The Dynamics of Language Program Direction

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5

The Dynamics of Placement Testing: Implications for Articulation and Program Revision

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Each year university foreign language departments admit into their classes thousands of students who have had from one to several years of high school—level instruction in the languages offered.[1] It is a common impression that continued language study from high school to college proceeds in a linear fashion, moving forward toward advanced proficiency in the language. Upon closer observation, however, the notion that instruction moves forward as a seamless web is often faulty. More often than not, the web contains gaps and weaknesses that cause it to fall apart. As a consequence, university students frequently spend time and money repeating course work for which they have already been awarded high school credit.

An increasing number of publications and mission statements from universities and professional organizations identify articulation, particularly the bridge between secondary and postsecondary language study, as one of the major issues of the 1990s (Byrnes, 1991; Lange, Prior & Sims, 1992; Wherritt, Druva-Roush & Moore, 1991). For example, Schwartz (1985) reported that almost half the California students he surveyed had to begin their language study anew at the university. The problems of articulation are especially obvious at large postsecondary institutions such as Ohio State University, whose language departments serve more than 40,000 undergraduate students. A 1992 study conducted by the university's Foreign Language

Center found that approximately 92% of the incoming students who had studied at least two years of a language in high school were unable to place directly into the expected third-quarter courses.

Statistics such as these bring to the forefront the important role that an institution's placement procedures play in the articulation equation. Critical in any effort to understand and promote articulation is a thorough understanding of the placement procedures that an institution uses to determine how students will be placed.

Placement Procedures

Placement procedures vary greatly from institution to institution, and range from no formal assessment at all (that is, students choose their own placement levels) to assessment through sophisticated computer-adaptive placement tests. Between these two extremes lies a variety of other techniques, including locally constructed paper-and-pencil tests, self-assessment instruments, oral interviews, standardized tests, and combinations of different procedures (Schwartz, 1985; Wherritt & Cleary, 1990).

In most cases, placement measures are administered primarily for the purpose of assigning individuals to specific levels of a course of study. Often these measures are administered upon the student's entry to university study, or just prior to it. Ideally, the goal of a placement procedure is "to situate the student in the course or treatment that will challenge him but will not overwhelm him—to prevent his wasting time or being bored on the one hand and to prevent his failure due to lack of preparation or lack of sufficient repetition or explication on the other" (Hills, 1971: p. 702). In addition to assuring appropriate placement, the placement test can also function to determine the amount of course credit that students will be awarded for their previous knowledge. A favorable placement test score may result in large savings in time and money if the student is exempted from required sequences. Therefore, it is important that any placement test function accurately, for accurate placement benefits the entire language program: the student, the instructor, the department, the university, and even those who pay the student's tuition.

As Schaefer (1982: pp. 75–76) states, "A placement test used in the real world to make practical decisions is primarily justified not by its theoretical foundations but by the degree to which it improves the decision-making process, making it more effective or more efficient." At a state university where approximately 6,000 incoming freshmen are tested every year,

issues of practicality and utility come to the forefront and play an impor-
tant role in any investigation of test use and validity (Messick, 1989). In
high-volume situations, placement procedures must be easy to use and
quick to administer and score. Valuable instructional time cannot be
wasted while waiting for up to two weeks for the return of results from
computer-scored paper-and-pencil tests. Finally, in times of increased
demand for services within the confines of ever-shrinking budgets, the
placement instrument must also be cost-effective.

Computer-adaptive testing (CAT) is gaining in popularity in many
fields as a cost-effective and efficient means to deliver large-scale testing.
With CAT, each test taker is presented with a different test sampled from
the computer test bank and tailored to the test taker's abilities. The com-
position and length of the test are determined by the test taker's responses
to items that are presented at various levels of difficulty. The test items,
which have been precalibrated using procedures based on item response
theory (Hambleton & Swaminathan, 1985), are sampled by the computer
at a level of difficulty higher or lower than that of the current item, depend-
ing on whether the examinee answers the current item correctly or not. By
probing above and below its working hypothesis about the examinee's abil-
ity level, revising as necessary through further probes, the computer is able
to narrow in quickly on the examinee's ability level, that is, the level of dif-
ficulty at which the examinee operates most consistently. The more consis-
tent the test taker's performance at a given level, the more readily the com-
puter can arrive at a judgment regarding the examinee's ability level.
Guessing or inconsistent performance by the examinee will result in a
slightly longer test because the computer must revise its hypotheses and
probe further. However, compared to conventional paper-and-pencil mea-
sures, the result, on average, is a shorter testing time, a better match
between items and test taker, greater test security, and immediate reporting
of results (Ebel & Frisbie, 1991).

