (Turnbull & Dailey-O'Cain, 2009).

With respect to research question two, there was not found to be a statistically significant difference between the preferences of the streamed and unstreamed instructors. Nevertheless, as noted in the Results section, this was unsurprising given the small number of participants in this study. Thus, consistent with findings from the context of British secondary schools (BBC, 1998), the teachers' preferences may have been influenced by the grouping method used in their current teaching situation. Just as teachers who teach streamed classes may perceive certain advantages related to that method of placement, instructors teaching unstreamed classes might be more aware of strategies that can be applied to MACs. For example, some MAC teachers may employ a differentiated approach which they feel allows them to provide the appropriate level of materials and instruction for all learners. However, differentiation is not an advantage of MACs per se; offering some degree of choice and individualization is recognized as good practice in any classroom, streamed or unstreamed. The difference is one of degree. Most teachers in the present study believed that streamed classes were easier to manage. Indeed, teachers of MACs often find it difficult to sustain a differentiated approach and instead rely on strategies that do not require advanced planning and preparation, such as simply offering more individual assistance and encouraging peer tutoring (Hacker & Rowe, 1993; Westwood, 2002). It can also be argued that providing differentiated instruction in a MAC amounts to *streaming within the classroom.* If always given less challenging work than their classmates, lower-ability students may feel stigmatized and become demotivated (Hall, 1997). On the other hand, in cases where it is not possible to stream students based on their current level of proficiency in the TL, there is some evidence that learners may respond positively when given the opportunity to self-select materials or activities that they deem appropriate for their own learning needs (e.g., Nuangpolmak, 2010).

As suggested by three MAC teachers, students may develop social skills through peer tutoring or cooperative learning activities. However, research shows that different-proficiency learners do not always collaborate effectively (e.g., Eckerth,

2009; Gobel, 2006; Lesser, 2004; Lim & Jacobs, 2001). The teachers who favored mixed-proficiency classes also believed that lower-proficiency students would be motivated to catch up to their higher level classmates. While this may be true in some cases, where differences in proficiency are great, low-proficiency learners may also feel like little fish in highly heterogeneous classroom ponds, experiencing FL anxiety (MacIntyre, Noels & Clement, 1997), and becoming demotivated (Ainslie, 1994; Maddalena, 2002). Teachers who preferred streamed classes felt that more advanced learners would be more motivated in streamed classes, and may not appreciate being thrust into a *teacher* role in MACs. In classes with a wide of range proficiencies, it can be expected that more advanced level students will need to use shared L1 resources when assisting weaker students (Ainslie, 1994; Maddalena, 2002), and this may prove frustrating for higher-proficiency students who would prefer to use the TL as much as possible (Joyce & McMillan, 2010). While both high- and lower-proficiency learners may benefit from peer tutoring from time to time, it seems unlikely that both would be best served by always working together on a wide range of learning activities.

A number of *Streaming preferred* teachers conceded that low-proficiency streamed classes may suffer from low levels of motivation. This highlights the need for teachers to emphasize the incremental nature of L2 learning, and to guide lower-proficiency learners in selecting higher-proficiency peers as role models (Murphey & Arao, 2001). This could be achieved through sharing examples of student work from other lower or higher-tier classes, or by combining different classes on a regular basis.

Of the teachers who did not express a preference for either streamed or unstreamed classes, five teachers from three different universities expressed reservations regarding whether the tests were of sufficient quality to accurately stream the learners. It is undoubtedly true that measurement error has a deleterious effect on the quality of student placement. Furthermore, it is important to note that owing to differences in the content of a placement test and the purpose of the class for which the students are being placed, some students are likely to be misplaced. For instance,

in most of the institutions where the survey respondents worked, a test based purely upon receptive language skills (reading and listening) is used to place students into classes with a heavy emphasis on speaking. However, as well as the largely inevitable reliability and validity based difficulties, decisions based upon placement results can also greatly contribute to the large differences in proficiency within classes that some teachers criticized. For example, as was discussed in the Methodology section, the students at University B were placed into three proficiency bands and the learners within each band were mixed to ensure that the average proficiency of each of the classes within a proficiency band was comparable. Naturally, given the breadth of language ability within the student body (TOEIC scores between 150 and 700), the scores within each class varied considerably. Furthermore, when the influence of measurement error is taken into account, it is clear that many of the students with scores that are close to the cut points between the three streams may be inappropriately placed. Thus, reliability, validity, and program management decisions conspire to reduce placement accuracy. One approach to improving the allocation of students to classes would be to stream students more tightly, that is, to follow the example of University C.

Conclusion

A number of authors suggest that the placement process should be transparent, and that the perspectives of teachers and students ought to be considered, such as when deciding whether a student may have been placed in the wrong class (Gillis-Furutaka & Sakurai, 2002; Matthews-Aydinli & van Horne, 2006). However, teachers and students often have little say in placement decisions. In large, multilevel English classes, which are common in Nepal (see Dewan, 2003; Khati, 2010), teachers are assigned the difficult task of ensuring that the instruction, materials, and opportunities for practice are appropriate and motivating for all learners. Through awareness of student perceptions and potential problems, teachers can help learners to have positive and effective learning experiences, whether in streamed or mixed-ability classes. Yet in programs where the placement system is designed to maximize the range of proficiency levels within each class, especially where highly advanced learners are placed alongside beginners, teachers and program managers should be aware that any potential advantages may be outweighed by disadvantages in terms of the effectiveness of instruction, appropriateness of materials, motivation, and quality of learner-learner interaction.

While most teacher-participants perceived a number of advantages to streaming for both lower and higher-proficiency students, this small-scale, exploratory study should be replicated with a larger survey to enhance the generalisability of the findings. In addition, a more detailed questionnaire could examine the influence of other factors, such as whether instructors teach high-, mid-, or low-streamed classes, or the instructor's level of proficiency in the learners' L1. Process-product studies, including interviews with teachers and classroom observations, would also provide a richer account of teacher perspectives, as well as a more objective measure of the relative advantages of different streaming methods.

The Authors

Brian McMillan is currently teaching at Hiroshima Bunkyo Women's University in Japan. His research interests include motivation, learner-learner interaction, and the use of the L1 in L2 learning.

Paul Joyce teaches at Kinki University in Osaka, Japan. His research interests include L2 vocabulary acquisition, L2 listening, and language testing.

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Appendix

Questionnaire for Teachers about Class Placement

The purpose of this research is to gather information regarding teachers' perceptions of teaching streamed and non-streamed first-year classes. Please answer all questions as honestly and as completely as you can. Rest assured that participants will remain completely anonymous. Thank you for your participation!

Section 1: Background

Approximately how many years have you been a language teacher?   ___ years

What is your highest teaching-related qualification?

What is the name of the university that you work at?

Section 2: Views on placement

For each of the questions below, please consider how much you agree with each of the statements. Please indicate your answer by writing a check in the appropriate box.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1) I prefer teaching first-year classes with a narrow range of proficiency to classes with a wide range of proficiency.	1	2	3	4	5
2) I prefer teaching first-year streamed classes to mixed-ability classes.	1	2	3	4	5

Why? Please explain the reasons for your preferences.