



Exploring a compassionate approach to student placement in language classes

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Abstract

The issue of how to place students into appropriate class levels in languages other than English is one that most higher education institutions struggle with in one way or another, often from both a pedagogical perspective as well as an administrative one. Many programs use a placement test of some sort, although their ability to place students correctly is not universal; at the same time, the logistics of administering such a test, often to large numbers of students, can be challenging. This paper presents the rationale for and process of evolving from a strict experience-based placement policy to a more compassionate one that allows students to choose their enrollment level, based on their own experiences and confidence. Data from before this change and after this change are analyzed in order to explore outcomes ranging from enrollment numbers to student success. Overall, results show that student outcomes are positive, and that the change did not result in additional challenges or problems for the program.

Keywords: placement, proficiency, program administration, compassion

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Introduction

This article addresses the challenge of placing college students into appropriate language courses. As language instructors and administrators know, the primary goal of placement systems is to categorize “students into relatively homogeneous language-ability groupings, sometimes within specific skill areas” (Brown, 1989, p. 65) in order to assign them to the most suitable class level, or to separate students who have mastered certain topics or learning objectives from those who have not (Green, 2012). This straightforward goal may lead us to believe that placement is a relatively clear-cut process, although it is in fact a rather complex one that must take into consideration multiple factors, ranging from student background to curriculum, from enrollment numbers to test validity. Further, placement takes many forms depending on the context and institution and although the vast majority of programs opt for some sort of placement test, these tests vary widely in scope, format, and medium (Birkbichler et al., 1993).

Placement Models

A challenge inherent in any placement endeavor is the almost inevitable conflation between proficiency and placement. On the one hand, we seek an assessment of a student’s overall language level; on the other, we also want to know if the student has achieved more specific skills or competencies, such as knowledge of a particular verb tense. Educators and researchers are wont to interchange these constructs, due to both a lack of concretely different tools and to the multiple goals of assessment in general. Some assessments, for example, are administered at the end of a given period of time or course to determine if learners have achieved the goals set out and others are developed to establish an approximate skill level. Many

assessments, though, may be used for a combination of the two to determine how much learners know or have accomplished and their placement in the curriculum.

Although this placement challenge is one virtually every college language program must grapple with in one way or another, there is surprisingly little published about the process (e.g., Clark & Hudson, 2008). What research there is focuses predominantly on the development, implementation, and effectiveness of placement tests. For example, some have chosen to evaluate specific placement tests, such as Aleamoni and Spencer (1968) or Schwartz (1985), who examined tests already in use to explore their effectiveness; Bernhardt et al. (2004), who examined a web-based placement test; or Long et al. (2018), who discussed the development and effectiveness of a local web-based placement test. Others have looked at the special needs of unique populations, such as heritage learners (e.g., Fairclough, 2006), or explored different approaches to placement tests, such as cloze passages (Heilenman, 1983) or a yes/no lexical decision test (Lam, 2010). Still other research has taken a more statistical approach to placement testing; for example, work by Wall et al. (1994) and by Fulcher (1997) proposed different ways to gather and analyze data on the reliability and validity of such tests.

The information on placement test design and on assessing test effectiveness is undoubtedly valuable to educators and researchers and may provide interesting linguistic insights from a language acquisition perspective. However, many of the tools discussed are largely context-dependent, and thus may not be broadly generalized to other programs or institutions. Even so, anyone who has taught beginning or intermediate language classes knows that no placement test is perfect, nor do the most reliable placement tests yield an entirely homogenous class when it comes to language skills. So, one must wonder, then, if there are better ways to approach the dilemma of student placement.

Self-Placement

One such approach could be allowing students to place themselves, and indeed some institutions have used this approach, both in languages (e.g., Birkbichler et al., 1993; Blue, 1994; LeBlanc & Plainchaud, 1985) and in other disciplines, such as English composition, mathematics, or other skills courses (e.g., Denison-Furness et al., 2022; Kosiewicz & Ngo, 2020; Mecher Karp, 2021), though there is remarkably little written about these efforts. In one case, Blue (1994) asked a group of English language learners to evaluate their own language skills to assess the potential viability of a self-placement policy. He found that learners often gave different assessments than those they had obtained from internationally known language tests used for assessment and placement, such as the TOEFL. This may imply that learners are not capable of self-assessment or possibly that those well-known tests are not, in fact, an accurate reflection of language ability. Interestingly, Blue also found a mismatch between students' self-assessments and assessments made by their teachers at various points throughout the semester, which confirms the challenges of assessing language abilities in general, regardless of experience or training. The difficulty of student self-assessment, even with teacher feedback, led Blue to suggest that students should not be allowed to self-place into language classes. It is worth noting, though, that he found evidence that students who were able to realistically assess their language level were more likely to be successful in their language learning, and more likely to persevere to upper levels, than those whose assessments were unrealistically high or low.

