

**UNIVERSITY OF TARTU**  
**DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH STUDIES**

**EFL ABILITY GROUPING IN ESTONIAN BASIC SCHOOLS:  
TEACHERS' PRACTICES AND PERSPECTIVES**

**MA thesis**

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates the practice of ability grouping or *temporühmad* in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom in Estonian basic schools. Drawing on interviews with eight EFL teachers across six schools, the study explores how teachers perceive and implement ability and attainment grouping or *tasemerühmad*, the criteria used for group placement, and the differentiation strategies applied within groups. Findings indicate that teachers generally appreciate the structured learning environments provided by ability grouping, as it allows for targeted instruction tailored to students' learning paces. However, concerns arise regarding the potential for labelling, lowered expectations for slower-paced groups, and logistical challenges in resource allocation. Grouping practices vary significantly across schools, with some initiating placement as early as the second grade and others waiting until the fifth grade. Teachers also highlighted the importance of flexibility and careful observation in determining group movement. The study provides insights into optimizing ability grouping to enhance equity and learning outcomes in EFL contexts on the verge of educational reforms in Estonia.

**Keywords:** ability groups, grouping by pace, differentiated teaching, EFL.

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## INTRODUCTION

The organisation of students into ability-based groups has long been debated in education. Ability grouping is chosen due to student variations in knowledge, skills, developmental stages, and learning pace (Kim, 2012: 209). Advocates of ability grouping argue that it facilitates tailored instruction, which allows teachers to address the specific needs of each group more easily, thereby enhancing learning outcomes (Bygren, 2016; Deunk et al., 2018; Tatomir et al., 2021). Critics, however, emphasise the potential for inequities, such as reinforcing social divides (Allende et al., 2024; Chisaka, 2002; Domina, 2019; Gamoran 1995), lowering expectations for students in lower groups (Belfi et al., 2011; Domina et al. 2019; Kim, 2012) and exacerbating students' school well-being (Belfi et al. 2011). In English as a foreign language (EFL) instruction, the practice of ability grouping holds significance due to the varying proficiency levels among students and the challenges associated with teaching a foreign language in diverse classroom settings.

Ability grouping refers to the structured assignment of students into different groups or classes, typically based on their previous or anticipated academic achievements. This approach can take on various forms (Allende et al., 2024: 162). The most common are *between-school*, *between-class*, and *within-classroom grouping*. Between-school grouping, common in countries like Japan, Germany, Austria, and Sweden, involves sorting students into separate curricular tracks – typically academic or vocational (Schindler et al., 2021). Between-class ability grouping occurs within schools and is commonly called *tracking* or *streaming*. While these terms are often used interchangeably, *tracking* is more common in the US and *streaming* in the UK. Both approaches assign students to fixed ability groups across multiple subjects, with limited opportunity for movement. In addition to *streaming*, the UK also employs *setting*,

a more flexible system in which students are grouped by ability in individual subjects and can move between different levels more easily (Allende et al., 2024: 162). Finally, the most adaptable form is *within-classroom grouping*, where teachers organise students into groups based on their perceived instructional needs and classroom dynamics (Allende et al., 2024: 161–162). This last method is most widely used in primary school.

The concept of ability grouping has evolved over time, with its roots in early 20th-century standardised testing. This approach gained traction in countries such as the US and the UK, where formal tracking systems sorted students based on perceived aptitude. Over time, these practices faced criticism for limiting mobility between groups and perpetuating social stratification. The civil rights movement's ascendance relaxed and reformed school tracking systems in the US (Domina et al. 2019: 294).

Despite this, ability grouping remains a common educational approach worldwide. However, data from PISA assessments by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (2020) show that its prevalence varies significantly between countries. Globally, subject-specific ability grouping is on the rise, with OECD (2020) and Taylor et al. (2022) reporting a 4% increase between 2006 and 2015. Above 50% of students in Australia, Israel, New Zealand, the UK, the US, and Chile are grouped by ability in some or all subjects, compared to just 10% in Austria, Portugal and Norway, with Norway banning permanent ability grouping.

In Estonia, the OECD (2020) reports that 3.2% of students are grouped by ability in all subjects and 55.5% in some subjects, meaning that ability grouping is widely practised across Estonia. The OECD (2020) report does not differentiate between various types of ability grouping or specify the number of groups used across different subjects. As a result, estimating the total number of Estonian schools that implement ability grouping in EFL remains challenging. However, the previous studies on ability grouping conducted in Estonia asserted

that quite a few schools employ this method (Kersna, 2018; Tatomir et al., 2021; Toomela et al., 2006) Estonian basic schools practice subject-specific ability grouping in individual subjects, most commonly foreign languages, mathematics, science classes, and P.E. The practice parallels the UK's *setting* due to the relative flexibility of the groups. The Estonian National Curriculum for Basic Schools (2023) allows schools to decide whether and how to allocate students into separate groups for instruction. As a result, different schools divide students based on their proficiency in the subject, previous attainment, learning pace and available resources.

While ability grouping is widely practised across educational systems globally, the umbrella term used to describe it is often inconsistent and debated. In addition to *ability grouping*, the method is occasionally called *attainment grouping*. The former refers to grouping students based on perceived inherent traits – such as learning pace or cognitive processing speed – while the latter is based on demonstrated academic performance, such as test scores or proficiency levels.

Even among researchers, the distinction is often blurred. According to Steenbergen-Hu et al. (2016: 850) there is significant confusion surrounding the concept of "ability grouping," as it is often understood differently by various people in different contexts. For instance, Taylor et al. (2022) do not consistently distinguish between ability grouping and attainment grouping and alternate between these terms throughout their paper. Similarly, Taylor et al. (2019) and Domina et al. (2019) treat ability grouping as synonymous with *tracking*, which is only one form of the broader practice.

This distinction also plays a role in the Estonian educational context, where schools mainly alternate between two terms: *temporühmad* (grouping by learning pace) and *tasemerühmad* (level groups). While these terms are sometimes used interchangeably, Tatomir et al. (2021) emphasise that they reflect different grouping logics. *Temporühmad* are based on

students' learning pace and underlying abilities, aligning more closely with *ability grouping*. In contrast, *tasemerühmad*, as defined by Haridussõnastik (n.d.), are formed according to students' current knowledge and skills, making them equivalent to *attainment groups*. Ability groupings are not formally regulated by Estonian law, reflecting the view that teaching methods must remain adaptable and flexible (Tatomir 2021: 9). Indeed, the Basic Schools and Upper Secondary Schools Act § 46, 10-11 only mentions *tasemerühmad* (level groups) and does not include the term *temporühmad* at all.

The term *temporühmad* is sometimes used in place of *tasemerühmad* to reduce the risk of stigmatisation and promote inclusivity (Kersna, 2018, as cited in Tatomir et al., 2021: 4). This emphasis on inclusivity (*kaasav haridus*) is consistent with Estonian educational values. The National Curriculum for Basic Schools (2023) grants the schools autonomy in grouping students for language instruction, allowing them to base decisions on proficiency, learning speed, or available resources. Scholars such as Mazenod et al. (2019) argue that these terms should be clearly distinguished. Tatomir et al. (2021: 10) argue that the effectiveness of grouping strategies depends heavily on whether educators clearly understand whether they are grouping by ability or attainment. A lack of clarity can undermine the goals of differentiation and may negatively impact equity and teaching outcomes.

Although the author of this thesis agrees with the critical perspective of Mazenod et al. (2019) and recognises the conceptual strength of the term attainment grouping, the current thesis deals with schools that officially adopt the system *temporühmad*, which is classified more as ability groups than attainment groups. For this reason, and in line with observations by Tatomir et al. (2021), the thesis adopts the umbrella term ability grouping to refer to the practice.

This research interest stems from the author's firsthand experience teaching in a school that employed ability grouping, or *temporühmad*, in EFL lessons. Upon being assigned both fast- and slow-paced groups of fourth-grade students, the author observed that, despite using

the same study materials, the two groups displayed stark differences in comprehension and proficiency – not just in pace, but in their overall grasp of English vocabulary, grammar, and understanding. This gap complicated lesson planning and challenged the assumption that only the speed of learning would differ.

Although group mobility was theoretically possible, it was often restricted to maintain classroom order. Behavioural concerns and interpersonal conflicts were frequently cited as reasons for limiting movement, even if some students – such as those with ADHD – might have thrived in a faster-paced environment. These experiences led the author to question the basis for grouping decisions, as conversations with colleagues revealed that placement was mostly based on teacher observations. However, it was unclear whether there was a shared understanding of what “pace” meant, making the grouping process feel inconsistent and arbitrary.

The idea to explore ability grouping further was solidified through a conversation with a Tallinn University PhD student, who noted that *temporühmad* is often considered outdated. This suggestion encouraged the author to connect personal experiences with broader educational debates, shaping the focus of this research.

In addition to personal reasons, in Estonia, the debate over ability grouping is becoming increasingly relevant amid significant educational shifts. The Education Strategy 2021–2035 (Ministry of Education and Research, 2022: 8) identifies inclusivity (*kaasav haridus*), equal access to quality education, and differentiated instruction as key goals for schools to achieve by 2035. At the same time, the gradual transition to Estonian as the main language of instruction introduces new challenges for EFL teaching, particularly in linguistically diverse classrooms. In this context, ability grouping in EFL may offer a practical means of managing varied learning needs. Although not formally regulated by law, ability grouping aligns with Estonia’s broader educational principle of maintaining flexibility in instructional methods to accommodate

individual student needs. However, this flexibility also raises concerns about how such practices align with inclusivity. The dual aims of promoting social cohesion and academic excellence can be difficult to reconcile, making the role of ability grouping in Estonian EFL classrooms a complex and contested issue.

The goal of this thesis is, thus, to explore the perspectives of Estonian basic school EFL teachers on the effectiveness and impact of ability grouping in EFL instruction. By examining the perspectives of teachers working within such systems, this research seeks to shed light on how grouping methods influence teaching strategies, student outcomes, and equity in the classroom. Furthermore, this study aims to identify whether current practices align with the stated goals of ability grouping or if they inadvertently reinforce disparities among students. Addressing these gaps will contribute to a deeper understanding of how ability grouping affects EFL learning in the context of a changing school environment of Estonian schools and provide insights for more effective and equitable practices.

By examining the teachers' practices, experiences, and opinions the study seeks to address the following research questions:

1. Do EFL teachers accurately understand the distinction between ability grouping and attainment grouping, and does their understanding of ability grouping align with the grouping practices implemented in their schools?
2. What criteria and methods do EFL teachers use to categorise students into different ability groups?
3. How do EFL teachers adapt their instructional strategies and study materials for students in different ability groups?
4. What do EFL teachers consider the benefits and drawbacks of ability grouping in EFL instruction?

The thesis is structured into two main chapters. The first chapter presents a comprehensive review of the relevant literature, establishing a theoretical foundation for the study of ability grouping in EFL contexts. The second chapter details the empirical research, including information on the participants, data collection methods, and analysis of interview data gathered from Estonian EFL teachers. The thesis concludes with a summary of key findings, recommendations for future research, and a discussion of the implications for teaching practices and educational policy.

## **1. ABILITY GROUPING IN EFL: CONCEPTS, VARIATIONS AND EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS**

The role of ability grouping in EFL classrooms has been a topic of considerable debate, with discussions focusing on its implications for student achievement, equity, and classroom dynamics. Ability grouping, which involves organizing students into groups based on their perceived proficiency levels, is implemented with the intention of tailoring instruction to meet diverse learning needs. While proponents argue that such groupings allow for more targeted teaching strategies and efficient use of classroom time, critics highlight the risks of stigmatization, unequal access to quality instruction, and the reinforcement of educational inequalities. This literature review explores the theoretical foundations of ability grouping, its various forms – such as *temporühmad* and *tasemerühmad* – and its impact on student learning and teacher practices. Furthermore, it examines the broader educational and social implications of this practice, drawing on empirical studies and theoretical perspectives to provide a comprehensive understanding of how ability grouping is applied within EFL contexts, particularly in Estonian schools.

### **1.1 Macro- and Micro-Level Differentiation**

Before examining different types of ability grouping, it is important to first understand the broader context in which such practices arise. Differentiation, both at the school and classroom level, forms the foundation for why ability grouping is implemented in the first place. By exploring how differentiation starts even before students enter the classroom, and how social

and organizational factors shape educational experiences, it becomes easier to understand the role ability grouping plays within the larger structure of schooling.

