



Placement of International English Language Learners: How Different Is It?

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Abstract

Amid profound changes to student placement systems at universities and colleges, the placement of English language learners has remained largely the same. Generally speaking, international students, and in some places other English language learners, face single measure testing and required remediation. Single measure high stakes testing goes against recommended practice, according to the test makers themselves, and the resulting remediation is often not demonstrably productive in terms of student success. ESL placement remains in much the same situation as traditional placement systems for native speaking developmental English and math students. This article explores parallels between developmental and ESL placement systems, so that improvements being made in the one arena can be extended to the other.

Key words: placement, ESL, testing, test reliability, test predictability

States and institutions are busy making significant improvements to the placement of college and university students. These improvements include the creation of customized and diagnostic placement tests; test preparation systems; the use of multiple measures for placement, including measures of non-cognitive factors; implementation of college readiness assessments and remediation in high schools so that more students are college ready when they arrive; and the dissemination of new developmental education models that offer corequisite student development and academic support. Multiple measures placement systems using high school GPA or completion have begun tipping the balance from a majority of new students being placed into developmental classes, to a majority being placed at college level for both English and math. This shift has begun to move key success indicators, and students will benefit greatly as these strategies spread through the system.

Unfortunately, not many of these improvements have made their way into the placement of non-native speakers of English. Both ESL placement tests and general placement tests are

built on the assumption that measuring knowledge of language out of context is a sufficient and valid predictor of college readiness. The placement of English language learners typically involves tests like TOEFL, IELTS, or ACCUPLACER ESL; and required remediation, especially for international students. But we now know that a valid placement system cannot adequately be measured only by the correlation of placement data to first term grades, but must also be measured by the impact on broader and longer-term student outcomes. ESL placement should likewise go beyond the assessment of English language skills and prediction of first term grades, and help to produce better outcomes.

All placement tests are based on questionable judgments about students' academic abilities and prospects. They can be said to violate the standard arising from the landmark 1988 MALDEF settlement (Romero-Frias et al. v. Mertes et al., 1988). The settlement of the case declared that course prerequisites may "be established only on the basis of data collected . . . on a course-by-course or program-by program basis" and that a student without the prerequisite must be found "highly unlikely to receive a satisfactory grade." This approach would have us set cut scores in a way that tips the balance away from maximizing initial success and toward maximizing access for students, as long as success doesn't become highly unlikely. If students can succeed at a higher level, they should be placed at a higher level. This standard has recently been updated through California's AB 705, which now seeks to manage "measures, instruments, and placement models" in ways that maximize "the probability that a student will enter and complete transfer-level coursework in English and mathematics within a one-year timeframe" (Seymour-Campbell Student Success Act of 2012, 2017). The placement of international students, and all English language learners, should adopt this kind of standard.

There is a long list of problems with current placement practices, affecting native and non-native English speakers alike. These include the language of the tests; a lack of test preparation; tests that don't authentically mirror educational activities; the weakness of tests as predictors; the narrowness of outcomes used to validate the tests; the undervaluing of academic history and the role of development; a standardization effect which inhibits innovation and experimentation—for example an over-reliance on the prerequisite remediation model when corequisite models might work better; and the high stakes nature of placements, which carry costs in terms of money and time, and can hinder rather than help student progression.

One of these problems is that English language learner status can affect performance on placement tests written in English. Students may have a difficult time reading and understanding questions simply because the questions are not written in their native language. Bosher and Bowles (2008) proposed that the language of a test can introduce construct-irrelevant variance for non-native speakers of that language, and found that linguistic modification of test items could make them generally more comprehensible while retaining the same content. Abedi and Lord (2001) found that ESL students scored lower on released math word problems from the NAEP assessment, and benefitted more than other students from the reformulation and simplification of the questions (Abedi & Lord, 2001). For this reason and others, Kokhan (2013) argues against the use of standardized tests such as ACT and SAT for the placement of English language learners. The real question is the degree to which this testing effect comes into play within tests designed to assess students' English language abilities. In a real sense, each test question measures several things, including the student's ability to comprehend the question; the student's ability to demonstrate—by answering the question—the knowledge or skills that is intended to assess; and by implication the student's actual possession of the knowledge and skills within an academic context.

Another problem is that both standard placement tests and ESL placement tests are weak predictors of first term grades, and can be strengthened by combining them with other, more predictive measures, if not replaced outright. We have long known that multiple measures should be the standard for assessing college readiness (Bunch & Endris, 2012; Green, 2012; Noble, Schiel, & Sawyer, 2003). Various studies have shown that this principle works with ESL placement too. For example, James and Templeman (2009) found that a multiple measures approach improved placement accuracy over ACCUPLACER ESL test scores alone from 66.5% to 84.1% in an ESL reading course, and from 46.2% to 81.3% in writing.