In contrast, earlier work by LeBlanc and Plainchaud (1983) found evidence in favor of students' abilities to effectively self-place. To help them evaluate the potential efficacy of a self-placement policy, the researchers carried out three small, interrelated experiments, exploring students' ability to evaluate their own performance and what types of instruments can facilitate that ability. In their studies, 200 randomly selected students completed a 40-item survey that asked them to evaluate their ability to accomplish certain tasks in their second language, such as having basic introductory conversations or reading newspaper articles. Students' responses were correlated against proficiency tests they had previously been required to take, resulting in a correlation coefficient of .53, which is acceptable but not strong. To assess the impact of the type of instrument, the authors modified their survey to include a version that related specifically to how students might use their language beyond a university setting, and another that contained more metalinguistic terminology to reflect their language abilities. Results were again correlated against

placement scores, and LeBlanc and Plainchaud found that the version of the survey that related language skills to use beyond the classroom yielded a much higher correlation, with an r value upwards of .80. However, the inclusion of metalinguistic language terms did not result in any higher correlations. These findings, taken together, indicate that self-placement can be a reliable option.

The present study is situated between the two different experiences reported in Blue (1994) and LeBlanc and Plainchaud (1983) as it also investigates the efficacy of a self-placement policy. However, this current study focuses on the student and less on the specifics of placement systems or the correlation between instruments. The goal is to explore the outcomes, in terms of student enrollment numbers as well as student success, of transitioning from a strict test-based placement system to one that allows students to determine for themselves which class is best. Although motivated in part by linguistic and pedagogical concerns, as program directors we were primarily interested in transitioning to a system in which students have agency in decisions that affect their education (e.g., Hase & Blaschke, 2021): We wanted to encourage students to take responsibility for their own academic decisions and to see how such a system would play out in a large lower division language program. This study can be classified as exploratory in nature, given that its goal is to discover possible relationships between variables: placement policies, student enrollments, and student outcomes. As researchers, we therefore had no prior assumptions or expectations, especially since data were all collated and analyzed well after the fact. As such, we did not enter into the analysis with any particular research hypotheses; we simply sought an understanding of the situation.

Methods

The data presented here come from the lower division Spanish program at a large public university in the southeastern United States. Information on enrollment and grade point data were analyzed from two points in time, during which different placement policies were in effect. The different placement policies are described below, after a brief description of the program itself and the institutional context in which it exists.

Institutional Context

The university offers over 30 different languages, taught by three different units within the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. The Department of Spanish and Portuguese Studies offers classes at all levels, ranging from lower division to certificate programs, minors and majors, and M.A. and Ph.D. degree programs, with specializations in linguistics and literary/cultural studies.

There is no university-wide language requirement at this institution, but there is a proficiency-based language requirement for students enrolled in certain majors. For these students, the requirement is fulfilled by completing the last course in the beginning sequence with a grade of C or better; most languages offer two beginning semesters, like Spanish does, and successful completion of the second course in the sequence fulfills the requirement, regardless of whether the student took the first or not. In languages that offer a High Beginners class, that class also satisfies the requirement. Students may alternately fulfill their language requirement through transfer coursework or credit by exam (such as [CLEP](#), [AP](#), [IB](#), or [AICE](#)). Of those that do enroll in language classes at the beginning level, the vast majority pursue Spanish—as is currently the case in comparable institutions across the U.S. In any given semester, Beginning Spanish 1 and 2 sections enroll close to 1,000 students combined, and the two intermediate classes enroll around 300.

The department offers a separate track for Heritage speakers of Spanish (HS), with courses at four levels, and those students do not enroll in the second language (L2) classes except in rare cases when the Heritage Program director determines that the HS student would benefit linguistically from enrollment in a L2 class. The data presented here, and the policies described below, come exclusively from the L2 classes.

