



Placement of multilingual writers: Is there a role for student voices?



Dana R. Ferris*, Katherine Evans, Kendon Kurzer

University of California, Davis, United States

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ABSTRACT

Directed Self-Placement (DSP) is one placement model that has been implemented in various composition programs in the U.S. but has yet to be investigated thoroughly in second language writing settings. Central to DSP is the belief that, if students are given agency to help determine their educational trajectory, they will be empowered and more motivated to succeed (Crusan, 2011; Royer & Gilles, 1998).

In this study, 1067 university L2 students completed both a voluntary self-assessment survey and the locally administered placement examination. We statistically compared the students' placement exam scores and their responses to the final question as to which level of a four-course writing program they thought would best meet their needs. We also examined a stratified random sample of 100 students' standardized test scores to see if there was a statistical relationship between those tests, our locally designed and administered placement test, and students' own self-placement scores. We conclude that student self-assessment might have a legitimate role in our placement process, but it probably cannot be used by itself to accurately place large numbers of multilingual students into a four-level sequence.

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The appropriate placement of multilingual writers into the best courses for their needs has been a complex and often controversial issue (Crusan, 2006; Weigle, 2006). It is also a practical problem, as the most effective placement processes can be time-intensive and expensive (Silva, 1994). As colleges and universities in the U.S. and elsewhere aggressively recruit and matriculate increasing numbers of international students (Institute of International Education, 2015), the question of L2 writing placement has become even more pressing.

Colleges and universities that have large writing programs and/or English for Academic Purposes programs to prepare second language (L2) writers for college-level work have approached the placement process in a range of ways. Some rely on standardized admissions tests, such as the SAT[®] or the TOEFL[®],¹ to place students, reasoning that the sheer number of students involved prevents an in-house placement process from being feasible. Others use large-scale statewide proficiency examinations for local placement, such as the English Placement Test required by the California State University system. Some have used commercially available exams that provide automatic, machine-based scoring of student writing samples, such as the ACCUPLACER[®] test marketed by the College Board. Finally, many have developed and administered in-house placement processes and instruments, which may range from comprehensive testing of students' language skills (including speaking,

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: drferris@ucdavis.edu (D.R. Ferris).

¹ The Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) used most frequently for U.S. admissions is the Internet-Based Test (TOEFL-iBT), though paper-based tests still exist. For this paper, we use simply "TOEFL[®]" to refer to either option. Score ranges described are particular to the TOEFL-iBT.

grammar, reading, and so forth) to more targeted assessments of students' writing proficiency. All of these approaches to placement have different strengths and drawbacks.

Meanwhile, in the “mainstream” (not L2-focused) composition world, there has been continued interest in and enthusiasm for Directed Self-Placement (DSP) over the past 20 years or so (Inoue, 2009; Royer & Gilles, 1998, 2003; Sinha, 2014). Advocates argue that giving students a voice in their own placement is empowering and motivating, leading to their increased effort and engagement in writing courses. DSP as a model acknowledges that there is no perfect placement system, so student involvement in a decision that directly affects them may resonate with both students and program administrators.

For a variety of reasons, DSP has not really caught on as a placement approach for L2 writing programs (Crusan, 2006, 2011). Even those who are enthusiastic or sympathetic towards DSP in theory acknowledge that it carries risk: If students who are not fully aware (because of their differing cultural and educational experiences) of what language/writing proficiency entails, particularly in a demanding L2 academic environment, they might be more likely to aggressively place themselves so that they can make rapid progress through their degree requirements. Conversely, other students may lack confidence in their own abilities and place themselves lower than required. Not only can misplacement harm individual students themselves, but it can also make instructors' jobs much more difficult (if they have students with widely varying abilities in the same writing class) and lead to broader programmatic problems (such as difficulties in administering end-of-course assessments and high failure rates).

The program investigated in this study recently (in 2014) transitioned from relying on a statewide assessment instrument to a locally developed and administered placement examination for placing L2 writers into developmental writing courses. Though, as discussed below, this new placement process has functioned well thus far, the program is also growing quickly, and the annual administration of the exam has rapidly become a major budget line item. Considering both the effort and expense involved in writing, administering, and scoring the exam, as well as the appeal of the principles and philosophies behind DSP, we began investigating the feasibility of using student self-evaluation as part of the placement process by asking students taking the placement exam to separately complete a self-evaluation survey in which they assessed their own abilities in L2 reading, writing, vocabulary, and grammar. Our investigation was guided by one central question: Is there an appropriate and effective role for student voices in the placement process in this large developmental writing program for multilingual students? Our study of 1067 L2 students who took the exam and completed the survey in 2014–15 suggests that there could be.

2. Background: placement of L2 writers

Dialogue in the literature over the needs and placement of L2 writers began as early as the 1950s and has re-emerged intermittently but consistently since then (Crusan, 2002, 2006; Silva, 1994). A number of studies appeared in the 1980s–1990s on the merits of various placement procedures, and reviews of these options at different institutions have been conducted periodically. Placement procedures for determining which course is appropriate for a particular student have varied historically and across institutions. Such procedures may be *direct*, such as an essay examination, with the aim of testing one's “knowledge of the language as a whole” and with emphasis on “communication, authenticity, and context” (Crusan, 2002; p. 19). These are often developed and scored in-house, though writing samples may also be taken from the composition portions of commercially developed standardized admissions exams. Alternatively, placement assessments might be *indirect*, such as multiple-choice examinations, which aim to “to isolate and evaluate knowledge of specific components of language” (Crusan, 2002; p. 19). Some placement models might also use the two approaches in combination.

National investigations of L2 writer identification and placement procedures have been reported every decade or so. Williams (1995) reported on a nationwide survey of L2 writer identification procedures at private and public U.S. colleges. Of the 78 responding colleges that offered L2 writing courses, 37% used an institutionally developed standardized test alone (i.e., indirect assessment), 23% used a placement essay alone (i.e., direct assessment), 19% used some combination of a standardized test plus essay, and 26% reported using only TOEFL® scores for placement. In a later study of the Big Ten universities in the U.S., Crusan (2002) found that three used indirect methods only, two direct methods only, and six a combination of the two. In a recent research report initiated by ETS (Ling, Wolf, Cho, & Wang, 2014), a website search of 152 U.S. universities with ESL programs and surveys from 62 four-year universities revealed an even heavier reliance on standardized tests. The authors reported a “dominant majority” of programs studied using some version of the TOEFL® for placement purposes, with only one-third of programs using locally developed tests either alone or in combination with these standardized tests.

Researchers have also completed institutional case studies of current or potential placement procedures. For instance, Kokhan (2013) investigated the use of standardized test scores (SAT®, ACT®, and TOEFL®) as an alternative to a university's in-house placement examination, which consisted of an oral interview and a written test (only the written tests were analyzed in the study). A number of two-sample *t*-tests showed that very low ACT® English and SAT® Reading scores as well as the highest TOEFL® Total and Writing separated the students between the two possible placement levels, but these extremes accounted for fewer than 5% of the students tested. Other case studies have focused instead on students' perceptions of their placements and the placement process (Costino & Hyon, 2007; Ruecker, 2011), often with respect to placement between mainstream or sheltered composition courses. Participants in Ruecker's (2011) study expressed the belief that good placement processes should involve multiple information sources, and in particular, some reported a desire for interviews so they might have the opportunity to express their placement preferences.

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