In spite of the weaknesses of these tests as predictors, they persist as the primary vehicle for ESL placement decisions, and are even used for high stakes admissions decisions for international applicants. As Arkoudis (2011) puts it, "The sector's blind faith in language testing inhibits the development of more robust ways of addressing English language outcomes for graduates" (p. 230).

Some practitioners have argued against the use of standardized tests such as TOEFL iBT for the placement of English language learners, in favor of placement tests designed and implemented by ESL instructors. But as with standard placement testing, the trend has been moving toward standardizing practices across states and systems. Standardized tests are often easier to validate, given the large sample sizes, and traditional predictive validity does provide a clear, objective yardstick by which quite different placement measures can be assessed.

A less common method of placement validation has been to review survey data on teacher and learner satisfaction with the appropriateness of the course level the student has been placed into, once the class begins (Green, 2012). This has the disadvantage of being highly subjective. Students and teachers rarely have access to good data on likely student outcomes, especially across various placement levels, let alone placement methods or systems.

Consequence validity is more useful than either method. It considers a greater part of the student's academic trajectory, yet maintains the same value of a clear, objective comparison. Consequence validity would include first term grades, the traditional dependent variable in a predictive validity study, but it could also include student progression outcomes like completing a remedial course sequence, number of credits accumulated, college level course success and completion rates, term to term and year to year retention rates, graduation rates and time to graduation. These can be objectively compared just as has traditionally been done with the probability of first term course success.

Kasouha (2011) tested the correlation between ESL assignment and math placement and success, finding that such a correlation did exist, in that ESL students tended to place lower in math, but had higher course grades and lower dropout rates. One explanation of this dynamic could be that ESL students were being under-placed due to their English language skills, and were actually stronger math students who would have benefitted from a higher placement. This explanation is bolstered by the fact that the ESL students had higher math grades regardless of the course level they placed into (p. 42). In one case, a student's English language skills increased during the months between her initial math placement test and her subsequent retest, on which she placed four levels higher in math—into Calculus I, which she passed with an A (Kasouha, 2011). Another factor likely at play for that student is the impact of retesting.

Students tend to improve their test scores when they retest, due to familiarity with the test; greater understanding of the surrounding educational context, such as how the test will be used and for what purpose, and the high stakes nature of the results; the opportunity to study and prepare for the test (Bunch & Endris, 2012); and intervening learning. Test preparation has

become more commonplace and is now considered a best practice for placement testing, but less so for ESL placement testing. However, preparation for ESL tests is effective in providing more accurate and more positive outcomes for students, just as it is in standard placement tests. “Testing cold” was once thought to provide the most accurate result, but research has shown that the opposite is true, yet test preparation for ESL tests still lags behind in terms of acceptance and availability.

Solutions to these and other placement problems are being created in the realm of traditional placement systems for native speakers, and these same solutions can now be adopted to improve ESL placement. For example, when tests are used, having students study for those ESL placement tests should increase the power and validity of the tests and the resulting placements.

Another solution would be to use multiple measures to place students. As with traditional placement testing, ESL multiple measures can take the form of multiple tests, retests, self-assessments, advisor assessments, combinations of subject tests, non-cognitive factors, and past academic performance. The use of multiple measures improves placement accuracy, and just as with standard placement testing, it is strongly recommended by researchers and test publishers alike. The makers of ESL and standard placement tests have for many years warned us against using their products as single measures for high stakes purposes. ETS (1997, 2011) has long recommended that colleges employ multiple measures for any high stakes testing purpose, including “all available relevant information, not solely on TOEFL scores” (1997, p. 26), such as the use of “grade point average, scores on other admissions exams, teacher recommendations, and interviews with individuals” (2011, p. 5). ETS further recommended the use of the total score versus each specific subject score (2011), and the avoidance of rigid cut scores (1997).