Placement Policies

As mentioned previously, the data presented here represent two time periods, during which distinct placement policies were in place. Both time periods were comprised of eight semesters of fall/spring

enrollments, and data come from the first four semesters of lower division Spanish (two beginning semesters and two intermediate semesters). Summer enrollments are excluded from the analysis because of limited or different offerings during those times, such as study abroad programs, in which placement requirements may be relaxed.

Before the Change in Policy (2010-2014)

The first time period encompasses the eight non-summer semesters between Fall 2010 and Spring 2014 and represents the period in which a more traditional placement policy was in place. This policy had been in effect in some form for decades. Under that system, the Beginning 1 and 2 classes were restricted to true beginners, those who had never studied any Spanish. A High Beginners course was offered for those who had had some high school Spanish, which the vast majority of incoming students do, given the state requirement for two years of language study. The content for the High Beginner course was comparable to the content in Beginning 1 and Beginning 2 combined and went through that material at a faster pace. As such, this class was considered part of the Beginning sequence, rather than a bridge between Beginning and Intermediate. Placement in High Beginner and Intermediate courses required a score on the SAT2, in the absence of any other test (such as AP or IB, where scores, even those that do not award college credit, were used to determine placement). This policy was rigorously enforced by the coordinators and instructors. The system was undoubtedly strict, but it was developed and adhered to because it was believed that differentiating instruction in this way was the only way to meet the needs of true beginners, as well as to facilitate completion of the language requirement in one semester for those with some prior coursework.

This placement system is similar to those in place in many institutions, as the brief discussion above confirms, and follows the same beliefs held in many departments. In spite of the good-faith approach to meeting the needs of different learners it became increasingly clear that it was perhaps not serving the department or the students well. Many students were uncomfortable taking a class other than Beginning 1 because they felt their high school course did not prepare them well enough to go any higher.

Another challenge relates to the fact that the university only allows access to high school records in exceptional circumstances, and as such the reporting (or not) of prior coursework was left entirely up to the student. The assumption had always been that students were accurately reflecting their backgrounds due to the honor code of the institution. However, through data collected for a study related to classroom learning, it was discovered that students were routinely misrepresenting their backgrounds; in fact, in that particular case we discovered that fewer than 15% of students enrolled in Beginning Spanish 1 were true beginners. Therefore, the differentiated instruction that the placement policy was intended to allow for was, in effect, not differentiated at all.

Other evidence also pointed to the shortcomings of that placement system. For example, quantitatively, relatively high rates of student withdrawals from the Beginning courses were observed, and failing grades were not as infrequent as one would hope. From the qualitative and less tangible perspectives, it also appeared that many students simply did not enjoy those classes and viewed them only as an unwanted requirement rather than the opportunity to learn interesting cultural information or gain valuable linguistic skills; this of course potentially has nothing to do with placement, but those attitudes could be compounded by the apprehension many students felt at being forced to take a class they felt unprepared for. Such attitudes were evident not only in retention rates from beginner to intermediate classes, but also in comments on student evaluations, the number and type of complaints to level coordinators, and in colorful comments posted to Reddit threads. Attitudes like these are frequently contagious and can easily contribute to a more negative classroom environment, which in turn inevitably rubbed off on the instructors, who seemed to be having a difficult time teaching those classes.

All of this led to ongoing reflection about what was working with the placement system and what was not, and to subsequent reconsideration of the policies and practices. Around the same time, the College Board announced it would be phasing out the SAT2 test. As that test was the primary placement tool in use, the change necessitated modifications to prerequisites and placement requirements anyway. In light of the

growing evidence that the current placement system was not working, though, the elimination of the SAT2 was the impetus for undertaking a complete overhaul of the departmental placement policy. The changes, which are described below, took place over 12 months in the Fall 2014, Spring 2015, and Summer 2015 terms. Data from that transition period are not included in the analysis because it was a time of phasing in changes and modifying courses. Therefore, the post data presented here come from semesters in which the new system was fully in effect.

After the Policy Change (2015-2019)

The second time period is comprised of the eight fall/spring semesters from Fall 2015 through Spring 2019. The main tenet underlying the new placement system is compassion: The policy starts from a place of trust and respect for the students, who are now treated as individuals with unique backgrounds and unique needs, and who are themselves capable of determining which course is most appropriate for them. As noted above, this has not been a common approach in language departments, although it has been used in other disciplines (e.g., math, English composition). Nonetheless, this humane approach to advising students is in line with current philosophies of academic advising. For example, Delmas (2002) pointed out the need for advisors to be “human, not bureaucratic” (para. 1). Similarly, it is important to trust the students and their own awareness of their needs, rather than clinging to strict institutional criteria that do not consider or care about students’ individual experiences and skills.

To empower a large number of students to make the most appropriate placement decision for themselves while also providing the best administrative, curricular, and research-based information we could, a survey was developed in Qualtrics to guide students through the decision-making process (available at <http://bit.ly/spn-placement>). The introduction to the survey explains that the best Spanish course depends largely on the students’ own background and prior experience as well as their confidence level with what they may have learned in previous courses. The survey then asks what their prior experience with Spanish is, both in and out of the classroom (any indication of a HS background immediately prompts the student to contact the director of that program). Crucially, it uses branching logic to ask context-appropriate questions about how confident the students feel with certain aspects of language learning (e.g., culture, vocabulary, grammar) and how much of those elements they think they remember from previous courses, if any. Based on all those answers and the logic branches, the survey finally makes a level recommendation, with a course description and an explanation of what the goals are for that course, as well as why it seems appropriate for them. Students are also provided with contact information for the lower division coordinators if they have more specific questions. Although these questions and recommendations provide the feeling of a more personalized approach, the reality is that the course recommendations remain largely based on previous experience, and the questions about confidence and remembered material factor into the recommendation only in extreme cases (such as a student indicating they remember nothing and having zero confidence in any of their Spanish skills). The difference, though, is that the students are asked to reflect on their experiences, to think about their strengths and weaknesses, and encouraged to be active contributors to the decision about placement.

With the survey in place, the next step was to remove all prerequisites from the Beginning 1, Beginning 2, High Beginning, Intermediate 1, and Intermediate 2 classes, so that students would be able to register for the class they wanted to, without previous test scores or other coursework. The third course in the intermediate sequence, Communication Skills, is the first course that counts toward the major or minor, so it still has the prerequisite in place, not only to ensure that students are prepared for that level of work, but also to encourage a conversation with the undergraduate coordinator.

The final step in the new placement system is a more detailed background questionnaire form, which students complete as the first assignment for their classes each semester. Instructors review these, paying close attention to the individual circumstances of each student, and ask them to meet with others, such as the Language Program Director, the Director of the Spanish Heritage Language Program, or the Undergraduate Coordinator as needed. The goal is to have these conversations within the first week of classes, during the university’s schedule adjustment period, to confirm that students are in the appropriate

classes by the end of that period. In cases where students realize they have misplaced themselves, the department assists them in enrolling in the appropriate course. If this discovery is made after the drop/add period, a special arrangement made with the Registrar's Office allows unpenalized course changes for an additional week each semester. A special form was developed for these late requests, in consultation with the Registrar, so that late requests can be approved without penalty or fee liability to the student, and without going through the lengthy petition process.

Finally, it is worth noting that during this same transitional period, the High Beginners course was eliminated. There were reasons for that decision that go beyond the scope of this article, both administrative and curricular, but the placement policy change was an additional motivator. The accelerated review course was deemed less necessary under the new system, given the students' new ability to self-place into the first or second semester of the beginning sequence, according to their background (or even into the intermediate courses). For that reason, data from the High Beginners class are not included in the analysis here, as it was only offered during the period prior to the change.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data presented here were extracted from the student records systems by advising staff in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences in November of 2021, after receiving IRB approval for access to the data. The full dataset included the following information for every student enrolled in Beginning Spanish 1, Beginning Spanish 2, Intermediate Spanish 1, and Intermediate Spanish 2 during the two time periods mentioned above (2010-2014 and 2015-2019): first term enrolled at the university, race/ethnicity, Spanish course matriculation, term of matriculation in that Spanish course, final letter grade in that course, and final GPA points¹ corresponding to the final grade. While we recognize that final grade is not necessarily the most appropriate or the most accurate assessment of learning outcomes, it is the one constant measurement that is available across all students, time periods, and courses.

Data from students belonging to special populations, such as those enrolled in the fully online degree program, high school students dual enrolling, or auditors, were removed from analysis. Although these populations can provide valuable information as well, for the initial analysis it was decided to remove as many extraneous variables as possible and focus on the residential degree-seeking undergraduate students, as they comprise the largest percentage, over 95%, of enrollments during these time periods. Withdrawals constitute an interesting subset of the data. The number of withdrawals for each course during both time periods was noted, but then removed, so as not to skew the GPA data (the withdrawal shows as a 0.0 GPA in the dataset because of how the system codes them). Finally, both descriptive and inferential statistics were employed to explore the data. For inferential statistics, the p-value was present at 0.05. These statistical procedures and results are described in the next section.

Results

Data were retrieved from a total of 14,206 residential, degree-seeking students enrolled in the two beginning and two intermediate courses, with 3,725 from the first time period and 10,481 from the second. [Table 1](#) indicates the enrollment breakdown during the two time periods (labeled Pre and Post in the table and the remainder of the article).

Table 1*Student Enrollment per Course by Time Period*

Course		Pre	Post
Beginning Spanish 1	Pass	727	3,876
	Fail	57	75
	Withdraw	203	288
Total		987	4,239
Beginning Spanish 2	Pass	781	4,453
	Fail	53	185
	Withdraw	135	74
Total		969	4,712
Intermediate Spanish 1	Pass	894	862
	Fail	5	6
	Withdraw	45	90
Total		944	958
Intermediate Spanish 2	Pass	787	880
	Fail	8	3
	Withdraw	30	49
Total		825	932
Grand Total		3,725	10,841

Note that what appears to be a striking increase in beginning enrollments during the Post period is due almost entirely to the elimination of the High Beginners course, as the majority of students in the earlier period would have taken that class. Some modest enrollment gains in the Post period may be attributed to an increase in the average incoming freshman class size, and by extension a larger number of students seeking to fill a language requirement. The average freshman class size during the Pre years was 3,548, but during the Post years it was 4,503. However, these numbers would be in the dozens only; enrollment in beginning classes remained relatively constant between the Pre and Post periods.

Also worth noting, although not directly related to the placement issue, is the steep drop-off between first-year enrollments and second-year enrollments during both time periods. Beginning enrollments were 1,956 and 8,951 during the Pre period, for a total of 10,907 students; however, intermediate enrollments were 1,769 and 1,890, for a total of 3,659 students. Although the drop-off appears much steeper during the Post period, this is an artifact of not including High Beginner data in the Pre period. The fact that fewer than a quarter of the first-year students enroll beyond the language requirement courses is something that should be addressed. Placement issues, especially in the beginning classes, may potentially have something to do with this, because students who are placed in a course where they struggle or do not feel the course is suitable for them are unlikely to develop an interest in the language, and could be reluctant to enroll in further classes. That is a topic beyond the scope of this article but is something to keep in mind.

In terms of student outcomes, the first analysis explored withdrawals and failures. A percentage of withdrawals was obtained by dividing the number of students assigned a W grade by the total number of students during each time period. As can be seen in [Table 2](#), the withdrawal percentage for the Pre period was 6.01% and in the Post period it was 5.313%.

Table 2

Total Numbers and Percentages of Withdrawals and Failures by Time Period

	Pre		Post	
Withdrawals	224 / 3,725	6.01%	576 / 10,841	5.313%
Failures	178 / 3,725	4.78%	285 / 10,841	2.63%

A chi-squared test of independence revealed that this difference is significant where $p < .001$. Similarly, the rate of student failures during the time periods was also examined, as displayed in [Table 2](#). The percentage of students that failed their Spanish classes during the Pre period was 4.78%, and that rate dropped to 2.63%. Again, a chi-squared test of independence revealed that this difference is also significant where $p < .001$. Therefore, after the implementation of the new placement policy, significantly fewer students chose to withdraw from their Spanish classes and significantly fewer students failed their Spanish classes. Over 95% of both the failures and the withdrawals occurred in the beginning classes, with relatively few of either occurring in the intermediate classes. This is not surprising, given that the students who enroll in intermediate courses do so out of interest and motivation, rather than to fulfill a requirement they may feel ambivalent about.

An additional analysis looked at the grades students earned before and after the policy change, excluding the withdrawals. The mean grade points earned in each specific course and at each time period are provided in [Table 3](#) and visually represented in [Figure 1](#).

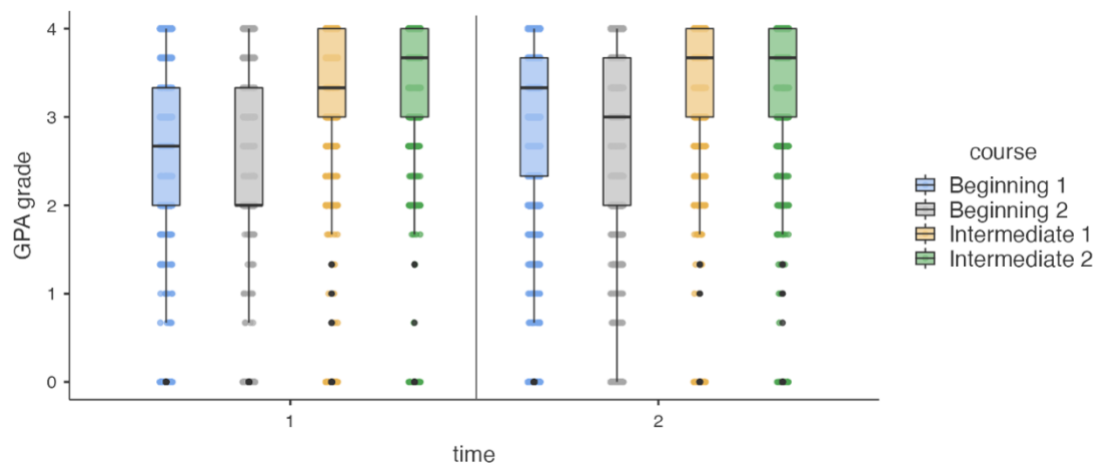
Table 3

Mean Grade Points and Standard Deviation, by Course and Time Period

Course	Mean grade (GPA points)	Standard deviation
Beginning Spanish 1		
pre	2.35	1.33
post	2.85	1.20
Beginning Spanish 2		
pre	2.30	1.21
post	2.81	1.11
Intermediate Spanish 1		
pre	3.12	1.03
post	3.25	0.98
Intermediate Spanish 2		
pre	3.31	0.87
post	3.29	0.86

Figure 1

Box Plot of Mean Grade Points, by Course and Time Period



There were substantially different numbers of students enrolled in the courses, especially the beginning courses, during the two time periods. Levene's homogeneity of variances confirm that the variances during the time periods were comparable ($F = 85.6$, $df = 9$, $18,066$, $p = 0.13$). An analysis of variance (ANOVA) was carried out in Jamovi (<https://www.jamovi.org>), with grade points as the dependent variable and course and time period as fixed factors. [Table 4](#) summarizes the ANOVA results.

Table 4

ANOVA Using Grade Point as the Criterion

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
Course	1,062	3	354.07	282.9	< .001
Time	187	1	187.14	149.5	< .001
Course * Time	125	3	41.64	33.3	< .001
Residuals	18,817	15,036	1.25		

The ANOVA revealed statistically significant effects for Time and Course and a significant Time*Course interaction. In other words, the difference in overall grade points between Pre and Post was significant, and the difference between grade points earned in the different courses (in both time periods combined) was also significant. Most importantly, a statistically significant interaction between time and course indicates that there are relationships between the different course levels and the two time periods. Tukey's post-hoc tests were run to understand the nature of these interactions, the results of which are presented in [Table 5](#).

Table 5*Post-Hoc Comparisons of Grades by Course and Time Period*

Pre-Post Grade Point Comparison	Mean Difference	SE	df	t	p _{Tukey}	Cohen's d
Beginning Spanish 1	0.50	0.04	15,036	12.67	< .001	0.445 [†]
Beginning Spanish 2	0.51	0.04	15,036	13.02	< .001	0.459 [†]
Intermediate Spanish 1	0.12	0.05	15,036	2.51	0.19	0.11
Intermediate Spanish 2	-0.02	0.05	15,036	-0.33	1	-0.02

NOTE: [†] = reliable effect size (discussed below)

As indicated in the p column of the table, the Pre to Post comparison of grade points is significant for the beginning-level classes. In both courses, the mean grade points earned after the implementation of the new placement policy were significantly higher than those earned prior to the change. In Intermediate 1 the grade points in the Post period were also higher, but this was not a statistically significant difference; similarly, the grade points in Intermediate 2 were minimally lower in the Post period by 0.01, but this difference was also not significant. Therefore, in the intermediate classes, the placement change does not seem to have had the impact it did on the beginning classes in terms of student grades.

Effect size, illustrated by Cohen's d-values in [Table 5](#), are also an important consideration in examining these findings. Generally speaking, the larger the effect size, the more confidence one can have in the significance of the results. For educational or classroom based research, Hattie (2009) found that on average effective interventions had effect sizes of around 0.4, and he therefore suggested that 0.4 be the cut-off point to demonstrate whether the independent variables have an effect. With that guidance in mind, the significant effects found for the grades in the two beginning classes can be interpreted as reliable indicators of true differences, as indicated by the [†] marker next to the effect sizes of 0.445 and 0.459.

To summarize the findings of the statistical analyses, significant differences were found in various aspects of the students' performance before and after the change in placement policies. In each of the beginning classes, students earned, overall, significantly higher grades when they were allowed to assess their own strengths and weaknesses and self-place into the classes they felt were most appropriate for them. Likewise, the self-placement policy also corresponded to significantly fewer students withdrawing from their classes, and significantly fewer students failing their classes.

Discussion

When the new placement policy was initially presented to the faculty and instructors involved in the lower division Spanish program, some concerns were raised. However, the data analyzed here as well as what is known about language teaching and learning have shown those concerns to have been largely unfounded.

For example, one concern was that students with some background in Spanish would self-place in the Beginning 1 class rather than Beginning 2 or Intermediate 1, not because they truly felt it was the best class for them, but rather to get the "easy A." If this had been the case, enrollments in the Beginning 1 class would have increased disproportionately and enrollments in the intermediate classes would have decreased. In fact, that was not the case, as intermediate enrollments increased minimally in the Post period. The proportions of students enrolled in beginning versus intermediate courses stayed largely the same over the two time periods. In other words, those who were prepared for intermediate level coursework were still choosing to enroll at those levels even when given the opportunity to self-place at a lower level.

In fact, anecdotally, students reported that they felt more confident in their skills because they were allowed to decide what was best for them. Furthermore, virtually every theory of second language acquisition

recognizes that learning something once is rarely sufficient. Language is learned by repeated input and output (e.g., Swain, 1985) and therefore, if the goal is successful language teaching, the more experience and recycling (e.g., Lynch & Maclean, 2000) students are provided, the better, especially at the foundational levels.

A related concern was that students would not take their classes seriously if they were not forced into classes that would be difficult for them. This concern was raised not only for the beginning classes, but also for the intermediate classes, with the fear that the intermediate students would not be ready for that level because they self-placed too high or because they did not really learn or try as they breezed through beginning classes. Unfortunately, the student data system does not allow us to determine the proportion of students in intermediate classes who placed there directly or who came from beginning classes, though that information could provide interesting insights. The grade point figures analyzed here point not to students blowing off classes they thought were too easy, but rather to students being more invested in their classes and more committed to succeeding. As already noted, not only were grades higher in beginning classes during the Post period, but there were fewer failures and fewer withdrawals, too. Additionally, the grades in the intermediate classes were not significantly different between the two time periods: Students were equally successful in those classes as they had been under the previous placement system. Thus, this fear was not borne out either.

Another issue the instructors raised was related to the student composition of the classes. The fear was that if students who were not true beginners were allowed to enroll in the true beginner classes, the heterogeneity would make it exceedingly difficult to teach effectively (see for example Loughrin-Sacco, 1991). In reality, there were already false beginners at those levels, as was discussed previously. Furthermore, the nature of second language acquisition is such that every class will be a mixture of levels thanks to individual variation among learners (e.g., Dörnyei, 2006; Skehan, 1989; Tarone et al., 1976), just as every classroom presents a mixture of identities, motivations, and experiences. Even a class of true beginners will vary in how they learn and how they react to instruction and, especially in the case of Spanish in the United States, how much incidental exposure they may have had to the language already. This concern, then, was a bit of a straw man, in that heterogeneity was and always will be present at any proficiency level (Strawbridge et al., 2019; Winke et al., 2020). Additionally, the instructors eventually reported that the classes did not seem significantly different after the change anyway.

In sum, the challenges that were anticipated with the new placement system did not, in the end, materialize into problems. Instead, the program experienced fewer withdrawals, fewer failures, higher grades in the beginning classes with comparable grades in the intermediate classes, and a similar ratio of enrollment between beginning and intermediate levels.

Conclusion

These findings are rewarding, although not without their limitations. For one thing, the data set is quite large, especially for language acquisition research. As with all quantitative analyses, those presented here allow us to see the big picture and explore some overall trends, but do not offer any individual insight. It would have been useful to have some subset of students, and possibly instructors, participate in interviews and reflections to add depth and nuance to the data. For example, it is impossible to know when the withdrawals took place in the semester, and why those students withdrew. There are certainly extenuating circumstances that always contribute to these decisions, but it would have been interesting to be able to gather some more data about this population and their choices, and specifically to see if a more flexible placement policy might have helped prevent some of those withdrawals during the Pre period.

Another potentially problematic issue related to the dataset involves the students who chose to take their courses for a Satisfactory/Unsatisfactory designation, rather than a letter grade, which is a relatively common choice for students: In the dataset of passing grades used in the analyses here, 1,222 students in the Pre period (16.23%) and 1,129 in the Post period (11.67%) opted for this grading system. As alluded to

above, Satisfactory grades were factored as a C grade (2.0 GPA points); because only the Satisfactory/Unsatisfactory designation was reported, there is no way to know what those students' final averages were, and thus what their GPA points would have been had they taken the courses for a letter grade. It is conceivable, then, that those Satisfactory grades represent a combination of As, Bs and Cs, while the Unsatisfactory designations could indicate final averages anywhere between 72 and 0. While it is unlikely this had a significant impact on the results of the analysis, it would have been desirable to get a more accurate and nuanced understanding of the student outcomes.

Anecdotal evidence from students and instructors has shown that the change in placement practices was either neutral or beneficial in the program. Furthermore, the interest that colleagues around the country have shown in this revised approach indicates that perhaps the time for draconian placement systems has passed, and a new, compassionate approach is warranted. In the future, the placement survey will be revised to attempt to personalize it a bit more and to offer more nuanced options for students. For example, we are considering incorporating ACTFL-like Can-Do statements into the survey to better gauge specific language abilities. It would also be interesting to explore ways to have conversations with students who truly do not know what course to take or who fall between recommendations in the survey; this always happens with students who proactively seek out this kind of guidance, of course, but making it a possibility for more students would surely benefit them and their classes. The possibility of incorporating AI chatbots in the department page, and possibly the survey recommendations, is also being explored to hopefully allow for a somewhat more personalized approach to placement issues, at least as a first step in the process.

Additionally, there is an incredible amount of data that has not been analyzed here, but that could provide interesting insight moving forward. For one, looking at the university matriculation term for the students could allow for a comparison of the performance of freshmen taking these classes versus seniors who waited until the last minute to take the requirement, for example. Likewise, data on the students' race and ethnicity, when factored in with the other variables, might prove enlightening. In fact, a preliminary analysis seems to indicate a significant interaction between course grade and ethnicity, suggesting that these placement changes may have differentially benefited students of different ethnic backgrounds. A closer examination of this interaction might help to discover inequities that need to be addressed, not only with placement, but also in terms of curriculum and program administration, and would contribute to ongoing work in this area (e.g., Anya, 2020; Mechur Karp, 2021; Zárate-Sández, 2021).

For now, though, the current analysis has shown that this kind of compassionate approach to student placement in lower division language courses holds many benefits and no disadvantages that we have seen. The advantages discussed here are the quantifiable ones related to enrollment and outcomes. Beyond that quantifiable evidence, research shows that empathy and compassion are crucial components of success for students (Ford, 2012; Ohrabio, 2014), especially now, as we are all still dealing with the stress and challenges of the pandemic. Additionally, Blue (1994) found that students who could self-assess ended up being more committed to their language study, so it is possible that involving students in decisions about their course enrollment, and the autonomy that gives them, can have beneficial effects long past the placement decision. Anecdotal evidence also provides a reason to believe that students are more relaxed, more interested in their classes, and in general less negative toward the language requirement when allowed to determine their own placement.

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Notes

1. GPA point equivalencies are as follows: A = 4.0; A- = 3.67; B+ = 3.33; B = 3.0; B- = 2.67; C+ = 2.33; C = 2.0; C- = 1.67; D+ = 1.33; D = 1.0; D- = 0.67; E (failing grade) = 0.00. Students have the option of taking these courses on a Satisfactory/Unsatisfactory basis. Neither is calculated in the student's GPA, but for the purposes of analyzing the grade distribution data here, a grade of Unsatisfactory is figured as a failing grade, at 0.00 GPA points, and a grade of Satisfactory as a C, at 2.00 points.

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