Guiding Questions for Evaluating Placement Tests

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Placement testing is an important first step for students entering academic English programs, including intensive, and community college and university programs. These tests are often a student's introduction to the academics of the program and help set the tone of the student experience. Effective placement tests provide accurate information to guide new students into appropriate courses. When the placement process is accurate and efficient, new students integrate into the program seamlessly. However, evaluating the effectiveness of your current placement tests is not always a straightforward process. Often, programs hang on to outdated and ineffective placement tests beyond their expiration date. What was once fast and easy becomes drawn-out and messy.

Some signs a change in placement test is needed begin to show up include:

- An increasing number of students are being moved up or down a level after initial placement
- Students complain that their courses are too easy or too difficult
- The content on the tests no longer reflect what is taught in the classroom
- Testing and scoring the tests become difficult
- Classes contain students of increasingly varied proficiency levels

These signs often do not show up overnight. They may appear after a program makes changes to the curriculum, when program resources change, or simply when a placement test becomes outdated.

The following questions are designed to guide an examination of the suitability and effectiveness of an academic English program's placement test. Through these questions, one will get an idea of whether (a) the test measures what it is intended to measure, (b), the test is equally accessible for all test takers, (c) the test is suitable for the resources of the program, and (d) the test results are consistently scored and interpreted.

1. <u>Is the test aligned to a common language standard (such as CEFR or ACTFL), or to the program language standards?</u>

A placement test is most effective when it measures the same range of language proficiency as what is taught in the program. Test items that fall outside the proficiency range of the program do not accurately reflect content that would be found in the program curriculum.

2. <u>Does the test measure an accurate representation of the language skills taught in the program?</u>

A test is only as good as the skills it measures. Testing all language skills taught in the program ensures that the most complete picture of a student's language proficiency is taken into consideration when placement occurs.

3. <u>Does the test include items that cover all language proficiency levels in the program?</u>

Placement tests need items that show what students at all proficiency levels can do. Tests that have a high concentration of items that focus on one proficiency level cannot accurately measure the proficiency of students that do not test at that level.

4. <u>Does the content in the test items reflect the content taught in the program?</u>

The content used in the placement test should be representative of the content in the program. Academic-prep programs should choose placement tests with academic content to measure language skills in the correct context. Career and community programs should choose tests with similarly-themed content.

5. <u>Do any test items require knowledge other than English language ability?</u>

While the content should be representative of the content in the program, it should not measure anything other than a student's knowledge of English language skills. Test items that measure knowledge of the content itself do not provide accurate information.

6. <u>Does the program have the appropriate resources to administer and score the test quickly and efficiently?</u>

Placement testing should not be a long, strenuous process. A revision or replacement of the placement test may be necessary if the program experiences a reduction of available resources. Many placement test products exist for a variety of program sizes.

7. <u>Can the test be scored consistently by different evaluators?</u>

Consistent norming practices ensure that evaluators are using the same criteria to measure student language proficiency on open-ended test items, such as writing and speaking samples. Standardized tests also ensure consistent scoring by different evaluators by controlling the way test items are answered.

8. <u>Does the test scoring method consistently place students with similar language proficiency into the same level?</u>

Rubrics and standardized test cut scores must accurately reflect the proficiency standards of the program's levels in order to accurately place students into appropriate levels. The language on the

rubrics must describe the student's abilities, which in turn must be consistent with the program language standards.

9. <u>Does the scoring method consider a student who is relatively stronger in one language domain and weaker in another?</u>

A student who is relatively stronger in speaking and weaker in writing would not benefit from a placement solely based on speaking proficiency. A final placement should ultimately reflect where a student will be most successful across all language domains.

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