And yet, few college and universities follow the recommendation to not use TOEFL as a single, high-stakes measure. If the use of additional measures improves placement accuracy, and is strongly recommended by researchers and test publishers, why then do so many colleges rely on ESL placement tests alone? The answer lies with the perceived qualities that are the hallmarks of commercial placement tests in general. Placement tests are efficient and inexpensive. They can be used at scale (Green, 2012), and they give the appearance of fairness, since every student takes the same test. However, there are multiple flaws in spite of these illusory appearances. First, most such tests are computer adaptive, meaning that any two students are not likely to receive the same questions. Second, the testing experience is a relationship between the test taker and the test, so that even if the test is standardized, the test taker isn't. The testing experience is never truly fair, any more than human relationships are fair, or the partners interchangeable. And finally, there are measures even cheaper and faster than placement tests, for instance high school and prior college GPA, which can potentially cost nothing and be immediate.

Which additional measures should be considered? Research studies have shown benefits of multiple measures, even within a single testing system. A study by Fu (2012) showed, as other studies have also indicated, that as with traditional placement, high school GPA (HSGPA) proved to be more strongly correlated to first-year college GPA than SAT scores. However, there were some interesting differences. First, SAT was more strongly correlated to first-year college GPA for international students than for native students. Second, the combination of the two factors correlated more strongly still. While for American students, there was a moderate correlation, where the combination of factors accounted for a quarter of the variance in first-year GPA, for international students the correlation was strong, with the factors accounting for over one half of the variance. Third, TOEFL had a moderate correlation to first year college GPA, but

the combination of TOEFL, HSGPA, and SAT explained little to no additional variance in first year college GPA than HSGPA plus SAT. Combining the four TOEFL subtests also accounted for more variance in college GPA than each subtest by itself, providing further evidence of the power of multiple measures, even within a single testing system. Computer based TOEFL iBT individual subject scores accounted for between 0% and 12% of variance in first year college GPA (for Speaking and Reading respectively), while the composite score accounted for 16%.

Research on college readiness research has established, among other things, the principle that like measures predict like measures. Test scores are better predictors of test scores and grades are better predictors of grades, whether GRE or TOEFL or ACCUPLACER. As Fass-Holmes and Vaughn (2015) point out, some studies have shown a correlation between TOEFL and college GPA for international students, and others have shown no correlation whatsoever. Language tests may be more or less effective, but they will always tend to fall short in terms of predicting college success when compared with measures that focus on abilities required for actual college success.

Although English language ability is important, there is reason to believe that ESL placement tests and systems undervalue students' educational potential. Fass-Holmes and Vaughn (2015) looked at whether "admitted applicants who subsequently struggle with English (despite having acceptable TOEFL scores) might be expected to struggle academically" (p. 229), and found that undergraduate international students could succeed academically despite their shortcomings with the English language. At least 90% of undergraduate international students earned a 2.0 or higher college GPA, in spite of being required to take ESL or remedial English classes, *and* these students struggled in those remedial classes, with 42% earning a grade below a C. This is critical to understand. Research tells us that being of English language learner status is not by itself a barrier to learning in English at the college level. Correlations of TOEFL to freshman GPA were 1% and 2% for the two terms studied (p.239), and at most only 10% of the students who struggled with English struggled academically and failed to remain in good standing (p. 238). The obvious disjunctions between English language skills and remedial or ESL course success and success in college level courses were noted by Fass-Holmes and Vaughn (2015), yet their results are probably typical, and should call us to question why we are treating English language learners as a group. At my own institution, students identified as English language learners enjoy significantly higher course success and fall-to-fall retention rates, whether F-1 visa international or other, yet the F-1 visa students face required assessment and treatment, while other English language learners do not.

The common practice of placing and treating entire categories of students for academic afflictions that they may never suffer can waste time, money, and students. One different model would be to stop requiring the treatment and then watch to see what happens. Simner and Mitchell (2007) examined the effects of a policy at the University of Western Ontario that opened enrollment to non-native speaking applicants without requiring a minimum TOEFL score. The researchers asked whether students scoring below 550 performed worse academically than students between 550 and 579, and whether those students in turn performed worse than students scoring at 580 and above. They further tested the effect of the student's country of high school completion, whether Canada or elsewhere. There was no statistically significant relationship between location of high school completion by itself or when combined with TOEFL score band on first year GPA, or degree completion. Further, there was no effect on GPA, whether first year or final GPA, by score band within the lowest score band in the original analyses; nor was there an effect on graduation. In fact, 11 of the students in the low (410-549)

band graduated with honors. Further, the students in the lower TOEFL score bands graduated at a higher rate than native English speakers at the same institution. Those results do not support treating an entire class of students based on a TOEFL score, or differentiating treatment based on the relative magnitude of that score. And yet, this is common practice.