Placement Testing at Ohio State University

The Foreign Language Center at Ohio State University first began using
computer-adaptive testing to determine student placement in French and
Spanish in the summer of 1988. The instrument, the Brigham Young
Computer-Adaptive Placement Test (Larson, 1991), has been administered
on a regular basis ever since, with the majority of testing conducted during
summer freshman orientation sessions. In the summer of 1992 a German

version of the test was added, and a total of 4,583 students took the test in French, Spanish, or German. To date, the Brigham Young test has proved to be an efficient, convenient, and fairly accurate means for placing large numbers of students in Ohio State's French, Spanish, and German programs. The test's developers at Brigham Young University conducted studies to determine the reliability and validity of their computer-adaptive placement tests (see Larson, 1991, for a description of the procedures used for the Spanish version of the test). The tests were subsequently normed on Ohio State students for its language programs.

The data collection, storage, and networking capabilities of the computer have also enabled the Foreign Language Center to analyze and use data gathered during testing to monitor trends and provide a feedback loop to Ohio State's language programs. Collected data are of two types. Scores from the placement tests are reported individually to students, to their instructors, and to their academic advisers, all for the purpose of placing students into language classes. Test results are also reported in aggregate for each language, and made available to the language departments via the Foreign Language Center's annual report on placement testing. Student responses to questions appended to the placement test provide a second source of data. These questions (listed in the Appendix) elicit a variety of information, including typical demographics, self-assessment of language skills, previous language experience and language study goals, and data on attitude toward language study. The questions can be modified depending on the type of information needed for program evaluation or revision.

The remainder of this chapter will describe some of the studies that Ohio State University's Foreign Language Center has conducted on its placement procedures, program changes that have come about as a result of this research, the use of placement test results in articulation efforts, and the questions that have yet to be asked and answered about the role of placement tests in general and the use of CAT as a placement tool in particular.

Data for Decision Making: Program Modifications Based on Test Results

Analysis of computerized placement test results collected at Ohio State University since 1990 in French and Spanish revealed that a large proportion of Ohio State's incoming students who had studied these languages in high school did not score well enough on the required placement examina-

tion to enter directly into third-quarter (103) or fourth-quarter (104) courses (Birckbichler & Deville, 1991; Birckbichler, Deville & Antonsen, 1991, 1992). These are the placements that would be expected from the traditional equivalency formula of one-quarter of university study equals one year of high school study. In 1990, 65% of Ohio State's incoming students placed into beginning 101 courses, regardless of their number of years of high school language study. The Foreign Language Center and the language departments regarded this repetition of high school course content as wasteful of time, money, and instructional resources at both the high school and university levels. In addition to the financial considerations associated with repeating course content, there were instructional considerations, in particular, the problems caused by large numbers of "false beginners" in lower-division language courses (see, for example, Lange, Prior & Sims, 1992 and Loughrin-Sacco, 1990, for further discussion of the "false beginner").

In response to this problem, so clearly delineated by the placement test data, the Department of French and Italian and the Department of Spanish and Portuguese revised their beginning language offerings to include review courses (French/Spanish 102.66 and 103.66), which were designed especially for students who had had high school language experience, but who had scored lower than anticipated on the placement test. Placement in the review courses is determined by a combination of years of high school study and score on the computerized placement test. A student with two years of language experience whose score on the placement test is too low for placement into 102 is required to enter 102.66, a course that combines the content of 102 with a review of the content of 101. Similarly, a student with three or more years of language study who places into 102 instead of the anticipated 103 is required to take 103.66, in which the most important contents of 102 are reviewed and combined with the contents of 103. After completion of the review courses, students enter at the next level of regular-numbered courses, that is, 103 or 104.

