Assessment Measures for English as a Second Language Students in College

Summary of Relevant Literature

MMAP Research Team

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Introduction

Project Background

With the recent implementation of Assembly Bill (AB) 705, assessment and placement practices for math and English have taken center stage in many California Community Colleges. However, it is just as important to develop an understanding of how best to assess and place English language learner (ELL) students as well. In February 2019, the Research and Planning Group for California Community College's (RP Group's) Multiple Measures Assessment Project (MMAP) team partnered with the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office (CCCCO) to conduct an overview of the various types of assessments used for English as a Second Language (ESL) courses and programs.

At this time, the MMAP team has updated our initial examination of literature in this field in order to include even more recent research on the benefits and challenges of different types of assessments as well as key considerations for colleges seeking to implement one or more of the main ESL assessment and placement strategies. This report is not intended to offer a comprehensive literature review but rather highlight key pieces of information for community college stakeholders and offer references for those seeking to find out more. In particular, MMAP hopes that this updated research will provide pertinent information to the AB 705 ESL Subcommittee about how ELL students can most effectively be assessed and placed within the California Community College system.

> **For More Information**
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> A full list of references is provided at the conclusion of this report, and a file containing all of the articles described in this report can be found here: https://bit.ly/2XE0OxF.

ESL Assessment Matters Now More Than Ever

Assessment is one of the most important components of a students' college experience, because their initial course placements have a significant and lasting impact on the programs of study they pursue, the length of time they spend at the institution, and ultimately the likelihood that they will achieve their educational goals. Research shows that ESL placement has a particularly powerful impact on ELL students' access and success in higher education (Callahan et al., 2020; Hodara, 2015; Kanno, 2018). Some research indicates that students' placement in community college ESL courses can actually delay enrollment in college-level coursework and stymy success in transfer-level courses, thus deferring students' capacity to earn an associate's degree or other credential (Hodara, 2015).

In a time when colleges are focused more than ever before on moving students efficiently into transfer-level coursework and facilitating their success at that level, it is crucial that English language learners not get left behind. The findings highlighted in this report should be considered when evaluating ESL placement processes, as well as ESL curricular structures and sequences, to ensure that colleges are maximizing the likelihood of ELL students' completing a transfer-level English or ESL equivalent course within three years (as required by AB 705).

Key Findings

In mining the literature to incorporate into this report, the MMAP team reviewed and selected dozens of scholarly articles addressing placement methods for ELL students. This summary presents the latest findings with respect to the following primary strategies used to assess and place ELL students:

- Writing samples and essays
- Guided/Directed self-placement
- Questionnaires
- The Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL)
- International Baccalaureate (IB) program transcripts

The sections below provide an overview of the research on these key strategies, highlighting aspects of each such as what has been found effective, what is challenging, and what community colleges should know if they are seeking to implement one or more of these approaches.

Writing Samples and Essays

One of the primary approaches used to assess the skill and knowledge level of ELL students is having them write an essay or provide a writing sample to the college. Research has found that this method, when used in combination with a review of high school data, is more effective than asking students to complete a multiple-choice test (Bunch et al., 2011; Brunk-Chavez & Fredericksen, 2008; Matzen & Hoyt, 2004).

Additionally, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Conference on College Composition and Communication states in a position paper,

> …[placements] should be based on students' writing proficiency rather than…the scores from standardized tests of general language or spoken language proficiency. Instead, scores from the direct assessment of students' writing proficiency should be used, and multiple writing samples should be consulted whenever possible (NCTE, 2014, para 12).

When colleges do use a writing sample or essay, research indicates that the following considerations increase the effectiveness of the assessment process:

- Test takers should have the opportunity to review a writing prompt in advance and/or select a prompt of their own choosing (Johnson & Riazi, 2017; Marini et al., 2008).

- Since ELL students may write more slowly than their native-English-speaking peers, it is helpful to have an unlimited timeframe for completing a writing sample (Crusan, 2002; Johnson & Riazi, 2017).

- It is also critical that those rating the writing samples do so in a consistent, valid fashion (Johnson & Riazi, 2017; Karimi & Mehrdad, 2012).

Guided/Directed Self-Placement

An increasingly common approach is referred to as guided self-placement (GSP) or directed self-placement (DSP).[1] This approach usually involves giving students the information they need to make their own decision about the course level at which they should be placed—information such as details about courses, samples of work done in particular courses, and more.

Thus far, many researchers have found GSP to not only be a valid assessment measure, but also one that produces higher levels of success for ELL students than other approaches (Ferris, 2016; Ferris & Lombardi, 2020; Hu et al., 2016; Inoue, 2009; NCTE, 2014; Ross, 2008; Royer & Gilles, 2003; Tompkins, 2003).

In order for GSP to be maximally successful, researchers offer the following recommendations:

- Make sure that key stakeholders participate in developing the GSP model, including classroom faculty, students, counselors, and administrators (Blakesley, 2002).

- Equip students with information about what each course will require of them. Ensure that students also have access to learning outcomes for each course as well as fundamental course expectations (Crusan, 2011; Sinha, 2014).

- Give students information about the GSP process in advance, including how to challenge their initial placement if necessary (Blakesley, 2002; Bunch et al., 2011; Crusan, 2011; Sinha, 2014).

- Design self-assessments in a way that the content matches the curriculum of the course. This way, what is expected of students is aligned with what they will learn in the course, which helps them make a more informed decision about which course to choose (Ross, 2008).

- Make sure that students understand the purpose of the GSP process as well as the range of possible outcomes, particularly with respect to the college's English and ESL sequences (and the lengths of each sequence) (Bedore & Rossen-Knill, 2004; Blakesley, 2002; Bunch et al., 2011; Crusan, 2011; Sinha, 2014).

Questionnaires

Some institutions use questionnaires (sometimes referred to a "multiple measures questionnaires") in order to capture information about students' backgrounds, skills, and abilities, among other things, as part of an assessment process. Unfortunately, there is only a somewhat limited amount of published literature regarding the various types of questionnaires used for placement of ELLs.

However, MMAP has collected a number of questions used by colleges and archived them here: https://bit.ly/2EcBtTH. Further, MMAP has made one potential option for ESL multiple

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[1] For the sake of consistency, this report will use the term "guided self-placement" or "GSP."

measures available in 10 different languages that are being used and locally validated at several colleges statewide (https://bit.ly/2Iij8IZ).

Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL)

The Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) is an exam used to measure the English language skills of non-native English speakers (Educational Testing Service, 2020). Thousands of universities around the world use the TOEFL to place students in the English language course that matches their skill levels. Although many community colleges have a minimum required score for admittance to international programs, it is unclear how many use the TOEFL score as a form of course placement.

Nonetheless, numerous published studies examining the effectiveness of TOEFL scores found only a low or moderate correlation between TOEFL results and academic achievement. This suggests that TOEFL scores alone are not a highly effective assessment/placement method (Burgess & Greis, 1970; Ferris et al, 2016; Fu; 2012; Krausz et al., 2005; Moglen, 2015; Newell, 2018; Ng, 2007; Wongtrirat, 2010).

International Baccalaureate Program Transcripts

The International Baccalaureate (IB) program offers a uniform and accredited curriculum focused on international education at high schools in the United States or in other countries. Schools must be authorized to teach IB programs. Many California Community Colleges do not currently accept IB transcripts from domestic or international students. However, research examining IB student success at four-year universities overwhelmingly shows that IB graduates outperform non-IB students in a variety of ways (Bergeron et al., 2015; Coca et al, 2012; Conley et al., 2014; Halic, 2013). Given this finding, colleges would be advised to consider the use of IB transcripts as a form of assessment for ELL students.

Conclusion: Multiple Measures Matter

As shown in this overview of research into ESL assessment and placement practices, there are benefits and drawbacks to the various methods used by community colleges and universities nationwide. Perhaps the most important take-away from this body of work—aside from specific insights about each assessment method—is that use of multiple assessment methods can help ensure that English language learners are appropriately placed into courses that match their level of skill and knowledge as well as facilitate their achievement of educational goals.

In the California Community College system, "multiple measures" refers specifically to the incorporation of two or more criteria for assessment and placement, such as:

- High school or college transcripts;
- Highest level of coursework completed in a subject and corresponding course grade;

- Attitude surveys;
- Vocational or career aptitude interest inventories;
- Specialized certificates or licenses;
- Education and employment histories;
- Military training and experience;
- Interviews; and
- Holistic scoring processes.

In 2020, the RP Group conducted a survey of 71 ESL departments within the California Community College system. This survey found that the majority of departments use assessments test to place students, followed by high school transcript data and guided self-placement (RP Group, 2020). However, research strongly indicates (as cited in this report) that standalone methods like standardized tests do not offer a full picture of students' capabilities, and ineffective placement can delay student achievement or even derail it entirely. As such, it is essential that colleges look at ways that multiple assessment methods can be used in conjunction with one another in order to give each and every student the greatest chance at educational success.

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The Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges

The RP Group strengthens the ability of California community colleges to discover and undertake high-quality research, planning, and assessments that improve evidence-based decision-making, institutional effectiveness, and success for all students.

Authors

Elisa Rassen

Michelle White

Mallory Newell

Diane Rodriguez-Kiino

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