Another dynamic to consider is that differences between native and non-native English speaking students begin to lessen as they progress through their college education. This is important because many international students have previous college experience, though often in non-English speaking countries, or in countries with very different educational systems. English language tests do not recognize prior education, which the students start translating to their great benefit once they start adjusting to the new educational system. Studying native student performance on tests of English language proficiency shows that these tests are measuring something that standard English and reading placement tests do not measure, but it doesn't mean that such tests are strong predictors of college grades, or other important academic outcomes. It doesn't prove that they help to maximize ESL student success.

Students' academic histories are important. Education, like life in general, is a developmental process and that should not be ignored. Age and life experience provide valuable data about the chances of future success, but are often ignored in placement systems. Researchers have found that age varies positively with college GPA, and so does experience in the form of prior credits earned. Community college students perform roughly as well as native students at a university, with some studies showing a positive and others showing a negative comparison, but this lack of a difference could mask the real differences at work, by representing a balance between the positive effects of both higher age and more prior credits in community college transfer students, and the higher high school GPAs of native university students. It is plausible that universities and colleges should consider prior credits as evidence of college readiness, rather than subjecting such students to placement testing regardless of their academic history.

This brief look at the ESL placement literature highlights many of the same issues present within the general placement situation. These include the inability of tests to adequately measure college readiness or predict college success outcomes, coupled with their persistence as a primary or single-measure placement vehicle by users, especially as a primary or significant college or program admissions criterion. There is also the issue of testing practices, such as a failure to ensure adequate test preparation, or the use of cut scores that aren't based on a statistical prediction of first term grades and longer term academic consequences. ESL placement practices mirror the overall placement situation also by the lack of focus on GPA as a predictor, or multiple measures in general, including the combination of test parts or related tests into a stronger measure; and by the tendency to underestimate and undervalue prior college performance, student development, and actual college readiness, as it is often demonstrated by students when placed into college level classes.

Many of these issues are well understood, so future research can help determine the best ways to solve the issues that are less well understood. It can clarify the best mix of measures to gather in predicting the short- and long-term academic performance of English language learners. This will include prior academic performance, but should also examine students' performance in real time, such as through corequisite language learning, or by monitoring students initially placed at college level to identify which ones need treatment. In the developmental education world, this has been called "Just-in-Time remediation," after the now common manufacturing practice. Perhaps there should be Just-in-Time language development.

There are also other gaps in our knowledge. For example, how long should placement criteria remain valid? Can we use life experience or workplace experience to help place students? Which students will have a greater chance to succeed academically if given a prerequisite intervention, and which will be more likely to succeed through a corequisite intervention? Will a multiple measures formula or a multiple measures placement hierarchy yield better student outcomes? Which interventions should be required and which can best be left to the student's well-informed discretion? What are the likely effects of performance-based funding on systems of placement and student academic development? How can we best balance the academic language development needs of English language learners while maximizing their chances to move forward and complete their goals?

To simplify, any placement system should consider the multiple dichotomies at play regarding placement and remedial or developmental education.

Predictive validity	Consequence validity
Single measures	Multiple measures
Optional treatments	Required treatments
Predictive identification	Diagnostic identification
Prerequisite treatments	Corequisite treatments

Each of these dichotomies should be considered in the context of whatever provides the most beneficial outcomes for students, and maximizes their chances to reach their goals.

Predictive validity is an important part of assessing a placement system. It allows us to test the relative strengths of the measures we do use and those we could use in an objective way. It clearly shows the value of using GPA as a predictor, and multiple measures rather than a single measure, for predicting first term grades. Without consequence validity, however, there is no way to tell if a valid measure is being used in an invalid way with regard to longer term student success, which is the ultimate purpose of placement systems in general, or English language development, which is a specific goal of ESL placement and treatment. We should be assessing placement systems using consequence validity. First term grades are an important consequence anyway, and therefore will be included in any such assessment. This form of validity can also serve as a good way of assessing the decisions we make regarding the rest of the placement dichotomies.

Decades of traditional validity studies have shown what test publishers and assessment experts have long recommended, that overall multiple measures should be used for placement. Overall GPA is a stronger predictor than specific subject GPAs, even when predicting grades in that subject, and composite scores are more powerful predictors than single scores from an assessment. Likewise, combining measures almost always produces a better prediction of academic outcomes than a single measure. ESL placements should likewise stem from a constellation of measures, beginning with high school or college GPA, but also including other objective measures like ESL test scores, standard placement test scores, and authentic academic performances. Subjective measures like student or instructor judgment should be used with great caution. Research has shown that ESL placement systems can undervalue students' academic preparedness, and at my own institution it has shown the same for developmental placement. The use of multiple measures has raised gatekeeper course completion rates, without lowering course success rates, and students who register below their placement due to a lack of confidence in their subject matter knowledge often fare worse in the short and long term than students who

register according to their placement. Students who voluntarily up-place actually perform better. A system using expert judgment should err on the side of placing students higher than objective measures, not lower. Regardless of the measures used, the system should be validated based on longer term academic consequences, and compared on that basis with other potentially viable systems.