As Table 1 demonstrates, in 1992 the majority of the 4,583 incoming high school students (50.1%) placed into the 102.66 review courses in French and Spanish. Excluding the data for the German Department, which will implement review courses during the next academic year, the course into which the second highest number of students (19.9%) placed was also a review course, 103.66. Thus, 70% of the students in the large-enrollment languages were required to do "remedial work," using the equivalency expectation that one year of high school language study corresponds to one

quarter at the university. This percentage will undoubtedly increase in autumn 1993 when the German Department adds review courses to its curriculum.

Table 1

Frequencies and Percentages by Language of Student Placement Level in 1992

Course Placement	French N	French %	German[1] N	German[1] %	Spanish N	Spanish %	Total N	Total %
101	47	3.3	121	28.6	61	2.2	229	5.0
102.66[2]	799	56.8			1495	54.3	2294	50.1
102	87	6.2	181	42.8	234	8.5	502	11.0
103.66[2]	249	17.7			665	24.1	914	19.9
103	156	11.1	85	20.1	230	8.4	471	10.3
104	60	4.3	36	8.5	68	2.5	164	3.6
Tested Out	8	0.6			1	0.0	9	0.2
Total[1]	406	100.0	423	100.0	2754	100.0	4583	100.0

[1]*German did not yet have review courses at the time of data collection.*
[2]*102.66 and 103.66 are review courses.*

Reviewing the Review Courses

As part of a continual feedback loop that examines the relationship between the placement test and language programs, the Foreign Language Center (FLC) conducted an evaluation of its newly introduced review courses.[2] During the final week of the winter quarter in 1992 the FLC surveyed all students in the 103- and 104-level courses ($N = 803$) in order to: 1) determine how satisfied students were with the preparation they received in the review courses; 2) find out how well students do after they have taken these courses and have moved into the regular course sequence; and 3) obtain a better understanding of the FLC's computer-adaptive placement test (Birckbichler & Deville, 1991).

The large majority (76.1%) of the respondents had taken their previous language course at Ohio State University, but 20.1% had taken their previous language course in high school. Most of the students (75.6%)

reported that they did not plan to continue to study the language beyond the required sequence.

The overall means for the survey questions and for final course grade are reported in Table 2.

Table 2

Means and Standard Deviations for Survey Questions and Final Course Grade

Variables	Mean	SD
Quality of high school preparation	3.32	1.29
Quality of college preparation	3.22	1.14
Quality of review course preparation	3.61	1.03
Accuracy of FLC's placement test	3.61	1.31
Final course grade	3.11	0.79

Note: All questions were on a scale of 1–5: 1 = low value; 5 = high value. Final course grades are reported on the conventional 0–4 scale.

As Table 2 indicates, all means are above the neutral value of 3, and the means for "Quality of review course preparation" and "Accuracy of FLC's placement test" approach 4. In general, these values speak well for the students' perceptions of how well they were prepared for language study at Ohio State University, either by their high schools or by Ohio State (including the review courses). The higher means for the statements about the review courses and the placement test indicate that the students who were surveyed were generally satisfied with how the courses and the test have served them in their foreign language studies at Ohio State.

In order to determine whether there were differences in final course grades depending on where students had taken their most recent language course, an analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted on the six levels of "previous study" (high school, transfer students, Ohio State's regular course sequence, review course sequence, study/travel abroad, and local community college). The dependent variable was final course grade. Although the data are somewhat unstable because of the small sample sizes in several of the levels, the analysis can be considered useful. The ANOVA did not reach significance ($F = 1.10$; $df = 5,795$; $p = .36$), indicating that student background was not significantly related to course grade. This

result is encouraging, for it signifies that the French and Spanish departments do well placing students into their programs and that student grades are not dependent upon where students did their previous language study.