Differentiation in education refers to the practice of adapting instructional content, methods, and pacing to suit the diverse needs of individual learners. This becomes particularly significant in heterogeneous classrooms – classrooms with mixed-ability, where students vary widely in terms of background and ability, and where teachers are required to adapt their instruction and materials to fit different needs of their pupils. On the other hand, while the goal of ability grouping is often to create more homogeneous learning environments – environments where everyone is similar, it is, at its core, a method of implementing differentiation by uniting students with similar learning profiles in separate groups.

However, differentiation in education does not begin on the classroom level – it often starts much earlier, shaped by school access, choice, and broader structural inequalities. Students are not randomly assigned to schools; rather, factors such as entrance exams, parental preferences, and residential location significantly influence school composition. For instance, Allende et al. (2024), in their study of Chilean secondary schools, found that parents often choose schools based on the social composition of the student body and proximity rather than pedagogical quality – information about internal grouping practices is rarely disclosed, leading to hidden forms of differentiation. A similar dynamic is observed in Flanders. According to De Fraine et al. (2003: 843), students are not randomly distributed across schools; private (mostly Catholic) schools typically enrol pupils from more privileged backgrounds than public schools. Although Flemish schools have limited control over their overall intake, they still implement internal classroom-level differentiation. Importantly, as De Fraine et al. (2003: 855) argue, teachers cannot be fully held accountable for student interactions and outcomes within these settings, as classroom dynamics are often shaped by pre-existing social contexts. This underscores the role of both formal and informal differentiation – at school and classroom levels

– in shaping educational opportunities and reinforcing inequalities. Before classroom-level grouping begins, schools often enrol students from similar socio-economic or cultural backgrounds, leading to systemic differentiation across schools that trickles down to the classroom level. This pattern means that ability grouping is not merely a pedagogical strategy used by teachers but part of a larger process of educational stratification.

Toomela et al. (2006: 33–34) provides a relevant perspective on the Estonian context, illustrating how school choice has expanded since independence. In addition to mainstream public schools, parents can now select public "elite" schools with competitive entrance exams, "alternative" schools, and private schools. Many schools also implement ability grouping and participate in international projects, however, access to these options is unequal. Private schooling remains costly by Estonian standards, and even public "elite" schools often require additional expenses for special programs, field trips, and materials, making them inaccessible to some families. As a result, parents must carefully weigh the costs and benefits of private or elite public education against their financial means, contributing to stratification and limiting equitable access to quality education.

Additionally, Dupriez (2010: 19) draws parallels between school as an organizational unit and a larger society. He argues that schools do not only transfer knowledge and skills but also serve as a space where students learn how to function in a diverse society. Since young people spend most of their time in schools during their formative years, the environment and the people they interact with can significantly shape who they become. These daily interactions with peers from different backgrounds help students develop the social tools they will later need in life. In this sense, schools act as a small-scale model of the larger society. However, as Gamoran et al. (1995: 688–689) explain, schools also function as organizations that strive for efficiency. They tend to deal with diversity by sorting students – or, as they describe, "raw materials" – into more homogeneous groups to better manage instruction. While this logic may

appear practical from an organizational standpoint, it becomes problematic in the educational context. Grouping students by ability is rarely neutral and often aligns with socioeconomic or ethnic divides, unintentionally reinforcing existing inequalities and creating status hierarchies within schools. What is meant to streamline instruction may, in practice, lead to social stratification early on. Moreover, while ability grouping is meant to support instructional effectiveness, its success is far from guaranteed. As Gamoran et al. (1995: 690) further point out that the key factor to productive differentiation is not just the way the “raw materials” are being sorted out among groups but also the “technology,” that is, which materials and instructional activities are used within the groups. It is, therefore, expected that they would be varied across the groups with adapted methods of instruction. In practice however, Teaching is not a straightforward process with predictable outcomes and there are no universally good methods of instruction – it depends heavily on the dynamic between teachers and students, who are not passive recipients but active participants in learning. Because instructional methods are still debated and outcomes are hard to measure, it is unclear whether grouping by ability improves learning. In fact, it may end up causing more harm than good, especially if the grouping leads to rigid hierarchies or lowers expectations for certain students.

In sum, when regarding the topic of ability grouping the discussion is enriched by the consideration of the broader patterns of differentiation that exist both between and within schools. Grouping practices reflect not only pedagogical strategies but also larger social processes that influence how students experience education. Before turning to the specific forms that ability grouping can take inside classrooms it is crucial to recognize broader implications that may influence the micro-level categories.

## **1.2. Methods of Differentiation**

### **1.1.1 Grouping Practices and Types of Ability Grouping**

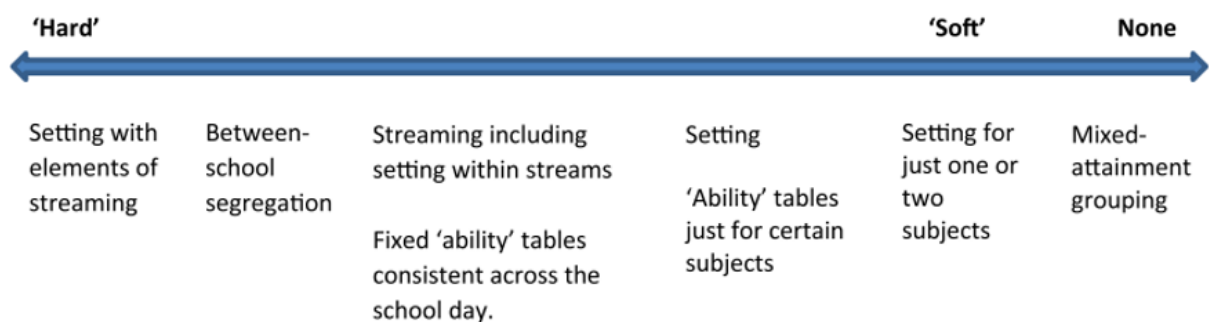
When discussing different grouping practices at the classroom level, two broad categories can be identified: heterogeneous grouping and homogeneous grouping. Heterogeneous grouping, most referred to as mixed-ability grouping, involves bringing together students with a wide variety of skills, knowledge, and backgrounds into a single learning environment. Homogeneous grouping, in contrast, can be divided into two further categories: ability grouping and attainment grouping. The difference between these two lies in the basis on which students are grouped. Official grouping practices for grouping include sorting tests, prior academic achievement, and teacher observations – while unofficial and unethical factors such as socio-economic background, ethnicity, and disciplinary records may also influence decisions in practice.

Ability grouping practices are highly diverse, ranging from flexible arrangements within a classroom to rigid tracking systems that span multiple subjects or entire schools. The degree of flexibility plays a crucial role in shaping students' experiences and opportunities. This section outlines the spectrum of grouping practices internationally and situates Estonian models like *temporühmad* and *tasemerühmad* within this broader context. It also comments on the different levels according to which the students are distributed into different groups.

When it comes to general broad practices, one of the most flexible forms of ability grouping is within-class ability grouping, commonly practised in elementary schools. According to Bolick (2016: 42–43), classroom teachers typically organise groups based on student abilities, skills, or interests, and these groups remain flexible. Students can move between groups as their achievements and needs change, with frequent assessments guiding these adjustments. Typically, a whole-class lesson is delivered before students are divided into smaller groups, with advanced groups working on more challenging tasks and lower-level groups focusing on simpler ones (Deunk et al., 2018; Hallam, 2004; Hamilton, 2011). The goal

is to minimise learning gaps and provide targeted instruction for all ability levels within the same classroom.

Ability grouping, however, is not limited to within-class arrangements. It also extends to between-class grouping, which has a vast variety of practises and tends to be more rigid. Taylor et al. (2022: 214) argue that earlier models describing only *streaming*, *setting*, and *mixed-attainment grouping* are oversimplified. They put different ability grouping practises on a spectrum that ranges from “hard” grouping – such as segregation between schools or *explicit tracking* – to “soft” grouping – such as flexible subject-specific *setting* or *implicit tracking* (Belfi et al. 2011: 63). “Harder” groupings label students more permanently and reduce movement opportunities, whereas “softer” groupings allow greater fluidity and flexibility. The authors argue that this spectrum of grouping practices provides a more nuanced understanding of how different forms of ability grouping impact students, particularly in terms of social equity. The graph below effectively visualises the spectrum of different ability groups, with Estonian ability groupings falling on the “soft” side of the spectrum.



#### Attainment grouping spectrum (Taylor et al. 2022: 204)

This diversity is also reflected in national differences. For instance, in countries like UK, Canada, and Australia, setting is common, meaning grouping happens by subject and tends to

be more flexible. In contrast, explicit tracking is practiced in countries like Japan, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Germany, where students are sorted into separate, rigid educational tracks (academic, technical, vocational) early on, with significant long-term implications (Belfi et al., 2011: 63; Dupriez, 2010: 19). In explicitly tracked systems, a student's group placement is visible to peers, parents, and teachers and directly affects future educational and career prospects. In countries with setting, however, ability grouping is usually less visible and less legally formalised.

According to Domina et al. (2019), tracking in schools is far more complex than simply labelling systems as grouped by ability or ungrouped. They argue that many studies overlook the fact that all individual groupings by ability have their own unique qualities, which makes generalisation difficult. Kerchkoff (1986: 857) already mentions that in his study contrasting American tracking with British streaming and setting. He mentions that American schools likely have similar internal variations in tracking for subjects like English and math. However, American studies may overlook these nuances by relying on overly broad curriculum classifications, which can obscure important within-track differences. The authors argue that to really understand how tracking affects students, we need to study the specific features of tracking systems – like how students are grouped, how flexible the groupings are, and what subjects they apply to – and how these features interact. Only then can we design better, fairer teaching practices.

Thus, Domina et al. (2019: 297–299) propose a multidimensional approach to differentiating between types of ability grouping, outlining five key dimensions: (1) curricular differentiation, (2) classroom skills homogeneity, (3) track exclusiveness, (4) track stability, and (5) track scope. Curricular differentiation can be horizontal – where students choose different subjects based on interest (this form is practiced mostly in higher education) – or vertical, which involves teaching the same subject at different levels of difficulty or pace, depending on

students' abilities or performance (practiced in primary and middle schools). Classroom skills homogeneity refers to how similar students' skill levels are within a class, which is often affected by a multitude of factors: test scores, teacher recommendations, parental input, and student choice, which leads to greater heterogeneity within the classroom. Track exclusiveness looks at how many students are allowed access to advanced courses, and how inclusive or selective those systems are. Track stability reflects how flexible the grouping system is. In some schools, students are placed in a track early and rarely change levels – this is called a high-stability or tournament-style system. In such systems, it's common for students to move down to a lower track but very rare for them to move up. Other schools have low-stability systems, where students can more easily move between levels over time. Allowing movement between tracks can help better match students with the right level of instruction, which may improve learning. However, if track changes mostly go downward, or if moving tracks is seen as a sign of failure, it could harm students' motivation and increase inequality. Finally, track scope considers whether grouping affects all subjects equally or varies between them; in high-scope systems, students stay in the same level across all subjects. High-scope systems also tend to reinforce social divisions: students mostly interact with peers from the same track, which can lead them to strongly identify with their track and widen gaps in achievement and opportunity.

Using longitudinal data from 23 middle schools, Domina et al. (2019) found significant variation across these dimensions both between schools and within individual schools over time. Moreover, the dimensions did not strongly correlate with each other, suggesting that even tracking systems, considered by Taylor et al. (2022: 204) as rigid, unchanging grouping practices, are not consistently implemented and often evolve in unpredictable ways. These findings underscore the complexity of tracking and the risks of oversimplifying it in policy or research. In the Estonian context, where practices like *temporühmad* and *tasemerühmad* are employed without clear legal regulation or unified definitions (Tatomir, 2021), Domina et al.'s

framework is especially relevant. It highlights the importance of analysing how specific aspects of grouping are enacted in different schools, rather than assuming a uniform model of ability grouping. This multidimensional approach offers a useful lens through which to evaluate the varying interpretations, degrees of flexibility, and instructional consequences of grouping in Estonian EFL classrooms.

Overall, Estonian ability grouping practices are relatively flexible compared to international examples of rigid streaming and tracking. Students theoretically have more mobility between groups, and decisions are adapted based on observed changes in student progress. Nevertheless, issues of subjectivity in group formation and the occasional confusion over grouping criteria remain ongoing challenges.

As seen, ability grouping practices vary widely in their rigidity and impact on student mobility. Estonia's *temporühmad* and *tasemerühmad* models fall on the softer, more flexible end of the grouping spectrum, allowing greater adaptability to individual student needs compared to stricter forms like tracking and streaming. Recognizing where Estonian practices stand internationally helps frame the analysis of their strengths and challenges. The next sections will examine the research supporting and criticising ability grouping in more depth.