Another important dichotomy is whether to make placement and course taking based on that placement optional or required. If either is optional, students likely won't do it, and many of the students who need language development to succeed academically will be missed. If required, colleges will be providing treatments to students who don't really need them. Optional systems will solve the first problem but not the second. When Florida made developmental placement and education optional, it saw dramatic decreases in the rate of remediation. Course success rates also went down, but significantly more students completed gatekeeper English and math courses (Hu, et al, 2016). Blanket treatments are not well targeted to individual student needs, and will provide both false positives and false negatives in identifying which students could benefit from a required treatment.

A key issue is whether placement systems should attempt to identify students' treatment needs before they enroll or after. Predictively identifying student needs may help to prevent costly failures, but predictive placement systems are blanket approaches based on odds, not what will actually occur for the individual student. Diagnostic identification after enrollment addresses that problem, and should be preferred, as long as help comes quickly enough.

Similar to the question of identification timing is that of when treatment occurs. Traditional ESL and developmental education are prerequisite requirements. Students have to complete them before registering for most college level courses. The biggest flaw in prerequisite systems is that they treat students who are college ready and would succeed in most courses without help. Corequisite treatments are intended to give college capable students the help they need while giving direct access to college level classes. It has shown great promise for developmental English and math students, and should also be considered for English language learners. A study of Florida's placement changes showed that corequisite developmental course taking was generally associated with the highest gatekeeper pass rates among various developmental models: corequisite, compressed, contextualized, or modularized (Hu, et al, 2016). There may be students who are not capable of succeeding in college level classes without further development, and if they can be accurately identified, these students may benefit from required prerequisite treatment.

These issues aren't only important to the goal of maximizing student success. Giving students remediation or language development also involve significant costs. In Kanno and Grosik's research (2011), non-F-1 ESL students at one university saw the mandatory placement and treatment policy they faced as unfair because the courses carried no credit, were expensive, and represented a burden that other student populations did not face (p. 140). In contrast, students interviewed at a different university expressed appreciation for their free, non-remedial ESL instruction, which involved special ESL sections of first-year writing courses. The researchers had assumed that students at both institutions would be bothered by the ESL stigma, yet students appeared to care more about fairness and practical concerns. ESL programs can involve several subjects and several levels for each subject, and each class may carry an above-average number of credits, and therefore a higher cost than other classes. In addition, many students taking these classes are international or undocumented, and paying higher, out-of-state tuition rates. The second university avoided the cost and credit problem by creating a corequisite

solution: ESL instruction within required college level courses that all students faced. Fass-Holmes and Vaughn (2015, p. 242) provided an apt recommendation, and one well worth considering in all placement systems, not just those for English language learners: “Policies and programs intended to support newly admitted international undergraduates would be most cost effective if they targeted the specific students with demonstrable academic struggles rather than all incoming international undergraduates who are not native English speakers.” Diagnosing and treating students who are struggling will be more efficient than targeting groups of students who may struggle.

Another solution to the cost factor might be to downsize the size of the classes in terms of credits and hours of instruction. This could ensure that the courses don’t monopolize students’ time to take other classes that they are likely to succeed in, but it could also help make ESL classes more available to student. While it is likely that some populations of English language learners receive more treatment than is needed, other populations are going untreated. Many colleges, including the vast majority of community colleges in my state, do not offer ESL classes for credit. Those that do typically only require treatment of international students with an F-1 visa. F-1 students are easy to identify and make requirements of, but other students are not. Issues of political or personal sensitivity arise, along with a fear of discrimination. Still, that identification is worthwhile if it gets help to students who need it. That help can be made more palatable as well. Colleges might entice students to take voluntary credit ESL classes if they offered them free of charge, as they do through non-credit, federally funded English language literacy programs.

Measures used to identify a real need and place students into high stakes treatment situations should only be used if the consequences of their use are demonstrably positive for students, when compared with their non-use or the use of some other measures. The stakes can and should be lowered. Placement reforms should reach as many students as possible, and insofar as they include international students, they will serve as an important part of overall structural reforms leading to significant measurable improvements in bottom line values for student success.

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