Noting that surveys and studies of programmatic effectiveness question the "survivors" of language courses, the FLC has undertaken a survey of all students ($N = 395$) who dropped language courses during the autumn quarter of 1993. Preliminary analyses of the data indicated that students discontinue language study at Ohio State for several reasons. The largest percentage of students (27.6%) gave reasons other than those indicated on the survey—for example, family responsibilities, too much time since they last studied the language, or intention to take the language next quarter. Other important reasons were time conflict (26.1%), perceived inaccuracy of placement and subsequent difficulty in course (18%), and the amount of work involved in the course (12.2%). It would seem from these preliminary analyses that student perception of the accuracy of the placement test is only one of several factors that influence dropout rate.

Questioning the Standard: Are Years of High School Study a Useful Metric?

Ohio State places incoming students into language classes on the basis of their placement test score and years of high school study. In order to examine the relationship between years of study and placement test score, a regression analysis was performed in which years of high school were regressed on the placement test score. The resultant F value was significant at the .0001 level ($F = 1023.13$, $df = 1,4582$), which is partly due to the large sample size. For this reason, the r^2 was examined. The number of years of high school language study explains 18% of the variance in the placement test scores, indicating that other important factors influence the scores. This relatively small value seems large in contrast with the value of 7% found in a similar study conducted by Lange, Prior, and Sims (1992). The difference, however, can be explained by reference to the way the data were categorized for analysis. Lange and his colleagues included in their measure of language experience years of high school, middle school, elementary school, and study/travel abroad, and established an equivalency table to convert these experiences into years of high school study. When the data from Ohio State were analyzed to include years of language study prior to high school, the r^2 value was identical to that of Lange and colleagues (7%).

Given the relatively low importance of years of study, improved predictors need to be determined so that incoming students can be placed more effectively. In order to examine several variables thought to be potential predictors of placement level, questions from a subset of the biographical survey of the placement test (see Appendix) were analyzed. These variables, aimed at eliciting student background, language experience, and attitude, were then examined in several stepwise statistical analyses. Although such procedures should be used with caution (Pedhazur, 1982), they can afford a useful overview of a long list of variables.

The most interesting and challenging result relates to the variable Self-assessment, a composite score obtained by combining responses to five items that asked students to assess their skills in the areas of listening, speaking, reading, writing, and culture. Self-assessment was found to correlate highest (.49) with the placement test and to be the first variable to enter the stepwise regression on the placement score (see Table 3). Self-assessment explained more variance (25%) than years of high school language study, the variable used by the FLC as the second criterion to place students. The third variable was the student's self-reported last grade received in the language course, accounting for 2% of the variance in the placement test score.

Table 3

Summary of Stepwise Regression for the Dependent Variable, Placement Test Score

Variable	Number In	Partial r^2	F Value	Prob.
Self-assessment	1	0.245	1484.05	.0001
Years in high school	2	0.045	292.30	.0001
Last grade	3	0.016	104.01	.0001

Other variables not listed in Table 3, but that also revealed a moderate and significant first-order correlation with the placement test score, are the questions "How well did your high school prepare you for college work?" (r = .39) and "Number of years since you last studied the language." (r = −.37).

A second stepwise procedure using discriminant analysis was also performed on the data. Discriminant analysis provides a weighted linear com-

bination of the numeric variables and classifies subjects into categories, in this case into the seven different levels used for placement at Ohio State (for example, 101, 102.66, 102, and so on). Because the primary interest was in the strength and accuracy of predictor variables other than the placement test, all variables except the placement score were entered into the analysis. As expected, the strongest predictor turned out to be years of language study in high school, the variable used by Ohio State in combination with placement test score to determine student placement. The next strongest predictor of placement level was the self-assessment composite score (Wilks's lambda = 0.49, p <0001).

The emergence of self-assessment as a strong predictor is worthy of further examination for a variety of reasons. Self-assessment has already been proposed as an alternative or supplement to proficiency testing (Brindley, 1989) and has been used with success as a placement instrument at the University of Iowa (Heilenman, 1991) and at the University of Ottawa (LeBlanc & Painchaud, 1985). Self-assessment is also an economical and efficient tool. Because students are not required to actually perform numerous language tasks, self-assessment inventories can sample more language behaviors in a shorter amount of time than standard procedures. In addition, students can evaluate their own oral skills, thus providing an oral evaluation component for placement procedures.