### **1.3. Theoretical Framework: Connecting Key Theories to Ability Grouping**

Understanding ability grouping also requires considering the psychological and educational theories that explain how grouping impacts student learning and development. Several key frameworks, such as Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development, the Big-Fish-Little-Pond Effect, and the Pygmalion effect, offer insights into both the potential advantages and the risks associated with grouping practices. These theories highlight how group

composition influences not only instruction but also student motivation, self-image, and achievement over time.

One of the earliest key theoretical frameworks referenced in discussions of ability grouping is Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). According to Vygotsky (1978), students learn best when working on tasks slightly beyond their current capabilities, provided they receive appropriate support or scaffolding. This idea has been used to support the rationale behind ability grouping, as it allows teachers to tailor instruction more precisely to the readiness levels of students within each group, potentially enhancing learning outcomes (Deunk, 2018: 32). However, Vygotsky (1978) also highlighted the importance of social interaction in learning, particularly the role of more capable peers in helping others progress. From this perspective, mixed-ability classrooms may better support collaborative learning and peer scaffolding, which are also central to Vygotsky's theory. Thus, while ZPD can be used to justify ability grouping for instructional efficiency, it can equally be interpreted to support heterogeneous grouping to promote social learning and equity.

The Big-Fish-Little-Pond Effect (BFLPE) is a well-documented psychological phenomenon that highlights how students' academic self-concept is shaped by their peer environment. As Belfi (2011: 66–67) explains, in explicitly tracked systems – where students are grouped rigidly by ability – high-achieving students may experience lower academic self-confidence due to constant comparison with equally capable peers. In contrast, students placed in lower or mixed-ability groups often perceive themselves more positively, as they become “big fish” in a “small pond.” Over time, students in lower tracks may even develop stronger self-perceptions than their higher-tracked counterparts, particularly in supportive and less competitive environments. In more flexible or implicitly tracked systems, the BFLPE tends to appear less frequently, likely because students encounter a broader range of peer comparisons, reducing the intensity of upward or downward comparison.

Dupriez (2010: 38) also identifies the BFLPE as one of the key psychosocial mechanisms connected to ability grouping, alongside the Pygmalion effect. A term coined by Rosenthal et al. (1968), which refers to a psychological phenomenon in which higher expectations lead to an increase in performance. In the classroom context, it suggests that when teachers hold positive expectations for their students, those students are more likely to perform better. It implies that the impact of grouping on student achievement is less about pedagogy itself and more about the expectations and instructional adjustments teachers make based on group composition – such as modifying the pace, complexity, or depth of instruction. These changes often reinforce existing disparities: high-achieving groups receive more enriched learning experiences, while lower groups may be limited to basic or repetitive tasks. This is not purely instructional but also a psychosocial issue rooted in labelling. Teachers form expectations based on group placement, which in turn affects students' self-image and how they are perceived by peers. As these perceptions become internalized, students' academic identity is shaped accordingly, reflecting the self-fulfilling prophecy described by the Pygmalion effect.

Lastly, Dweck's (2000) theory of motivation and learning highlights why the conceptual confusion between the terms ability grouping and attainment grouping matters. According to Dweck, students with a fixed mindset view intelligence as static and are more likely to give up when faced with challenges, whereas students with a growth mindset believe that ability can be developed through effort. Ability grouping – particularly when based on poorly defined or rigid perceptions of “ability” – can reinforce a fixed mindset, especially for students placed in lower groups. Students may internalize the idea that their group placement reflects permanent limitations rather than temporary performance levels. Dweck's work thus underscores why labelling students according to perceived ability, rather than demonstrated attainment, carries significant risks for motivation, self-esteem, and long-term educational outcomes.

The theoretical frameworks discussed reveal that ability grouping affects students on multiple levels: instructional, psychological, and social. While it may provide more targeted instruction, it also carries risks of reinforcing inequities through labelling and comparison effects. Understanding these theories is crucial for critically evaluating ability grouping practices, particularly in contexts where both learning outcomes and student well-being are valued.

#### **1.4. Ability Grouping: Evidence for and Against**

Dupriez's (2010) literature review provides a comprehensive overview of studies on ability grouping up to that point, including several key works in French that were inaccessible to the author (Van Zanten, 2001; Opdenakker, 2006; Duru-Bellat, 1997). His analysis primarily focuses on ethnographic and natural-setting studies, concluding that the overall impact of ability grouping on student achievement is close to zero and often detrimental for lower-achieving students. The following overview aims to build on Dupriez's findings by incorporating more recent literature, presenting both supportive and critical perspectives on ability grouping, including studies not covered in his review and those supporting its implementation.

Research supportive of ability grouping highlights its potential benefits when effectively implemented. Hallinan et al. (2003), in a large-scale study involving over 4,000 students across six US high schools, found that students in higher-ability groups benefited from access to rigorous curricula, experienced teachers, and a more academically focused environment. These conditions led to improved academic outcomes, with higher engagement and more effective learning. However, the study also noted that lower-ability groups often received less challenging instruction and fewer academic resources, hindering their progress. Hallinan et al.

suggest that reforming grouping practices to prioritize academic criteria for placement and improve instructional quality across all groups could mitigate these disparities.

Robinson (2008) examined within-class ability grouping among language-minority, low-income Hispanic students using data from the nationally representative ECLS-K study. His analysis found that ability grouping in kindergarten improved reading achievement, and these gains persisted into first grade if grouping continued. This demonstrates that level-appropriate, small-group instruction can be particularly effective in closing early achievement gaps for disadvantaged students. The study emphasizes the importance of sustained grouping to maintain benefits over time.

Hallam et al. (2004) investigated primary school students' perceptions of ability grouping in six UK schools, each with different grouping strategies. Through semi-structured interviews, students reported both positive and negative experiences. Some appreciated the focused support and collaborative learning within groups, while others expressed frustration over group dynamics or the stigma of being placed in lower groups. Hallam concludes that while ability grouping can be beneficial, it can also heighten visibility of attainment differences, leading to stigmatization and negative self-perceptions among lower-ability students.

On the other hand, several studies caution against ability grouping, citing its potential to reinforce inequalities. Van Zanten (2001) observed that teachers in suburban French schools often adapted curricular expectations to perceived student abilities, sometimes prioritizing classroom order over academic learning. This adjustment tended to lower expectations for certain groups, perpetuating disparities.

Opdenakker et al. (2006) explored the effects of class attainment levels on mathematics learning in Flemish secondary schools. Their structural equation model revealed that higher average class attainment positively influenced learning opportunities and the classroom

environment, but the overall effect was moderate. They noted that lower-attainment groups often experienced less stimulating learning environments, which impacted student progress.

Duru-Bellat et al. (1997) conducted a large-scale longitudinal study of 32,000 students across 212 lower secondary schools in France. Their findings showed that students in high-achieving classes made substantial progress, particularly those who initially struggled, while mixed-ability classes also supported student achievement without harming high performers. The study concluded that mixed-ability settings may foster equitable learning opportunities while still benefiting high achievers.

VanderHart (2006) analysed data from the 1992 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and found that ability grouping in American schools was influenced more by socioeconomic and racial factors than by academic need. His study suggested that tracking sometimes served as a mechanism for segregation, reflecting community biases rather than actual differences in student ability.

Gamoran et al. (1995) conducted a two-year study in 25 secondary schools in the American Midwest, comparing honours, regular, and remedial tracks. They found significant disparities in instructional quality: high-track classes featured richer academic content and greater student engagement, while lower-track classes often faced off-task behaviour and less meaningful instruction. These differences contributed to widening achievement gaps over time.

Domina et al. (2019) studied 23 Californian middle schools, examining how tracking dimensions like skill homogeneity and stability impacted achievement. They found that high achievers benefitted in English, while low achievers struggled in skills-homogeneous math classrooms. This suggests that while tracking can support advanced learners, it can also marginalize struggling students if not carefully managed.

Smith (2020), summarizing Reassessing 'Ability' Grouping by Francis et al. (2019), argued against ability grouping in UK schools, claiming it increased inequality and negatively

affected student confidence and aspirations. The authors advocated for mixed attainment grouping as a more equitable alternative but acknowledged implementation challenges such as teacher workload and classroom management.

Kerckhoff (1986) conducted a longitudinal study of a 1958 British cohort, finding that high-ability students benefited academically from ability grouping, while lower-ability students fell further behind. This gap was particularly noticeable in reading, suggesting that ability grouping may exacerbate educational inequalities rather than bridge them.

Allende et al. (2024) found that between-class ability grouping in Chile negatively impacted student achievement in reading and mathematics, particularly for those from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Their study highlighted that grouping practices could deepen educational disparities in public schools.

Chisaka (2002) studied Zimbabwean schools and found that ability grouping often segregated low-ability students, providing them with fewer resources and reinforcing negative stereotypes. His findings suggest that grouping practices in underprivileged schools may perpetuate social inequalities and limit learning opportunities for marginalized students.

Overall, the literature presents a complex view of ability grouping. While some studies highlight its potential for targeted support and improved outcomes, particularly for high-achieving students, others reveal its capacity to reinforce inequalities and limit opportunities for those in lower groups. These findings suggest that careful implementation is crucial to avoid deepening educational disparities.

## **1.5. EFL practice in Ability Groups**

Ability grouping in EFL contexts has not been studied as extensively as in general education. Much of the available research primarily focuses on college students and generally

supports the practice of ability grouping for enhancing EFL learning outcomes. However, there remains a significant gap in understanding how ability grouping is implemented across different educational settings, particularly in middle schools. Beyond EFL, there is also limited research on ability grouping in other foreign language studies, indicating a broader need for exploration in diverse linguistic learning environments. In the Estonian context, research is particularly sparse, with only three relevant studies identified (Kersna, 2018; Tatomir et al. 2021; Toomela et al. 2006). This lack of investigation highlights the necessity for more research to understand the implications of ability grouping for EFL learners in Estonia.

Huang (2024) explore EFL third-year students' attitudes toward ability grouping at a junior college in Taiwan. This study aimed to explore students' attitudes toward ability grouping in a junior college in Taiwan, investigating patterns of attitudes, differences across proficiency levels, and the reasons behind these attitudes. Huang (2024) emphasises that unlike prior studies that focused on differentiated curricula, this research examined ability grouping within a unified curriculum. The study employed both qualitative and quantitative data gathering methods and used surveys which had 277 respondents and semi-structured interviews which had 26 participants. The semi structured interviews were used to gather students' experiences with and attitudes to ability grouping. The goal was to find out how students perceived ability grouping in unified curriculum setting. The study found that students' attitudes toward ability grouping are shaped by social interactions and self-perception. While some initially felt anxiety and inferiority due to public displays of proficiency, being with similarly skilled peers also fostered belonging and reduced fear of judgment. Teacher quality was identified as more impactful than grouping itself; effective teachers who adapted the curriculum to different proficiency levels significantly improved student experiences. Personal motives influenced acceptance – advanced students aimed to maintain high GPAs, while lower-level students saw it as a chance for equal learning. Overall, successful ability grouping relies on teachers' ability to tailor

instruction and meet diverse needs, with attitudes evolving based on students' social and learning experiences.

Zamani (2016) investigates the impact of mixed-ability and ability-based grouping in a cooperative learning (CL) setting among Iranian university EFL students. This quasi-experimental study involved 66 female participants, grouped as heterogeneous (mixed proficiency), high-level homogeneous, and low-level homogeneous, based on preliminary English test (PET) and writing test results. The findings suggest that CL improves writing performance across both grouping types, with low-proficiency students benefiting particularly from heterogeneous grouping due to scaffolding from more proficient peers, consistent with Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory. However, the study's scope is limited by its quasi-experimental design, which, according to Dupriez (2010: 28), can lack authenticity, and by its narrow participant profile – adult female university students – who may not reflect the learning dynamics of younger or mixed-gender groups. The findings, while promising, may not be easily generalized to middle school contexts, where learning styles and classroom behaviours differ significantly.

Khazaenezhad et al. (2012) investigated the impact of ability grouping and varying weekly exposure to English on the academic achievement of non-English major undergraduates at the University of Isfahan. Fourteen groups were formed – eight heterogeneous and six ability-based – using a placement test to assign students to 2-hour, 3-hour, or 4-hour weekly classes. All groups followed the same study material, and learning outcomes were measured with an end-of-course achievement test. The results showed that ability-grouped students outperformed their randomly assigned peers, suggesting that separating students by ability enhances learning. Increased weekly exposure to English also helped reduce performance gaps among ability levels, supporting tailored instructional time for lower-achieving students. While there were no significant gender differences within groups, gender interactions with ability grouping showed

improvements, highlighting its potential benefits for all learners. The study encourages implementation of ability grouping practice globally based on these results, which seems dubious based on how specific the conditions that it took place in. As it was again a quasi-experimental study in a university setting and Asian country, meaning that these results cannot be used as basis for influencing the educational decisions and strategies in the Estonian context or Estonian basic schools.

Kim (2012: 291) highlights the lack of research on ability grouping in South Korean EFL education, particularly with the implementation of the revised 7th National Curriculum, which introduced this practice as “one of the most provocative educational policies.” The study examined how ability grouping was applied in Korean middle school English classes and its perceived benefits and challenges based on teacher and student questionnaires. The findings showed that most schools used regrouping – a form of between-class grouping – except in ninth grade due to exam preparation. High-achieving students appreciated the faster pace, while low-achieving students faced issues of labelling, unequal treatment, and low expectations, reinforcing educational inequality. Teachers preferred high-ability groups due to fewer classroom management challenges but struggled to differentiate instruction effectively because of standardized materials. Kim concluded that ability grouping tended to widen achievement gaps, echoing the idea of “the rich get richer, and the poor get poorer” (Kim, 2012: 306), and called for further research involving classroom observations and input from administrators and parents. The study was not intended to be generalized, as it focused on the specific South Korean context during educational reform (Kim, 2012: 306).

The existing body of research underscores the potential benefits of ability grouping for EFL learners, such as enhanced academic achievement and improved classroom dynamics. However, the effectiveness of this practice is heavily dependent on the quality of instruction and the ability to adapt curricula to meet diverse learning needs. While studies like Huang

(2024) and Khazaenezhad et al. (2012) highlight the positive impact of homogeneous grouping on learning outcomes, Kim (2012) cautions against the risks of inequality and labelling. In the Estonian context, the concept of *temporühmad* provides a unique approach to ability grouping that merits further investigation. Expanding research in this area, particularly in basic schools' settings, would be instrumental in identifying best practices that support equitable and effective language education.

The literature on ability grouping in EFL contexts presents a complex picture of its benefits and drawbacks. While ability grouping has the potential to facilitate differentiated instruction and cater to diverse student needs, it also raises concerns about equity, student self-esteem, and long-term academic outcomes. The reviewed studies highlight that the effectiveness of ability grouping largely depends on its implementation, the awareness of teachers regarding its theoretical foundations, and the adaptability of instructional practices to the needs of various groups. Moreover, the differentiation between ability grouping and attainment grouping remains a critical aspect that influences the effectiveness of these strategies in practice.

In Estonian EFL classrooms, where ability grouping is commonly applied, understanding its nuances and theoretical underpinnings is essential for optimizing learning outcomes and promoting fair opportunities for all students. This literature review underscores the importance of teacher awareness, reflective practice, and ongoing assessment to ensure that ability grouping serves its intended purpose without reinforcing inequities. Future research should continue to explore the long-term impacts of ability grouping in diverse educational settings, as well as the perceptions and experiences of both students and teachers to inform more equitable and effective language teaching practices.

## **2. EFL ABILITY GROUPING IN ESTONIAN BASIC SCHOOLS: TEACHERS' PRACTICES AND PERSPECTIVES**

The empirical part of this paper consists of a study on EFL teachers' attitudes towards ability grouping as a method in EFL classes in basic schools of Estonia. The first subchapter deals with the overview of the participants and methods used to gather data. The second subchapter reports the data collected and the last subchapter discusses the findings and draws connections with existing literature on the topic.

### **2.1 Methodology and Participants**

Understanding teachers' firsthand experiences and opinions was crucial for answering the research questions of this study. To capture these insights, a qualitative research design was chosen. Interviews were selected as the main method of data collection to allow teachers to speak openly and reflect on their experiences with ability grouping in EFL instruction. This section provides an overview of how participants were selected, how interviews were conducted, and the procedures used to process the interview data.

The goal of the interviews was to learn what EFL teachers at Estonian basic schools consider the benefits and drawbacks of ability grouping in EFL lessons; what specific criteria and methods they use to assign students to different ability groups; and how they adapt their instructional methods to fit students from different groups. Additionally, the interviews aimed to find out whether teachers understood the core premise behind ability grouping: its intended purpose for both students and teachers, as well as their familiarity with different terms related to the method (*temporühmad* and *tasemerühmad*).

This thesis employed qualitative methods to gather data in alignment with the research questions, as it was crucial for the author to hear directly from teachers about their opinions and experiences regarding ability grouping in EFL lessons in Estonian schools. While surveys or

open-ended questionnaires could have provided general insights into whether teachers support or oppose the system, interviews allowed for a deeper understanding of why teachers hold certain views. Face-to-face conversations offer more nuanced insights compared to yes-or-no surveys or written responses, as they enable richer discussions and allow participants to express themselves more freely. Furthermore, sharing thoughts through an online form can be challenging, especially for busy teachers, which might limit the quality and depth of their responses.

To achieve this deeper understanding, semi-structured interviews were chosen as the primary method of data collection. Unlike questionnaires, which tend to restrict the depth and scope of responses, semi-structured interviews provided an opportunity to explore participants' views in greater detail and allowed for follow-up questions when necessary. The semi-structured format, as opposed to a fully structured one, offered the interviewer flexibility to adapt the flow of the conversation, change the order of questions, and introduce new ones based on teachers' responses. For instance, questions related to teaching mixed-ability groups were skipped if the interviewee had no relevant experience, ensuring that the discussion remained meaningful and contextually relevant. In turn, question prying into who the teachers thought the system was created for – students or teachers – naturally emerged in the conversation with the first few teachers and was later incorporated into the other interviews because the author was curious in how the other teachers would respond to it.

The author started the preparation for interviews by conducting an online search for schools that practised ability grouping, and specifically *temporühmad*, in their EFL lessons. The search identified ten schools across four cities: Tallinn, Tartu, Paide, and Võru. The principals of all these schools were first contacted to receive permission to conduct interviews with EFL teachers. Five principals responded, and two more were contacted successfully with the help of the University of Tartu. As a result, six schools agreed to participate.

The next step was reaching out to teachers, which was also done by email. Twelve emails were sent to teachers at the schools which principals agreed to participate. The main criterion for selection was that teachers had to be teaching EFL in ability groups in a basic school. Out of twelve, ten teachers replied. One of the schools that responded initially did not thus end up participating as the teachers from this school did not respond to the invitation emails. All ten teachers interviewed had at least around two years of teaching experience, with some having taught in both mixed-ability and ability-grouped settings. The table below (Table 1) shows the education level for all teachers, their work experience in years. The interviews were conducted in the middle of the academic year, so the total years worked was rounded for all teachers. If they have worked with mixed ability groups before, what grades they are teaching this year and of which how many are grouped by ability.

**Table 1. Teachers' characteristics.**

<b>Teachers</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Years worked (approx.)</b>	<b>Experience with mixed ability groups</b>	<b>Grades taught this year</b>	<b>Grouped by ability (<i>temporühmad</i>)</b>
<b>T1</b>	?	3	Yes	1–6	3–6
<b>T2</b>	MA in teaching EFL	2	No	4, 7	4, 7
<b>T3</b>	Program <i>Noored Kooli</i> , teacher qualification, 1st year of MA in teaching EFL	5	No	3, 7–9	3
<b>T4</b>	MA of Science, teacher qualification certificate.	11	No	3–9	5–9
<b>T5</b>	Education is Special Education	3	Yes (primary school)	1–4	2–4
<b>T6</b>	MA in Primary Education, with a specialisation in English	3	Yes	3–8	5–8
<b>T7</b>	Tallinn Pedagogical University, Primary Education Program, with the qualification to teach English up to the 6th grade, two-year program	23	Yes (primary school and the 4 <sup>th</sup> grade)	4	–

	with authorization to teach up to the 8th grade				
<b>T8</b>	MA in teaching EFL	17	Yes	3–5, 8	4, 5, 8
<b>T9</b>	MA in teaching EFL	10	No	3–5, 9	3
<b>T10</b>	MA in teaching EFL	25	Yes	6–9	6–9

During the interviews, it became clear that three participants did not fully meet the initial criteria. Teachers 3 (T3) and teacher 9 (T9) were teaching *temporühmad* only in the third grade, as their school had just transitioned from attainment groups to ability groups, while the secondary-level students, who they taught were still studying in attainment groups. Another interview was conducted with a head teacher (teacher 7), who did not have continuous teaching experience in ability grouping but had some involvement through substitution. Insights from this interview regarding administrative perspectives were also included where relevant. While ten interviews were conducted, the main analysis draws on eight interviews that fully aligned with the study's focus. Partial insights from the remaining two interviews were used where relevant.

All ten interviews were conducted between February and March 2025. Except for one, which was held in person, all interviews took place via Zoom, ensuring convenience for participants the author could not meet face-to-face. The interviews lasted approximately 30 to 40 minutes and were audio-recorded with the participants' consent. All interviews were conducted in Estonian, as all the participating teachers were native speakers and would naturally express themselves more easily in their own language. Each interview consisted of 12 open-ended questions, organised around five key themes: (1) teaching experience, (2) understanding of core terminology, (3) comparisons with mixed-ability teaching, (4) attitudes towards the system, and (5) suggestions for improvement.

However, as the data collection progressed, certain responses from participants prompted the researcher to introduce additional questions in later interviews. These emergent questions were not part of the original interview guide but were introduced to explore themes

and insights raised by earlier participants. While not all participants were asked the same set of supplementary questions, all were asked the core questions, enabling comparison across cases. The additional questions, though not generalisable across the entire sample, provided valuable contextual depth and contributed to the richness of the data. This approach aligns with the goal of exploring teachers' experiences and perceptions in depth, rather than seeking strictly generalisable results.

After collecting the data, the author transcribed the interviews using *Tekstiks*, an Estonian speech transcription system developed by Tallinn University of Technology (Olev et al., 2022). The author then listened to all the recordings again and manually edited the parts that *Tekstiks* had misinterpreted. Following this, the interviews were uploaded in two parts to *QCAmap* (Mayring et al., 2014), an open-access web application for systematic text analysis.

The author applied inductive category formation during the coding process, allowing the categories and themes to emerge organically, shaping the structure of the following sections. Initially, four files were created under each research question, and four interviews were uploaded into each. This first batch was used to develop preliminary categories, optimizing the coding process for the remaining five interviews. All four interviews were color-coded under each research question. Once the codes were finalized, the remaining four interviews were uploaded, and the coding process was completed.

The codes were then grouped into broader categories and structured into four distinct sections. Relevant extracts from each interview, aligned with the respective research question, were copied into a separate document, combined with extracts from other interviews, and organized under appropriate subthemes. Recurring themes in the responses were identified and summarized. The author aimed to preserve as much of the original content (quotes from the interviews) as possible in the findings section to maintain authenticity and capture specific details. Each section is linked to its respective research question, demonstrating how sorting

decisions impact the overall study process and influence teachers' opinions on the system. The findings section takes on a similar structure to the literature review where it starts with more general categories to shape the premise for the opinions on grouping practices.

## **2.2 Teachers' Understanding of the terms *temporühmad* and *tasemerühmad***

It was essential for the author to investigate whether the teachers they interviewed understood the distinction between the terms ability grouping or *temporühmad* and attainment grouping or *tasemerühmad*. Previous literature (Tatomir et al. 2021), alongside author's own experience, indicated that many educators may not fully comprehend this difference. It is vital for teachers to have a clear understanding of these concepts, as misinterpretation or lack of understanding could significantly impair their ability to implement the grouping systems effectively. Without a proper grasp of the underlying principles, teachers may struggle to organize students appropriately and provide the necessary support tailored to their individual learning needs.

This section presents the findings on how teachers defined the terms *temporühmad* (paced groups) and *tasemerühmad* (ability groups). The analysis revealed stark differences in how less experienced and more experienced teachers understood these concepts and how they perceived their practical application in schools. For clarity, the findings are presented separately for each group before drawing connections between them.

### **2.2.1 Less Experienced Teachers' Understanding**

Among the less experienced teachers (T1, T2, T5, and T6), there was noticeable uncertainty and variation in how the terms were defined. T1 expressed some confusion about

the exact definition of *tasemerühmad*, mentioning that they had not studied it formally or received specific explanations. However, T1 perceived *tasemerühmad* as groups formed based on an initial assessment of students' skill levels. In contrast, T1 described *temporühmad* as being based on the teacher's ongoing observation of students' learning speed—whether they are faster or slower learners.

Similarly, T2 explained that *temporühmad* are structured according to how quickly students grasp new material, while *tasemerühmad* are organized around established language proficiency benchmarks. T2 illustrated this understanding by stating: "I assume that *temporühmad* are simply about how quickly you acquire knowledge, and *tasemerühmad* are about what level you are at—like, for example, B1 level or A2 level."

T6 viewed *temporühmad* as primarily connected to students' working speed, while *tasemerühmad* focused more on grouping students with similar skill levels, even if their working pace differed. They observed that in their own classes, students in the faster-paced group tended to have a higher skill level, while those in the slower-paced group needed more support: "The pace and level go hand in hand," T6 noted, suggesting that differences in speed often reflect differences in ability as well.

T5, however, offered a different perspective, defining the two terms more uniquely than the others. They explained that *tasemerühmad* could involve students being grouped across different grades based on similar proficiency levels, referencing practices of acceleration. For *temporühmad*, T5 described them as grouping students within the same grade based on how quickly they progress. Interestingly, T5 questioned the necessity of differentiating between the two terms, suggesting that "there shouldn't be any difference," and that both systems ultimately separate faster-paced and slower-paced learners. They concluded, "Tempo (pace) and tase (level) are probably very, very similar terms. The level is just different [in the groups]."

Overall, the less experienced teachers seemed to grasp the general concept of *temporühmad* being pace-based and *tasemerühmad* being level-based, but their descriptions often overlapped, revealing some conceptual ambiguity.

### 2.2.2 More Experienced Teachers' Understanding

In contrast, the more experienced teachers (T4, T7, T8, and T10) demonstrated a deeper understanding of the terms and their practical implications. Many of them acknowledged that the shift from *tasemerühmad* to *temporühmad* was largely terminological, intended to reduce stigma and competition among students.

T4 admitted some confusion over the exact differences, noting that in their school, "we've probably been using these terms almost synonymously." However, they viewed *temporühm* as a more neutral and flexible concept that emphasizes individual learning speeds rather than rigid ability labels. According to T4, the term *temporühm* was less judgmental:

"It's better to use the term *temporühm* because it suggests that the student can learn at a pace that suits them, rather than clearly distinguishing levels like 'you're in the third group,' or 'you're somewhat lower or less smart than the first group.'"

T7 reinforced this perspective, explaining that the shift to *temporühm* was influenced by community concerns over the competitive atmosphere that *tasemerühmad* created, with distinctions like "elite classes" versus "weaker classes": "Such a system did create competition and some kind of resentment among students, like 'we are the stupid ones, and you are now the smart ones.'" T7 described *temporühm* as a "milder term," even though grouping was still largely ability-based, determined by fourth-grade test results. Interestingly, T7 pointed out that students with stronger English skills—often gained through gaming or home environments—naturally progressed faster, highlighting the blurred line between pace and ability.

T8 also noted that the term *temporühmad* is used intentionally to avoid negative labeling, but they acknowledged that paced groups still reflect ability differences: "Some are capable of more, and others achieve a better level than others." They expressed skepticism about whether pacing alone could equalize learning outcomes, pointing out that some students, especially those with learning difficulties, struggle to catch up despite the differentiated pacing.

T10 added further insight, emphasizing that *temporühmad* are based on students' work pace, not their proficiency. However, they admitted that those who work faster are often more capable: "Those children who work faster are also very often stronger or more capable." They noted that some students are slow in completing tasks but still possess strong language skills, challenging the assumption that pace always matches ability.

Interestingly, T4, T7 and T8 acknowledged that the term *temporühm* was intentionally introduced to soften perceptions, confirming previous findings by Kersna (2018). However, they admitted that in practice, the categorization often mirrors the distinctions made under *tasemerühmad*, as ability differences are still evident even when the language is softened.

The contrasting perspectives between less experienced and more experienced teachers highlight an evolving understanding of *temporühmad* and *tasemerühmad*. Less experienced teachers tended to see the terms more literally—*temporühmad* for pace and *tasemerühmad* for skill level—while more experienced teachers recognized that the distinction is often superficial. The latter group was more reflective about how terminology shifts were driven by attempts to reduce stigmatization, even though practical outcomes remained largely ability based. This nuanced understanding among more experienced teachers suggests that the practical realities of teaching challenge the idealized separation of pace and ability.

### **2.3 EFL Grouping practices across Estonian schools**

In this section, the author will examine the grouping practices employed in the schools of the interviewed teachers, analysing them on a school-by-school basis. This exploration is particularly significant as it provides insight into the variations in implementation across different educational settings. This section presents results in three parts, the first part comments on the initial grouping practices across schools interviewed: what criteria and methods are used by the schools to group students. The second part comments on the make-up of the formed groups and on what tendencies are observed in them. And the last part presents the findings on the practices of transferring students between groups in the schools interviewed.

### 2.3.1 Initial grouping practices and criteria of grouping

**Table 2. Grouping practices across schools.**

<b>Schools</b>	<b>Teachers</b>	<b>Year of initial grouping</b>	<b>Sorting method</b>	<b>Number of groups</b>
S1	T2, T8	3	Teachers' observations	2–3
S2	T3, T9	3	Test, teacher observations'	2
S3	T1, T5	2	Teachers' observations	2
S4	T6, T7	5	Test, teachers' observations	4–5
S5	T4	5	Test, teachers' observations	4–5
S6	T10	3	Teachers' observations	2

The findings reveal notable differences in how grouping practices are implemented across schools, particularly regarding the timing of grouping, the criteria for placement, and the organization of groups. However, similarities also emerge, especially in how group sizes are adjusted based on cohort size and the perceived needs of students. This section synthesizes the grouping practices across the six schools (S1–S6), drawing connections where patterns exist

and highlighting key differences where they diverge. The table 2 visually represents the differences in grouping practices across the schools studied.

In S1, grouping begins in the third grade, with primary school teachers deciding the initial placements since "English teachers...don't really know who these students are" (T2). Placement is based on teacher assessment rather than formal tests, with an emphasis on minimizing "unnecessary testing" (T8). The number of groups is determined by cohort size: smaller cohorts have two groups (fast and slow), while larger ones have three (fast, medium, and slow). According to T8, group sizes are adjusted pragmatically, and slower groups tend to be smaller to provide necessary support. However, T2 observed that even in these smaller groups, significant teacher assistance is often required: "Out of the 12 students, maybe 10 of them need help."

S3 also adopts an early grouping model but initiates it even earlier—at the end of the first grade. Grouping decisions are made based on teacher assessments and classroom performance rather than standardized tests (T1, T5). Subject teachers collaborate in the process, focusing on factors such as motivation, learning pace, and classroom behaviour (T1). Group sizes, much like in S1, are adapted according to the cohort size, with slower-paced groups generally being smaller to ensure more focused support. T1 provided an example, noting that their slower group consists of "eleven students," while the faster group has "fifteen or sixteen." T5 added that sizes depend on the yearly cohort, but groups are mostly "more or less equal."

In S6, English instruction begins as early as the first grade, though initial learning is mainly oral-based, focusing on "playing, singing, no writing at all—it's basically like an oral course" (T10). Grouping into *temporühmad* starts in the third grade when students begin writing. As T10 explained, "The division happens starting from the third grade when they begin writing. That's when it becomes clear who has difficulties or not." Grouping decisions are made collaboratively by the subject and grade teachers, with the latter providing insight since they

“have a better picture than we [EFL teachers] do, since we only see them once or twice a week.”

Writing speed is a significant criterion for group placement, as it indicates how quickly students complete tasks, organize materials, and maintain focus. T10 observed that some students “create little masterpieces” in their notebooks, but this neatness often slows them down.

Unlike the early grouping in S1, S3, and S6, S4 and S5 delay ability grouping until the end of the fourth grade. Both T6 and T7 from S4 support this timing, believing that younger students benefit more from collective learning experiences that foster unity (T6). Group placement in S4 is determined through a combination of sorting tests and teacher observations. T6 highlighted that “tests don't always reflect a student's ability,” and teacher insights into classroom performance can influence final decisions. Similarly, T7 noted that behaviour and class participation could also affect grouping, even if test scores suggest otherwise.

S5 follows a similar structure to S4, with grouping initiated at the end of the fourth grade. T4 explained that this delayed grouping is intentional: “We don't group them into paced groups right away in the second or third grade but a bit later when the teacher has had the chance to observe them.” This observation period allows teachers to assess students' learning pace and abilities more accurately. In addition to teacher evaluations, S5 administers a “small assessment, which could be called a group test” at the end of the fourth grade. This assessment traditionally included “gap-fill exercises, grammar, and vocabulary tasks,” but recently a writing section was added to better differentiate students for the fastest-paced group. T4 praised this addition, stating that it “turned out to be a good addition, and thanks to that, the groups are now a bit more fairly divided.”

Regarding group sizes, S4 and S5 align with the flexible grouping seen in S1 and S3. T4 noted that “in the faster-paced groups, there are usually more students—around twenty, maybe sometimes even a couple more—and in the slower-paced groups, there are fewer, around

ten or eleven students.” T4 also emphasized that these numbers are heavily dependent on the cohort size of that particular year.

Across the schools, two distinct approaches to grouping emerged: early grouping (S1, S3, S6) and delayed grouping (S4, S5). In early grouping models, decisions are predominantly based on teacher assessment and classroom performance, with a strong emphasis on minimizing formal testing (S1, T8: “unnecessary testing”). These schools also demonstrate a pragmatic approach to group size, with slower-paced groups intentionally kept smaller to provide individualized support.

In contrast, the delayed grouping models of S4 and S5 prioritize a longer observational period before placement decisions are made. Teachers in these schools believe that waiting until the end of the fourth grade allows for more accurate assessments of students' learning capabilities and needs (T4: “when the teacher has had the chance to observe them”). Both schools also incorporate formal assessment tools, such as sorting tests (S4) and group tests (S5), to aid in decision-making.

Despite these differences, a common theme across all schools is the conscious adjustment of group sizes based on cohort numbers and perceived support needs. Faster-paced groups tend to be larger, while slower-paced groups are kept smaller to facilitate more personalized instruction.

The findings show that schools in Estonia, although using the same grouping practice on paper employ varying strategies for grouping, influenced by their beliefs about when students are ready for differentiated instruction. While S1, S3, and S6 initiate grouping earlier to address learning pace from the outset, S4 and S5 prefer a more measured approach, waiting until students are older and more established in their learning habits. Across all schools, however, practical considerations such as cohort size and the need for individualized support remain consistent factors in determining group structures. This suggests that while pedagogical

philosophies around the timing of grouping differ, logistical realities and the need for targeted support drive many of the decisions in practice.

### **2.3.2 Variability within the groups**

The findings on variation within ability groups across schools highlight a range of factors that influence the placement and success of students, including non-Estonian-speaking learners, students with diverse abilities, and those with behavioural challenges. Differences in the variability of student abilities and behaviours within groups were observed, revealing how student characteristics, group dynamics, and the presence of support mechanisms contribute to the overall classroom environment.

In S3, both teachers noticed that faster-paced groups tended to have more consistent skill levels, with some students excelling in particular areas like speaking or pronunciation. As T5 mentioned, "students tend to have more consistent skill levels, although some excel particularly in speaking or pronunciation." However, slower-paced groups exhibited more variability, with students showing a range of abilities, including intellectual disabilities, behavioural issues, and differing learning styles. T1 observed that some students were placed in slower groups not due to poor English skills but because they needed a calmer environment or had unique learning needs that required additional support. *"Some students are placed in slower groups not because of poor English skills but because they need a calmer environment or struggle with certain learning styles,"* T1 remarked. These groups also often included students with special needs who required additional support staff.

The variation within groups was also recognized by T6, who acknowledged that differences in effort and classroom contributions were common. Specifically, in terms of non-Estonian-speaking students, T6 noted that ability grouping could be beneficial, as students often

excelled in certain subjects while struggling in others. "A student might be stronger in mathematics but weaker linguistically, which would affect their group placement," T6 explained. Furthermore, T7 highlighted that for new immigrants, such as Ukrainian students, motivation was a key factor, though it was often lacking, impacting their academic progress. In contrast, Russian-speaking students who had been part of the Estonian educational system from the start seemed to adapt more easily. *"Russian-speaking students who have been in the Estonian system from the beginning seem to adapt well,"* T7 observed.

Behavioural challenges were more commonly seen in slower-paced groups, but this was not always the case. T6 suggested that such issues could depend on the specific students within each group. *"If disruptive students are isolated from like-minded peers, their behaviour may improve,"* T6 noted. In S3, the teachers' perspectives on behavioural issues diverged. T1 attributed behavioural challenges to a lack of positive learning experiences from an early age, often placing these students in slower-paced groups. On the other hand, T5 argued that concentration issues were not confined to slower-paced groups, stating, *"there's a certain number of students who find it hard to concentrate,"* regardless of their group.

In S5, T4 did not observe significant variation within the groups they taught. However, T4 noted that non-Estonian-speaking students were typically placed in slower-paced groups, which they saw as beneficial. *"The small setting allows the teacher to consider and accommodate more for these non-native speaking students and their home language,"* T4 remarked. T4 also observed that group dynamics could vary, with some groups exhibiting more behavioural issues than others. *"Groups are different; some groups have more behaviour issues, some have less, and sometimes the teacher simply has a better connection with certain groups,"* T4 added. Interestingly, while faster-paced groups generally maintained a more academic atmosphere, this was not always the case. *"Right now, I have one fast-paced group with quite a lot of behavioural issues, while my slow-paced group is very calm and composed,"* T4 observed.

In S6, the variability within groups was influenced by factors such as inclusive education practices, students' backgrounds, and their previous educational experiences. T10 noted that students coming from different schools often followed individual curricula. "We had students who are very, very slow, but their abilities and language skills are actually very good," T10 explained. Moreover, T10 emphasized that English serves as the "lingua franca" in their classroom, regardless of the students' native languages. "For us, English is like the lingua franca; it doesn't matter if you come from a Ukrainian family, a Russian family, or even if we have students from a German-speaking background," T10 noted. This approach helps non-Estonian-speaking students to integrate better, as English becomes the common language used for communication. T10 also stated that off-task behaviour is present in slower-paced groups, but it does not significantly affect performance. "Off-task behaviour is present in slower groups, but it does not significantly impact performance," T10 mentioned.

Overall, the findings highlight that variability within ability groups is shaped by various factors, including student abilities, behaviours, backgrounds, and group dynamics. Non-Estonian-speaking students, students with decorum issues and special needs students are often placed in slower-paced groups, but their progress is influenced by factors such as motivation, learning styles, and the support provided within the group. While behavioural challenges are more common in slower-paced groups, these issues can vary depending on the specific students involved.

### **2.3.3 Movement between groups**

The movement of students between ability groups is a key component of how grouping practices are managed across schools. Teachers emphasized the importance of regularly assessing students' progress to ensure they are in the most suitable group, while also maintaining

stability to avoid unnecessary disruptions. Adjustments are made when needed, based on both academic performance and individual needs, with collaboration between teachers, parents, and students playing a significant role in the decision-making process.

In S1, group changes occur at the end of each trimester, though mid-term adjustments are made if necessary (T2, T8). In the past, students with behavioural issues or poor attendance were automatically placed in slower groups, but now these cases are handled more individually to better address their specific needs (T8). T1 from S3 explained that group placements tend to remain stable, but adjustments are possible if teachers notice mismatches. For example, students demonstrating potential may be moved to faster groups mid-year to keep them engaged. This process involves working with homeroom teachers and parents to ensure the change is beneficial. T5 added that new students generally start in slower groups, and their placement is reassessed over time.

In S4, T6 described the first year after initial grouping as a "*period of adjustment*" in which teachers carefully observe student progress. Movements between groups are rare and generally not based on non-academic reasons, such as personal preferences or social reasons. T4 from S5 emphasized that the initial sorting at the end of the fourth grade is not permanent. Adjustments can be made at the end of each trimester or school year, with input from both students and parents. However, such changes become less frequent as students approach the end of their schooling years, particularly in grades eight and nine. T4 stressed the importance of stability and continuity, noting that frequent moves could disrupt students' relationships with teachers and negatively impact their learning.

In S6, transitions are handled with sensitivity, and collaboration between parents, teachers, and the class teacher is key. T10 noted that while parental input is valued, it is not always decisive. If disagreements arise, the school tries to avoid causing unnecessary distress

by maintaining the student's placement. Clear communication with parents is prioritized, but the school will not push changes if it risks creating unnecessary tension.

Overall, the ability grouping practices across the six schools share common themes, such as the regular review of students' progress, flexibility in group adjustments, and a strong emphasis on stability. Teachers value the opportunity to move students between groups based on their needs and progress, but they also prioritize minimizing disruptions that might affect students' relationships with their teachers and peers. These practices reflect a balanced approach, ensuring that students are placed in the most appropriate learning environment while maintaining stability and clear communication with parents.

The movement of students between ability groups is a key aspect of grouping practices across schools. Teachers emphasized the importance of regularly assessing students' progress to ensure they are in the most suitable group, while also maintaining stability to avoid unnecessary disruptions. Adjustments are made when needed, based on both academic performance and individual needs, with collaboration between teachers, parents, and students playing a significant role in the decision-making process.

In S1, group changes are typically made at the end of each trimester based on student progress, though mid-term adjustments happen if necessary (T2, T8). T8 shared that previously, students with behavioural issues or poor attendance were automatically placed in slower groups, but S1 now handles these cases separately to better meet their needs. *"Now we take each case separately, not just because of behavioural issues or attendance, but to really meet the needs of the student"* (T8).

In S3, group placements are generally stable, but adjustments are possible if teachers notice mismatches. T1 shared that students demonstrating potential are sometimes moved mid-year to faster groups to encourage engagement, stating, *"We sometimes move students to faster groups mid-year, especially when we see potential and want to engage them more."* This process

involves collaboration with homeroom teachers and parents. T5 added that new students typically start in slower groups, and their fit is assessed over time: "*New students are typically placed in slower groups, and we review how well they fit with that placement as the year progresses.*"

In S4, T6 explained that the first year after initial grouping is considered a "period of adjustment," during which teachers observe student progress and adjust if necessary. However, movements between groups are rare and typically not based on non-academic reasons, such as personal preferences for teachers or friends: "*The first year is a period of adjustment; we observe and make adjustments, but it's not common to move students for non-academic reasons*" (T6).

When discussing student movement between groups, T4 from S5 stressed that the initial sorting at the end of the fourth grade is not "*permanent.*" "*We can make adjustments after each trimester or at the end of the school year, in agreement with the student and their parents*" (T4). However, these movements become rare by the eighth and ninth grades as "*they are about to finish anyway.*" T4 emphasized that "*the main idea is to keep placing students in the right group at any given moment.*" They shared that diligent student sometimes "*catch up and end up in the same group as those with more prior knowledge.*" Conversely, if a student is struggling, they might be moved to a slower group "*so they can catch up.*" Reflecting on past practices, T4 mentioned that their school used to have another sorting test after seventh grade, but it was discontinued.

*"We used to have a sorting test after seventh grade, but we discontinued it. There's no need to move students around too much, as that would mean they'd need to adjust to a new teacher every year, which is not good."*

T4 stressed the importance of stability, suggesting that staying with the same teacher helps students understand expectations better.

In S6, transitions are handled with sensitivity, and collaboration between parents, teachers, and the class teacher is key. T10 emphasized that parental input is valued but not always decisive: "*We always try to explain to parents why this is good for the child because parents have their own preconceptions, and they don't always agree with our placement.*" If conflicts arise, the school may choose to maintain the student's placement to avoid unnecessary distress: "*If the parent is very categorically opposed, we won't push it. We won't cause unnecessary trouble; we'll manage the situation.*" Nonetheless, the school strives to communicate its reasoning clearly to parents, even if disagreements persist.

Overall, the ability grouping practices across the six schools share common themes, such as the regular review of students' progress, flexibility in group adjustments, and a strong emphasis on stability. Teachers value the opportunity to move students between groups based on their needs and progress, but they also prioritize minimizing disruptions that might affect students' relationships with their teachers and peers. These practices reflect a balanced approach, ensuring that students are placed in the most appropriate learning environment while maintaining stability and clear communication with parents.

#### **2.4. Differentiating materials and instruction for different paced groups**

This section examines the differentiation practices employed by Estonian EFL teachers to address the diverse needs of both fast-paced and slow-paced groups. It explores how teachers adapt their teaching methods, materials, and expectations to create effective learning environments that cater to students with varying language acquisition speeds. For faster-paced learners, the focus is on providing more independent tasks, creative assignments, and advanced materials to keep them engaged and challenged. Conversely, slower-paced groups require more

structured and supportive approaches, with an emphasis on repetition, guided instruction, and foundational language skills.

The teaching strategies for faster-paced EFL groups across the different schools reflected common themes, despite the teachers' varied experiences. Several teachers shared similar approaches to ensure that these students were challenged and engaged in their learning.

T8 described using more creative and independent tasks for faster-paced students. For example, instead of focusing on vocabulary drills, students were taken to the computer lab to create family trees and then present them to the class. T8 explained, "Same material, but different working methods and different ways of checking results." The faster-paced groups were often given tasks that allowed them more freedom and opportunities to work independently, as seen in their approach to using additional resources like idioms to challenge students further.

T1, while working with a faster-paced second-grade group, highlighted how these students could dive deeper into topics like phonetics and work on more complex activities. They emphasized the increased independence of these students, saying, "We can immediately use, for example, a dictionary app, everyone looks it up together, says it out loud, writes it on the board." T1 further noted that these students engage with the material more dynamically, utilizing tools such as Kahoot and Quizlet to guide their learning. "I just add our unit's vocabulary into those, and they work independently," allowing for a more personalized learning experience.

T5 echoed similar observations, noting that faster-paced students in their fourth-grade group engage with more reading materials. "We do a lot more texts in these groups," said T5, adding that the students demonstrate strong reading comprehension skills that allow for more extensive work with texts. T5 also pointed out that the pace and flexibility of the class lead to

less structured activities: “The flow of activities might be a bit mixed up... we might skip a text and watch a video instead.”

T6 shared that stronger groups had the capacity to engage with more supplementary materials and creative tasks, like group projects and presentations. “With stronger groups, there’s simply more time to go through additional materials,” T6 explained. They also described a shift in the types of activities, stating that faster-paced students had more opportunities to engage with tasks such as making posters, watching videos, and conducting independent research.

T4 contrasted the work in faster-paced groups with that in slower-paced groups. For faster learners, T4 mentioned, “You can already use tasks that are not just basic exercises,” highlighting the ability of these students to handle more complex and creative tasks such as writing short stories. The extra time available in faster-paced groups allows for more in-depth activities. In contrast, slower groups focused on more foundational work, with T4 noting that “with the slower-paced group, you focus more on drilling basic exercises to help them memorize the rules and understand them.”

T10 emphasized the need for more advanced materials for faster-paced students, who by eighth or ninth grade often exceed the B1 level. “In the faster groups, by eighth or ninth grade, they have definitely reached beyond B1,” T10 said, explaining that more challenging content was needed, such as additional textbooks and home reading in English, which was compulsory for these groups. For slower students, however, T10 stressed that these tasks would be too difficult and instead focused on building foundational knowledge until the students were ready to advance further.

Overall, across all teachers, there was a clear emphasis on creating more dynamic, independent, and challenging learning experiences for faster-paced students. These students were often given creative and exploratory tasks, more complex content, and additional

resources to keep them engaged and challenged. The consistency in these approaches suggests a broad agreement among the teachers on how best to support faster learners in EFL classrooms.

The teaching strategies for slower-paced EFL groups across the schools showed strong similarities in how teachers adapt materials, focus on foundational skills, and provide more structured and repetitive learning environments. The approach was centred around ensuring that slower learners received the support they needed, with a focus on language basics and more teacher-guided activities.

T2 described adapting materials for slower groups by modifying slides and adjusting words to suit students' needs. "If I get an idea like, 'Oh, we should do this,' like maybe a repetition exercise, I just go ahead and do it," T2 said, emphasizing that adjustments often happen naturally during lessons. Younger students, especially in the fourth grade, were more dependent on teacher guidance due to their recent transition from lower primary levels. T2 also noted that grammar exercises were sometimes skipped for slower groups, particularly for younger students: "For example, with the slower group I currently have in the fourth grade, it makes no sense to do grammar exercises yet."

T8, similarly, noted that vocabulary and grammar were treated separately for slower groups. "With slower groups, I tend to do vocabulary work separately and grammar separately," T8 explained. The teacher further described that, for some groups, grammar exercises were not conducted at all in early grades, as the focus was more on building understanding in other areas first: "For example, with the slower group, it makes no sense to do grammar exercises yet."

T1 highlighted the importance of repetition in slower-paced groups. "We always do things in the exact same order," T1 explained, emphasizing the need for structure and predictability. The teacher used visual aids and audiobooks to reinforce learning, saying, "I create a lot of audiobooks for the slower group... this helps them practice listening at home." T1 further explained that slower students struggled with vocabulary memorization, so they

focused on repeating and reinforcing material: “Each week, we focus on a manageable set of about ten words, and these are practiced collectively.”

T5’s approach for slower groups also involved focusing on key grammar concepts while skipping less critical content. “I would just skip some things and focus specifically on certain important chapters—grammatically, for example,” T5 said. They emphasized that slower-paced groups require a more structured and focused approach to learning, with repetition as a key strategy: “There’s a lot of repetition... we practice one topic, maybe spend the whole week practicing that topic.” Preparation for these groups was more time-consuming due to the necessary adjustments to materials, such as adding audiobooks or simplifying tasks: “I record myself reading out sentences they need to repeat.”

T6 described a more basic and focused approach for slower groups, where the emphasis was on grammar and foundational concepts. “With slower students, I might leave out a reading text from the chapter or not do as much extra work with the text,” T6 said, indicating a need to concentrate on the basics. They also mentioned that creative tasks, such as group projects, were difficult for slower students due to linguistic limitations: “With the very slow students, it’s really difficult to do group projects... their linguistic understanding is just too low.”

T4 mentioned using textbooks and workbooks more heavily with slower groups, relying on them as the primary materials while making fewer adjustments compared to faster-paced groups: “I rely more on the textbook and workbook,” T4 said. The focus was placed on core grammar concepts, with additional time spent reviewing and reinforcing grammar rules: “It takes more time with the slower-paced groups to go through the textbook itself and to review grammar.”

T10 noted that slower-paced groups required much more teacher support due to various challenges such as concentration issues and behavioural difficulties. “In slower groups, there are a lot of kids with ADHD or similar challenges who can’t concentrate on their own,” T10

said. To accommodate these needs, the teacher slowed the pace of lessons, repeated listening exercises multiple times, and used subtitles for video tasks: “In listening tasks, in a faster group, I may only play the audio once, but in a slower group, I definitely do it twice or even three times.” The focus was on ensuring comprehension through repeated practice and extra scaffolding.

In summary, the approach to slower-paced groups across all the teachers involved a strong focus on repetition, structure, and teacher support. Teachers adapted materials to meet the needs of these students, focusing on the basics of grammar and vocabulary and providing more scaffolding through visual and auditory aids. Additionally, there was a clear need to simplify tasks and reduce the level of independence expected from students, as well as to slow down the pace of lessons to ensure that students fully understood the material.

## **2.5. Attitudes of EFL teachers to ability grouping**

In exploring Estonian EFL teachers' views on ability grouping, the interviews revealed widespread support for the practice, with teachers emphasizing its benefits for both slower and faster learners. The teachers identified several positive outcomes, including the ability to cater to individual learning speeds, provide more focused instruction, and enhance students' engagement and motivation. Despite these advantages, a few concerns emerged, particularly regarding the emotional impact on students and the need for regular adjustments to group placements. This section will examine both the advantages and the drawbacks of ability grouping as seen through the perspectives of the teachers in the study.

### **2.5.1. Advantages of ability grouping according to EFL teachers**

One key reason cited for adapting the practice was that slower learners could make meaningful progress and experience a sense of success in a less pressurized environment. T1 noted, ability grouping "*allows slower learners to learn and experience success in the classroom... to have the feeling that they know something.*" T5 backed up this idea adding that ability groups encourage students to speak up more "*If a very slow-paced student is placed in a fast-paced group, they might simply get overlooked—they don't even want to answer. So, in that sense, being in a group that matches their level encourages and motivates students to speak up.*" T5 added "*They might dare to show themselves more, to speak the language more. That kind of shame or embarrassment might disappear.*" Meanwhile, faster-paced students benefit by receiving more in-depth instruction and moving through material at an appropriate speed: "We talk more, for instance, about language phonetics. We do more oral exercises, we go through topics faster..." (T1). T4 noted that in their opinion ability groups do not let anyone feel like they are "*way ahead or way behind...*" Interestingly, T4 commented more on the skills than the pace, noting that

*"if a student has a lot of experience with English, they can be in a higher group and don't have to wait around for others to catch up. And if they don't have much experience and the subject is difficult for them, they can take it at a slower pace, and it's not too hard for them to keep up in the group."*

This showed that the lines between skills and inherent pace of the student were blurred for this teacher. T4 reasonably noted that it would be more rewarding for students to acquire the knowledge of "basic words" first and there is no reason to start with "*very difficult vocabulary*" if they have not acquired the "*basic words*" first. That is why slower students benefit more from being placed in slower groups so they can focus more on the basics. This reasoning while reasonable once again highlights the fact that *temporühmad* is for teachers more *tasemerühmad*, that it has to do with skills and EFL proficiency now rather than with inherent pace of learners. T1 also emphasized that grouping allows teachers to give students

the individual attention they "*deserve and need,*" rather than treating everyone "*as if they are cut from the same cloth.*"

Beyond academic advantages, T1 observed social benefits, particularly for non-native Estonian speakers in slower groups. These students, often isolated at the start of the school year, had found a space to express themselves and build relationships with others at a similar level. T1 believed that this had contributed to both social integration and improved learning outcomes. T4 also pointed out that students get to meet and make friends with students from other grades as they are divided for instruction across math and English according to their pace "*They get to meet classmates they wouldn't normally interact with. That's a good thing. And, of course, they make new friends. They have similar topics, similar skill levels—they can joke, communicate.*"

When asked whether the grouping benefits teachers or students more, T1 was clear: "*Primarily it's for the students*"—especially in helping them avoid cognitive overload and stay motivated by working at an appropriate pace with their peers. T2 emphasised that the system benefits both teachers and students equally as it makes the study process more "interesting" for them,

*"Like, if you're, I don't know, a real nerd, and the person next to you doesn't even understand what a word means, then it's pretty hard to be in that situation and just try to complete an exercise that doesn't interest you at all."*

For the teachers T2 thought that ability grouping made the process of teaching easier as the teachers would not have to differentiate between varied learning speeds, T2 thought that it would demand from the teacher to create materials and tasks tailored to those different needs and that would alone be "*already a full workload.*" As T4 put it

*"It's better for both the student and the teacher, because there aren't too many students at different levels in one group. The teacher can move forward with everyone together, without having to constantly help the lower-level students or invent extra tasks for those who are ahead."*

T6 emphasized that one of the main benefits of ability grouping is the uniformity in students' understanding and learning pace. This consistency simplifies lesson planning and

assessment, as students within the same group generally progress at a similar rate. T6 explained, "when we're learning something new in grammar, the students tend to understand it more or less all at once—or sometimes not at all—so in that sense, it's much easier to teach grammatical concepts." This shared comprehension level extends to assignments and tests, making it easier to evaluate student performance: "the performance level is very uniform—either everyone does well because they've all understood, or everyone does poorly because they haven't understood." This homogeneity not only streamlines teaching but also reduces the need for constant differentiation during assessments.

The advantages also extend to vocabulary acquisition and reading exercises. T6 noted that students in paced groups tend to read at about the same speed, allowing the class to "read together in class and then do a summary together afterwards." This synchronized learning pace facilitates group discussions and collaborative learning, as students can "follow each other and understand one another," with opportunities to "help each other" during the process. According to T6, this consistency makes it easier to organize group work and homework assignments, eliminating the need to balance mixed abilities within small groups: "It's easier to divide them into groups because everyone is on a similar level. I don't have to think about how to group them: one stronger, one weaker, one average—they are all at the same level."

Furthermore, T6 highlighted the social benefits of paced groups, noting that students are encouraged to step outside their usual social circles: "I think paced groups are very good in that sense that students are not always in their comfort zone... they have to spend the whole day not only with the children who are maybe their close friends or just classmates, but with everyone." This structured environment fosters adaptability and broader social interactions, as students are frequently mixed to work with different classmates. T8's perspective aligns with T6's view, adding that ability grouping promotes student comfort and confidence. According to T8, students feel more at ease and develop faster when grouped with peers of similar ability levels:

"if the differences are not too large, they are more or less all at about the same ability level, then they are comfortable learning, and they develop faster." This sense of comfort helps to enhance learning experiences, as students are not overwhelmed by drastic skill gaps among their peers.

T8 also noted that lesson planning becomes significantly easier in paced groups. When students are at similar proficiency levels, the teacher finds it more straightforward to prepare tasks and assignments: "if they are more or less at the same ability level, then most things are just simpler." Even in larger groups of 17 to 21 students, T8 acknowledged that there might still be some variation, but the overall cohesion of the group aids in smoother lesson execution and classroom management. "The larger the group, the greater the likelihood that there are still a couple of weaker ones and some stronger ones," T8 explained, "but ability grouping allows for easier lesson preparation and smoother classroom management."

### **2.5.2 Drawbacks of ability grouping according to EFL teachers**

When it came to discussing the drawbacks of ability grouping, teachers often had little to say. Some skipped the question altogether, and in several cases, the interviewer—having asked about both the benefits and drawbacks in a single question—chose to follow up on more emergent themes instead of circling back. Additionally, some teachers, when prompted about challenges or suggestions for improvement, still struggled to identify clear negatives. This generally suggests that ability grouping was viewed positively by most teachers in the sample.

That said, a few drawbacks did emerge. T1 pointed to the risk of students forming early misconceptions or emotional reactions when first placed into groups. Specifically, T1 noted that,

“At the beginning, when we started dividing students into groups, some students developed certain prejudices—like, ‘Oh, I’m in the slower group, does that mean I’m bad?’ or ‘I’m in the faster group, does that mean I’m better than others?’”

However, T1 emphasized that these concerns tended to be short-lived, and that “it resolved very quickly. The students are now content with the groups they are in.”

T4 highlighted more logistical and social-emotional challenges. One concern was that students naturally develop over time and at different rates, meaning group placements may need to be adjusted regularly to ensure that each student is in a group appropriate to their current abilities. *“You need to adjust the groups later,”* T4 explained, *“because students develop each year, some more, some less, and you have to review things later to make sure they are still in the right group.”*

A more emotionally nuanced issue mentioned by T4 was the separation of friends due to how the groups are structured across parallel classes. T4 explained that students would sometimes ask, *“Can I be in the same group as my friend?”* and feel disappointed if they couldn't. Although this initial emotional reaction tended to fade over time, younger students could find the separation upsetting:

*“It's just a bit sad that sometimes when they're not eating lunch with their friends, they start to miss them a bit—but that only happens at first, until they get used to their temporihm and make new friends there.”*

T4 also noted that with proper communication and reassurance, these concerns were usually manageable.

When comparing ability grouping with mixed-ability classes, the teachers who had experience teaching EFL in both contexts expressed predominantly negative views of mixed-ability groupings. T1 highlighted that in such groups, both slower and faster learners were often left behind: *“either the teacher didn't have the time or the resources to support them as much as they would have liked.”* This concern reflects a commonly cited issue in the literature, which notes that in mixed-ability settings, instruction often targets the average level of the class, resulting in students at both ends of the ability spectrum struggling to stay engaged. T1 expressed a clear preference for ability grouping, stating that it eliminated the need for constant multitasking and allowed them to *“concentrate—I know the pace at which my students are learning.”* They appreciated not having to manage disengaged, fast-paced learners or frequently

scaffold for slower ones: *“I can move at one pace, and as a teacher, I don’t have to struggle so much in the classroom.”*

T5, who could only compare with the first-grade students at their school studying EFL in mixed-ability groups, echoed similar concerns. They noted that in mixed groups, slower students often *“do not dare to answer because others are so much stronger than them,”* leading to feelings of embarrassment or hesitation. In contrast, they viewed ability grouping as beneficial for faster learners, as it allowed them to progress more quickly without becoming bored or distracted.

When it comes to suggesting changes, they would like to see in the implementation of ability groups, the teachers offered several valuable ideas. T1 proposed that their school should come up with

*“a clear, I don’t know, assessment guide, based on which students could be placed [into groups]—some kind of definite document that would say, for example, that a student with such-and-such characteristics should go into this temporühm, and a student with the following characteristics should go into this group.”*

T1 believed that this would help teachers resolve certain dilemmas, like cases where a student with behavioural difficulties might need a smaller group but is still very strong linguistically. T2 and T5 suggested they would like to see more teachers involved, so that it would be possible to create more levels of *temporühmad*. T2 said this would be especially beneficial for slower learners, as it would help reduce group size and allow for more individual attention:

*“Ideally, the slower group would have up to 10 students. There could be some kind of intermediate group, and we could dedicate more time to each individual student. So that you’re not constantly running from one to another.”*

T5 acknowledged that although having more levels would be beneficial, it would be challenging to implement due to the small size of their school, adding that it is also quite difficult *“to find new teachers who are willing to teach in the same way.”* T4, on the other hand,

did not suggest any changes and felt that the system worked well enough as it was in their school.

The teachers expressed a high level of satisfaction with the current ability grouping system, viewing it as effective and well-suited to their school context. T1 stated, *“At the moment I do feel that it’s working very well. At least in our school, that has been my experience.”* T2 echoed this sentiment, saying, *“I can’t even imagine what it would be like if we didn’t have them. I’m very satisfied that we have them in our school as well.”* T4 similarly remarked, *“In my opinion, the current system works, which is very good.”* T5 also supported this view, noting that *“the way the groups are set up and the fact that teachers themselves sort of shape it—actually works,”* and concluded that the system *“is more suitable for both teachers and students than teaching in mixed-ability groups.”*

Social dynamics and labelling were highlighted as key concerns by T10 and T8. T10 criticized the social impact of categorizing students as *“stronger”* or *“weaker,”* explaining that this labelling can create tension, negative self-perceptions, and even teasing or diminished confidence among students in slower groups: *“Labelling tends to happen—like, “you are this kind of student,” “I am that kind of student,” as if the ones in the faster-paced group are somehow better.”* T8 echoed this concern, noting that parents sometimes challenge group placements if their children are unhappy or not performing well: *“Sometimes, some students simply don’t like the students in their group, they don’t like the teacher, and they complain,”* which can disrupt group stability and complicate teacher planning.

A further drawback discussed by T10 is the increased demand for differentiated materials. Teachers must prepare separate lesson plans, worksheets, and activities tailored to each group’s ability level, significantly increasing the workload: *“The material that works for the slower-paced group does not fit the faster-paced group, so the teacher definitely has to*

*prepare separate work.*" Although differentiation is also necessary in mixed-ability classes, T10 emphasized that the rigid separation of paced groups makes it more labour-intensive.

T10 also expressed concern for stronger students in mixed-ability classrooms, arguing that these students often lack adequate attention when teachers focus primarily on supporting weaker learners: *"It's always the strongest and fastest learners who suffer. I feel like those kids don't get anything out of it."* T10 suggested that while ability grouping helps address this, additional support like teaching assistants would improve the system.

Both T8 and T10 proposed modifications to increase flexibility and better address the needs of students who do not fit neatly into the existing structure. T8 recommended four paced groups instead of three for finer differentiation, though they acknowledged financial and logistical challenges: *"It mostly comes down to money. If the class size is small, then only faster and slower groups are made... there's no middle group."* T10 also proposed an additional middle group, imagining *"separate groups for the very fast, the average, and then the really slow learners,"* but recognized current limitations in scheduling and staffing.

Group size and teacher availability were also highlighted as issues. T8 explained that limited staffing sometimes results in only two groups instead of three, leading to mismatches in learning pace: *"No matter how many students are left, you can only make two groups. That's the downside—the same as in all of education—if there were more money, we could do it better."*

Regarding movement between groups, T10 advocated for more flexibility but warned against frequent level testing, recalling it as *"more stressful than useful"* in the past. They also pointed out that logistical and emotional factors often complicate movement between groups, particularly when different teachers are involved: *"Not every student wants to move—some don't want to leave their group because they have friends there or are comfortable with the environment and the teacher."*

T8 and T10 also saw the need for more support in slower-paced groups, suggesting teaching assistants could be helpful. T8 emphasized the challenge for some students who are cognitively capable but struggle with concentration: *"There's always a student who is otherwise quick-witted and good with materials and would learn well, but they can't concentrate at all."*

Finally, T10 expressed concern about potential policy changes that could impact the sustainability of ability grouping: *"You hear all sorts of things here and there; everyone is looking for ways to cut costs,"* indicating a degree of uncertainty about its future. Both T8 and T10 acknowledged the system's value but emphasized that targeted improvements could enhance its inclusivity and effectiveness.

## **2.6. Discussion**

The findings from the interviews with eight English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers in Estonian basic schools reveal significant insights into the complexities of ability grouping and its implementation in practice. One of the central themes that emerged from the interviews was the confusion among teachers regarding the distinction between ability grouping (temporühmad) and attainment grouping (tasemerühmad). Despite being able to define these concepts accurately when prompted, teachers often used the terms interchangeably in practice, indicating a misunderstanding of the nuanced differences between them. This aligns with Kersna's (2018) observations, which suggested that educators often blur these terms to avoid labeling students and to mitigate potential conflicts with parents or students themselves. The practice of blending these concepts was also noted in other studies, such as Kim (2012), where teachers in similar contexts often employed both terms interchangeably, leading to a lack of clarity in sorting students.

The findings also underscore the subjective nature of sorting practices, a crucial element of ability grouping. In the Estonian context, sorting is done through a mix of tests and subjective

teacher judgments, with some teachers admitting to considering non-academic factors like behaviour, absenteeism, or special educational needs when placing students into groups. This mirrors the findings of Domina et al. (2019), who discussed the complexities of class composition and how non-academic factors often influence students' placements, despite policies promoting academic-based sorting. The ambiguity in sorting practices leads to a more fluid approach that does not always adhere strictly to proficiency-based differentiation, causing potential disparities in student experiences across groups.

The fact that students are grouped from primary school onward further complicates the situation, as early sorting is criticized for contributing to labelling and potentially narrowing students' opportunities (Hallam, 2004). Teachers in the study acknowledged this challenge, yet most seemed to accept early grouping as a necessary part of the system. This issue is compounded by the fact that grouping practices are often decided at the school level, with little guidance on how to minimize the negative impacts of such early categorization.

A particularly striking finding was the limited mobility between groups. Despite the literature advocating for dynamic movement between ability groups to allow students to progress and avoid fixed labels (Steenbergen-Hu et al., 2016), the teachers in this study expressed reluctance to move students frequently between groups. This reflects the practical concerns highlighted by Hallinan et al. (2003), where the disruption of instructional continuity and the increased burden on teachers were cited as significant barriers to more flexible grouping practices. These concerns reflect the gap between theoretical ideals and practical realities, as found in other international studies (De Fraine et al., 2003). The inflexibility of the grouping system is a key limitation, as it reduces the potential for individual growth and further reinforces labels.

Regarding differentiation of materials and curricula, the study found that while the official curriculum and lesson plans were the same across all groups, there was significant

variation in the implementation of lessons. This variation, however, stemmed from the non-academic factors considered in the grouping process, which led to differences in students' engagement and success within the groups. This finding is consistent with the work of Gamoran et al. (1995), who emphasized that heterogeneous groupings based on various student characteristics often result in less equitable educational experiences, as students in slower groups may not receive the same level of academic challenge or support.

Lastly, the unanimous support for the ability grouping system among the teachers is noteworthy. Despite the practical concerns, teachers remained convinced that the system worked in the best interests of their students, a sentiment also reflected in studies such as Bolick and Rogowsky (2016), where educators expressed belief in the system's potential to cater to the diverse needs of students. However, the lack of clarity and flexibility within the current grouping structure poses significant challenges to achieving the system's full potential.

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, the study of ability grouping practices in Estonian EFL classrooms highlights the significant gap between theoretical frameworks and the practical implementation of these systems. While teachers express broad support for the concept of ability grouping, their practices reflect confusion around the terms and processes involved, leading to inconsistent and sometimes problematic application. The interchangeability of ability and attainment grouping in practice suggests a lack of clarity among teachers, which, as highlighted by Kersna (2018) and Kim (2012), can lead to undesirable outcomes, including early labelling of students and the solidification of educational inequalities.

Moreover, the reliance on subjective sorting methods, incorporating both academic and non-academic factors, demonstrates the challenges of creating a truly equitable educational environment. The fact that students with behavioural issues or special needs are often placed in

slower groups reflects the complexity of grouping practices but also points to the limitations of sorting mechanisms that fail to fully account for students' academic potential. The early grouping of students also raises concerns, as studies such as Hallam et al. (2004) caution against categorizing students too early, a practice that may inadvertently hinder their academic development.

The limited mobility between groups, though justified by teachers' practical concerns, further exacerbates the issue by locking students into fixed categories, regardless of their progress. As such, while the system provides some benefits, including increased individual attention and tailored instruction, it also creates barriers to educational equity and growth.

Ultimately, this study highlights the need for a more nuanced and flexible approach to ability grouping in EFL classrooms. There is a clear demand for clearer guidelines and training for teachers on how to implement ability grouping effectively, taking into account the theoretical foundations of the practice and the practical realities of the classroom. Additionally, more attention needs to be paid to ensuring that grouping decisions are based on academic performance rather than non-academic factors, and that there are clear pathways for mobility between groups to support student progress.

As the research of Steenbergen-Hu et al. (2016) and VanderHart (2006) suggests, careful consideration of group dynamics, alongside professional development for educators, can significantly improve the efficacy and fairness of ability grouping systems. Ensuring that students' academic needs are met without reinforcing negative labels will be key to creating more equitable learning environments in Estonian EFL classrooms.

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## APPENDIX

Categories	Questions
<b>Experience and General Views</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What is your education level, have you received any teacher training?</li> <li>2. Can you briefly describe your experience teaching EFL in school? How long have you been teaching EFL?</li> <li>3. How long have you been teaching EFL classes of students grouped by ability?</li> </ol>
<b>Specific to Ability Grouping</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3. How do you understand the difference between the terms <i>temporühmad</i> and <i>tasemerühmad</i>?</li> <li>4. Briefly describe the system of grouping by ability in EFL in your school. How does it operate?</li> <li>5. Do you feel this process accurately reflects students' abilities and learning needs?</li> <li>6. In your opinion, what are the main advantages and disadvantages of teaching EFL in ability-grouped classes?</li> <li>7. How do you feel ability grouping impacts student engagement, performance, and peer relationships in EFL lessons?</li> <li>8. How do international students and non-Estonian-speaking students fit into the ability grouping system in your school? Do they face unique challenges, and how are these addressed?</li> </ol>
<b>Comparing Ability and Mixed-Ability Groups</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>9. Have you had any experiences teaching mixed-ability groups? If so, how do these experiences compare to teaching ability-grouped classes in terms of learning outcomes and classroom dynamics?</li> </ol>
<b>Challenges and Adaptation</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>10. How do you differentiate instruction to meet the needs of these groups?</li> <li>11. Describe the difference between the lessons of lower-ability and higher-ability groups.</li> </ol>
<b>Improvement</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>12. Do you think there are ways in which the current system of ability grouping in EFL could be improved to better support both students and teachers?</li> </ol>

## RESÜMEE

TARTU ÜLIKOOL

ANGLISTIKA OSAKOND

**Anna-Liza Veresenko**

**EFL ability grouping in Estonian basic schools: teachers' practices and perspectives**

**EFL-i temporühmad Eesti põhikoolides: õpetajate praktikad ja perspektiivid**

magistritöö

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Annotatsioon:

Käesolev magistritöö uurib temporühmade rakendamist inglise keele kui võõrkeele (EFL) õppetöös Eesti põhikoolides. Tuginedes kaheksa inglise keele õpetajaga läbi viidud intervjuudele kuues koolis. See töö keskendub sellele, kuidas õpetajad mõistavad ja rakendavad temporühmi inglise keele õppes, milliseid kriteeriume kasutatakse õpilaste rühmadesse jaotamisel ning milliseid diferentseerimisstrateegiaid rühmades rakendatakse. Tulemused näitavad, et õpetajad hindavad tasemerühmadega kaasnevat struktureeritud õpikeskkonda, kuna see võimaldab suunatud õpet, mis on kohandatud õpilaste õpitempole. Samas on toodud esile murekohti, nagu sildistamise oht, madalamad ootused aeglasema tempoga rühmadele ning logistilised väljakutsed ressursside jagamisel. Rühmade moodustamise praktika varieerub kooliti oluliselt – mõnes koolis alustatakse jaotamist juba teises klassis, teistes aga alles viiendas klassis. Õpetajad rõhutasid ka paindlikkuse ja hoolika jälgimise olulisust õpilaste liikumise määramisel rühmades. Uuring pakub väärtuslikke teadmisi tasemerühmade tõhustamiseks, et suurendada võrdsust ja õpitulemusi inglise keele kui võõrkeele kontekstis Eesti haridusreformide künnisel.

Märksõnad: tasemerühmad, temporühmad, diferentseeritud õpe, inglise keel kui võõrkeel

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