The moderate predictor value of years of high school study and the emergence of other important predictor variables has led the Foreign Language Center to reexamine those factors used to place students. The Foreign Language Center is currently pursuing an in-depth study to identify factors that influence placement test scores and subsequent success in university-level language classes. The results of this study will undoubtedly lead to an approach by which actual placement is determined by multiple factors that take into account not only the student's placement test score but other variables that are identified as important.

Placement Testing and Articulation Efforts

Ohio State is quite satisfied with the computer adaptive placement test, in particular with its efficiency and accuracy in placing incoming students into appropriate courses. In an effort to make information about the placement test available to a wider public, the overall results of the placement tests are reported in the Foreign Language Center's annual placement test report (Birckbichler, Deville & Antonsen, 1991, 1992) and the results are

made available to high school administrators and teachers who request information about their students' placement at Ohio State. In an effort to provide more systematic feedback to high school language departments, the Foreign Language Center is expanding the reporting of placement test data to an increasing number of high schools. Although privacy laws in Ohio do not permit reporting individual results to anyone other than the student who has taken the test and the student's academic adviser, aggregate results can be furnished to high school language departments that request information about the placement levels of their students.

As reported above, the results of the placement test indicate that many high school students were not placing at expected levels and needed to repeat high school content at the university level. Although language learning should not be considered a linear, serial process in which all students master material at the same point in time, repetition of high school content at the university level is a luxury that can no longer be afforded or defended.

In order to find solutions to this articulation problem, Ohio State University, in close partnership with the Columbus Public Schools and Columbus State Community College, has undertaken a large-scale project, the Collaborative Articulation/Assessment Project, that will directly address the problems involved with the articulation of foreign language study at secondary and postsecondary institutions.[3] The goals of this partnership are to create a functional articulation relationship that encompasses three perspectives—large urban high school, community college, and large state university—with each institution serving as an equal partner, and to develop a coherent long-term sequence of language instruction for the thousands of language students directly involved in the project.

Assessment, in particular, placement testing, is an essential part of the collaborative project. Discussions with high school teachers and administrators have revealed a concern that the computer-adaptive placement tests may not take into account the content of high school language programs. The absence of listening and speaking components is also seen as a weakness by high school participants. In response to this concern, the Foreign Language Center plans to study the relationship between oral proficiency tests, scores on the placement test, and subsequent classroom performance. Finally, the project will implement a program of early language assessment, conducted while students are still in high school.

Although early assessment as a means to encourage better high school-to-university articulation has been largely ignored up to this point, it overcomes one of the major disadvantages of testing upon entry to a university.

Such testing occurs far too late in the student's overall course experience to allow for feedback and corrective measures that would give students the opportunity to try to place into higher level courses. Further, placement test preparation has generally not included high school teachers. Shohamy points out the difficulties in bringing about programmatic change when teachers are not involved in the test-making process and when specific feedback is not provided to teachers and their students. Bachman (1990) believes that any test has potential diagnostic value; an early language assessment procedure could therefore be used to identify gaps—in student ability, in program goals, in teaching, and so on—and provide the type of specific feedback that Shohamy and Bachman advocate.

The Foreign Language Center's early assessment project will be modeled after the highly successful Early Mathematics Placement Testing Program (EMPT) developed by Ohio State's Department of Mathematics. The EMPT project has demonstrated that early assessment can help facilitate the transition between secondary and postsecondary mathematics programs. The EMPT program, which began in one area high school 10 years ago, now tests some 60,000 high school juniors annually. These students take the EMPT test and receive personal feedback about their mathematics skills and information about where their scores would place them at selected Ohio universities. The EMPT program has been highly successful at promoting longer sequences of mathematics study (senior-level math enrollments have risen dramatically), in reducing the number of students who need remedial work upon entering the university, and in saving taxpayers' and parents' money that would have been spent for remedial instruction. In addition to increases in placement test scores, the project has also helped to improve communication among high school mathematics teachers, college mathematics faculty, and high school guidance counselors. Such a test in foreign languages would clearly be a worthwhile component of a comprehensive articulation plan and would provide additional information that could help effect change in both secondary and postsecondary language programs.

Conclusion

The computer-adaptive placement test used at Ohio State University has proved to be a useful tool that provides information for decision making at many levels. The increased efficiency and flexibility with which information can be collected and analyzed allow a continuous flow of information

both to the secondary language programs that supply students to Ohio State and to the language programs into which incoming students place. Given its past role in bringing about change and its future potential as an agent of change, the placement test will continue to be one of the important contributors to the dynamics of program building and reform.

Notes

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3. The Collaborative Articulation/Assessment Project described in this section is funded by a grant from the Fund for the Improvement of Post Secondary Education (FIPSE).

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Appendix

Additional Placement Test Questions

1. Enter your last name:
2. Enter your Social Security number:
3. Enter your gender (M or F):
4. Enter high school name:

   Enter the name of the STATE where the high school is located:

   Enter the name of the CITY where the high school is located:
5. In what year did you last study the language in which you are now testing? Enter a four-digit number. Example: 1991. Enter the year:
6. What was your yearly grade in the last language class you took? Enter only letter grades "A" through "F." If you did not take the language in a classroom setting, enter "N":
7. How much have you enjoyed your foreign language study to date? Enter a number from 0–5, 5 = very enjoyable:
8. How well do you feel that your high school foreign language program prepared you for university language study? Enter a number from 0–5, 5 = very prepared:
9. Do you have any study-abroad experience with the language in which you are now testing? (Y/N):
10. How many people in your immediate family are native speakers of the language in which you are now testing? Enter the appropriate number:
11. How much contact have you had with the language outside the classroom? Example: clubs, movies, pen-pals, etc. Enter a number from 0–5, 5 = lots of extra contact.

12. How important is it for you to know another language? Enter a number from 0–5, 5 = important:

13. The next three questions are about the language in which you are now testing:

    1. How many years of language did you take in grades 1–5? Enter a number between 0–5:

    2. How many years of language did you take in grades 6–8? Enter a number between 0–3:

    3. How many years of language did you take in grades 9–12? Enter a number between 0–4:

14. In your opinion, how much was SPEAKING emphasized in your high school language program? Enter a number from 0–5, 5 = very much emphasized:

15. In your opinion, how much was LISTENING emphasized in your high school language program? Enter a number from 0–5, 5 = very much emphasized:

16. In your opinion, how much was READING emphasized in your high school language program? Enter a number from 0–5, 5 = very much emphasized:

17. In your opinion, how much was WRITING emphasized in your high school language program? Enter a number from 0–5, 5 = very much emphasized:

18. In your opinion, how much was CULTURE emphasized in your high school language program? Enter a number from 0–5, 5 = very much emphasized:

19. How important is it to you to be able to SPEAK the language? Enter a number from 0–5, 5 = very important:

20. How important is it to you to be able to UNDERSTAND the spoken language? Enter a number from 0–5, 5 = very important:

21. How important is it to you to be able to READ the language? Enter a number from 0–5, 5 = very important:

22. How important is it to you to be able to WRITE the language? Enter a number from 0–5, 5 = very important:

23. How important is it to you to know about the CULTURE of the country/countries in which the language is spoken? Enter a number from 0–5, 5 = very important:

24. How well can you SPEAK the language? Enter a number from 0–5, 5 = very well:

25. How well can you UNDERSTAND the language? Enter a number from 0–5, 5 = very well:

26. How well can you READ the language? Enter a number from 0–5, 5 = very well:

27. How well can you WRITE the language? Enter a number from 0–5, 5 = very well:

28. How much do you know about the CULTURE of the country/countries in which the language is spoken? Enter a number from 0–5, 5 = very much:

29. Into which language course do you think you should place?

    1 = lst-quarter course

    2 = 2nd-quarter course

    3 = 3rd-quarter course

    4 = 4th-quarter course

    5 = place out of the language requirement.

    Enter a number from l–5: