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Emerging Practices in ESL Guided Self-Placement

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Introduction

According to [Assembly Bill \(AB\) 705](#), assessment and placement practices in California Community Colleges (CCC) should maximize the probability that students who enter credit-bearing ESL course sequences complete degree and transfer requirements in English within three years. The three-year timeframe begins when a student declares an intent to pursue a degree or transfer to a four-year institution.

The Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges' (RP Group's) Multiple Measures Assessment Project (MMAP) team partnered with the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office (CCCCO) to identify emerging practices in ESL guided self-placement (GSP). The use of GSP as a placement method can help ensure English Language Learners (ELLs) enroll in courses that align with their skill level and educational goal, and creates an opportunity for students to exercise personal agency in their educational journey.

This resource provides ESL community college stakeholders with an overview of key practices and strategies to assist in the implementation of a GSP model. It includes information on how ELLs can most effectively be assessed when using guided self-placement within the context of the California Community Colleges system.

In This Guide

This resource begins with an introduction to guided self-placement (GSP) including background information and related guidance on how colleges can use this placement method for students enrolling in credit ESL coursework. The next section offers examples of GSP in practice with descriptions and samples of approaches used in the CCC system. The following section includes recommended strategies for colleges interested in implementing GSP as a method for placement. The guide concludes with ideas and considerations on how colleges can continue to refine and improve ESL placement practices, including suggestions to help colleges verify the reliability and validity of their GSP model.

Background

Under [Title 5 of the California Code of Regulations](#), colleges are required to use evidence-based multiple measures for placement into ESL coursework. Chancellor's Office-approved ESL placement tests continue to be the most common method used to place students, followed by the use of essays; however, colleges may use alternative placement methods. GSP is one of the options available for placing ELLs in the appropriate language course.

Colleges can choose to implement a guided approach to placement or one that is entirely student-directed. The CCCCO's [AB 705 Guided and Self Placement Guidance and Adoption Plan Instructions](#) illustrates the following distinction between guided placement and self-placement:

Guided Placement: A process or tool used to encourage a student to reflect on their academic history and educational goals that may include the student evaluating their familiarity and comfort with topics in English or mathematics. After completing the process, students receive their course placement.

Self-Placement: A process in which a student chooses their placement after consideration of some form of self-reflection and other relevant factors (p. 2).

GSP most often involves providing students with course information, examples of typical coursework, and guidance such that students may effectively place themselves into the course level they feel best aligns with their learning and experience. GSP may include a self-assessment questionnaire, along with an overview of students' course placement options. The "guided" portion of GSP involves the inclusion of many factors that help students determine the best course for them, including an exploration of students' past experience, confidence/efficacy with respect to reading and writing in English, descriptions of the courses themselves, and meeting with a counselor or academic advisor to discuss the results of the GSP process and help students make a final determination on their placement.

Relevant Research

Robust research exists around GSP in higher education. Overall, there seems to be consensus that GSP has value in a placement process; it enables colleges to give students a voice in their placement, and results in a valid placement that is helpful to students (Crusan, 2011; Ferris et al., 2017; Ferris & Lombardi, 2020; Hu et al., 2016; Inoue, 2009; LeBlanc & Painchaud, 1985; Royer & Gilles, 2003; Sinha, 2014).

Ferris and Lombardi (2020) investigated whether a specific subgroup of students in a large university writing program for multilingual students could be successful if allowed to collaborate, with guidance, in their own placement. The authors provide strong evidence that ESL students can make smart choices for themselves and that including guided choice in the placement process can increase student buy-in. However, the authors concluded that for this process to be effective, students must be given adequate instructions in preparation for the decisions they are asked to make.

Blakesley (2002) acknowledged the challenges that faculty, staff, and administrators face when implementing a GSP model. The author asserts that institutions must empower students to make informed decisions about their placement. Blakesley et al. (2003) identified four major stakeholder groups they believe should be included in the process and convinced of the importance and value of GSP in order for it to function well: 1) students who need access to program information, 2) advisors who disseminate information, 3) administrators who make financial decisions, and 4) classroom instructors who teach the curriculum. One strength of GSP is the ability to adapt to the needs of students, programs, and colleges. Ultimately, GSP has been found to be a valid measure of assessment for ELLs and results in higher levels of success compared to other measures of assessment (Ferris et al., 2017; Ferris & Lombardi, 2020; Hu et al., 2016; Inoue, 2009; NCTE, 2014; Ross, 2008; Royer & Gilles, 2003; Tompkins, 2003).

Examples of Guided Self-Placement in Practice

Colleges take different approaches to GSP. The various tools and strategies offered below are examples colleges can use in developing or refining their GSP process. Though the following variations are not all-inclusive, the RP Group selected the following five practices to highlight:

1. **Student Questionnaires:** Students complete surveys that ask questions about their reading and writing habits and experiences. Questions cover a broad spectrum of topics and may include items related to students' backgrounds, skills, and abilities.
2. **Course Information and Expectations:** Course information is provided to students through an online form or paper brochure on the ESL levels available and how each course differs, including any noncredit options that may be offered.
3. **Reading and Writing Samples:** Students review samples of typical reading and/or writing assignments at each course level in order to choose the most appropriate ESL class. Students may be asked how difficult the reading samples are to understand with response options such as *too easy*, *too hard*, or *just right*. For writing samples, students may be asked to identify the writing that most closely reflects what they would be able to produce based on their skills and abilities.
4. **Can-Do Statements:** Students see a series of "can-do" statements they use to place themselves based on a self-assessment of their capabilities. These statements provide examples of what ELLs can do at various stages of language development.
5. **Academic Advising:** Counseling or guidance is provided to help students determine the appropriate class in which to enroll and develop a timeline for completing language requirements based on their educational goal.

What follows is a brief discussion of each of these four GSP practices, and in some cases, sample instruments or tools from select California Community Colleges (i.e., Laney College, Berkeley City College, and College of San Mateo).

Student Questionnaires

The use of student questionnaires or self-assessment surveys can be helpful in capturing students' backgrounds, skills, and abilities as part of the placement process. Questionnaires are used as a tool to help students determine which ESL course level is best for them and typically ask the student to provide information on the following:

- Academic attainment
- Self-evaluated English proficiency
- Use of English in everyday life

Questionnaires are often available both in-person and online to ensure students have the choice of completing them on-campus or in the comfort of their home. Typically, questionnaires do not have a time limit as they are not intended for testing purposes, though it may be helpful to inform students in advance of approximately how long it will take to complete the form. Questionnaires are not intended as a standalone measure. They are used in conjunction with other measures and may involve meeting with a counselor or advisor who can review the student's results and discuss the recommended placement options and the academic support available at the college (i.e., multiple measures).

MMAP has collected a number of questions used by colleges and archived them here: <https://bit.ly/2EcBtTH>. To improve student comprehension of the questionnaire instructions and prompts, it may be helpful to offer the self-assessment in English as well as students' native language whenever possible. MMAP has made one potential option for ESL multiple measures available in 10 different languages that is being used and locally validated at several colleges statewide (<https://bit.ly/2liJ8lZ>).

Course Information and Expectations

To help students determine the best course for them, some colleges provide students with information about the ESL and English courses available, and what will be required of students at each level. These colleges aim to ensure students have access to learning outcomes as well as fundamental course expectations. Examples of the type of course information colleges may provide during the GSP process include:

- Course description
- Course level (beginning, intermediate, advanced)
- Course type (e.g., reading, writing, speaking, listening, grammar, integrated skills)
- Course expectations (e.g., ability to construct clear and well-developed sentences and paragraphs)
- Credit classification (e.g., credit, noncredit)
- Number of units
- Number of levels below transfer
- Student learning outcomes

Course information may be included on a college's ESL webpage, embedded in an online GSP tool, or distributed in-person under the guidance of a counselor or academic advisor. Colleges can provide examples of typical assignments and exams to help students learn how ESL courses differ in terms of academic rigor and to have a clear roadmap of what is to come.

Reading and Writing Samples

With this approach, students are given reading or writing samples from different ESL courses and asked to pick the one that best matches their own capabilities. Students may be shown a typical ESL writing prompt and asked to read responses that align with varying levels of English proficiency. Students are instructed to choose the response that is closest to what they could write. Providing students with samples that correspond to various skill levels in ESL and allowing them to choose the example that aligns most closely with their reading/writing abilities helps students determine the most appropriate ESL placement level. Examples of ESL prompts used in GSP are provided below (see Figures 1 and 2) to illustrate how reading and writing samples may be constructed.

Figure 1. Laney College ESL Reading Sample

[open help](#)

Step 3: Read this story and choose if it is too easy, too hard, or just right for you.
Click on the "too easy" and "too hard" buttons to see stories from other levels before you choose which one is just right for you.

Level 1 Reading
Today is March 17th. About two and a half months ago, I said "Happy New Year!" to many of my friends. Slightly more than a month ago, I said the same thing to some other friends. In about four days, I'll give the same wishes to yet another group of friends. I'll do the same thing in July and also in September.

"How can that be?" you might be thinking.

The answer to this question depends on the calendar you use. Five common world calendars celebrate New Year at five different times: The Western/international calendar celebrates on January 1st. The Chinese calendar, used in China, Korea, and a few other places, rings in the New Year sometime in late January or February. The traditional Persian calendar, used in Iran, puts the New Year on March 21st. The Islamic calendar New Year falls on a different day of the Western calendar each year, because the calendar is based on the moon. The Eastern Orthodox Church calendar and the Jewish calendar are also based on the moon, but their New Years are usually in September.

Whenever you celebrate the New Year, I hope you have a happy one!

Too Hard ▼ I don't understand anything. I want to take Basic English classes.	 Level 1 reading is just right.	Too Easy ▲ I understand everything. I want to see Level 2 reading.
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Figure 2. Berkeley City College ESL Writing Sample

Writing Samples

These students were asked to write for 30 minutes about this question.

Which is a better place to live: a big city or a small town?

Think about what you would be able to write to answer this question in 30 minutes.

Read these samples of student writing. Choose the one that is closest to what you could write.

- I think a better place to live a big city. Because to get many chance everything. Example job. If you many chance job you get your like job. You get your like job to work easy. Because already you like.

- I think small town because in a small town the people are more friendly the life is more easy is less contamination in small town have a lot trees. Flowers, birds the small town is better to live than a big city. For example a big city no have many trees, have less birds is very loud. Sometimes the life is more difficult in a big city. A big reason about big city no is better to live.

- For me, a big city is a better place to live. I think the traffic in a big city is more benefit than it in a small town. Because I'm young, I think the traffic is important. And, I'm a lazy guy. I don't like to drive a long way to buy food. I'm from Nanjing in China. Nanjing is a city that is beautiful. People that live at Nanjing are nice and friendly. Also, my best friends are there, so I like Nanjing and I like a big city. I have been to a small town. In my opinion, a small town is peaceful. But, everything is slow at the small town. People walk, drive and work slowly there, so I can't stand that. But, people is nice too.

- I think is better to live in a big city because I like to live in a small house or an apartment, I don't like to be alone. In a big city you always can see a lot of people whenever you go. I like to go shopping to the big malls, so in the city there are a lot of malls. Also, in a big city there are many places to go, you can go to any movie, theatre, museums. I can choose to go at a restaurant: a Chinese restaurant, Mexican restaurant, Italian restaurant, etc. In a big city if you are married and have children there are many options of schools where to go. There are many industries, stores, and also there are more opportunities of jobs. You have better medical services than a small town. In the city, there are big and good hospital where you can go, be healthy. It is very important, if you are healthy you can do everything you want. In a big city you can use different kinds of transport: bus, car, train, etc. so you can go everywhere, and there are airports to go to other cities or countries, and that's good for me because I like to travel and meet other countries, other people, foods, etc. In a small town you can live maybe without stress but you can not have the opportunities that you can have in a big city. I suppose it depends how you are and what do you like to choose to live in a big city or small town.

- I prefer living in a big city to living in a small town because a big city has better schools, hospitals, and job opportunities than those of a small town. First, education is very important to me. I can easily find more modern schools with better teachers in a big city than in a small town. This is because there are more schools and teachers may be better paid. I can choose the school that is the best fit for me. Secondly, health is also an important matter to me. There are much more modern hospitals with best doctors and devices in a big city than those in a small town. In case i have serious sickness, doctors who work in modern hospitals in a big city are able to save my life better than those who work in small hospitals in a small town. Last but not least, job opportunities in a big city are better than those in a small town because there are more business facilities such as banks, travel agencies, insurance agencies, hospitals, schools, factories and so on located in a big city. These businesses recruit thousands of people every year. If I live in a small town, job opportunities are limited because business facilities rarely locate in such places. For all the above mentioned reasons, I prefer living in a big city to a small town.

Can-Do Statements

Colleges may also use a series of “can-do” statements to help students place themselves based on what students state they are capable of doing. Can-do statements are often presented as checklists to help ELLs assess their skills and abilities within the context of the English language. Can-do statements frequently pertain to daily life, personal experiences, or classroom topics. Students read scenarios and decide with which statements they most closely identify.

Once a student has determined which can-do statements best reflect their skills and abilities, writing samples may be provided to illustrate the type of work students would be expected to do in the corresponding ESL course. Reviewing these types of checklists gives students a better understanding of the level of English proficiency needed to be successful in different ESL courses. Examples of various can-do statements used by two ESL programs in the California Community Colleges (CCC) system are provided below (see Figures 3 and 4).

Figure 3. Laney College ESL Can-Do Statements

Basic English - Beginning <ul style="list-style-type: none">• I don't know any English.
Level 1 - High Beginning <ul style="list-style-type: none">• I can read directions.• I can write sentences.• I can use present tense.
Level 2 - Intermediate <ul style="list-style-type: none">• I can read stories in English.• I can read a newspaper or magazine article with a dictionary.• I can use present, past, and future tenses.
Level 3 - High Intermediate <ul style="list-style-type: none">• I can read newspaper or magazine articles without a dictionary and understand the main idea, even if I do not understand all of the details.• I can read a short book written in English with a dictionary.• I can write a 2-3 page essay giving my opinion about a topic.
Level 4 - Advanced <ul style="list-style-type: none">• I can easily read newspapers or magazines without a dictionary.• I can read fiction or nonfiction books in English.• I can write a 3-4 page essay presenting an argument on a topic with support from other texts.

Figure 4. College of San Mateo ESL Can-Do Statements

Levels below transfer	Reading/Writing/Grammar	Listening/Speaking
0	<p>Today, I can:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Write a <u>grammatically correct</u> 5-7 page research essay with multiple examples from books and articles. Read and <u>fully understand</u> complex texts, two or more 350-page nonfiction books and many articles from magazines and newspapers. Be confident that my grammar is clear enough for others to know very specific ideas that I am telling. 	<p>Today, I can:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <u>Fully understand</u> a college lecture in English on academic topics such as biology, history, and sociology. Communicate fluently in college, at work, or in the community with native speakers of English with little or no confusion. I can speak in English almost as well as I can in my native language(s). Use academic and professional vocabulary, idioms, and slang in my everyday speech.
1	<p>Today, I can:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Write a <u>mostly</u> grammatically correct 3-5 page academic essay that includes examples from books and articles. Read and <u>fully understand</u> difficult, multi-page news and magazine articles and a 300-page novel or nonfiction book. 	<p>Today, I can:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understand <u>almost all</u> of a college lecture in English on academic topics such as biology, history, and sociology. I may not understand all of it, but I can follow it well-enough to keep up with the discussion. Communicate <u>confidently</u> in college, at work, or in the community with native speakers of English. There are <u>a few</u> times when I can't say what I want to say in English.
2	<p>Today, I can:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Write a <u>mostly</u> grammatically correct 2-3 page essay about a personal topic. Read and <u>understand</u> 2-3-page news or magazine articles and <u>generally understand</u> a 250-page novel or nonfiction book. 	<p>Today, I can:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understand <u>most of</u> a radio program, TV show, or movie in English. Communicate in college, at work, or in the community in English. There are <u>some</u> times when I can't say what I want to say in English, but I can usually find ways to make myself understood.
3	<p>Today, I can:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Write a well-organized, detailed paragraph about a personal topic. Read and <u>understand</u> short readings (1-2 pages) and <u>generally understand</u> a 150-page novel or nonfiction book. 	<p>Today, I can:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understand <u>parts</u> of a radio or TV show or movie in English, but I often have trouble following the topic. Communicate in college, at work or in the community in English. There are <u>many</u> times when I can't say what I want to say in English, especially about academic topics.
4	<p>Today, I can:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Write a group of sentences in English about one topic. Read and <u>understand</u> short, not very complicated readings (½ -1 page in length) and a short book (20 pages). 	<p>Today, I can:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understand a <u>slow-paced</u> conversation in English on a familiar topic or in practical everyday situations, such as shopping. Communicate in English about familiar topics or practical everyday situations. There are <u>often</u> times I can't say in English what I want to say.

Academic Advising

After students complete their portion of the GSP process, they have an opportunity to review the proposed placement outcome with someone at the college. ELLs meet with a counselor, academic advisor, or someone within the ESL department to assist in making the final placement decision. During these meetings, students can discuss course expectations and implications of their placement decision. Academic advising provides an opportunity for students to ask questions and seek clarification on the placement process and timeline for completion within the ESL sequence. It also allows the college to connect students with valuable resources such as tutoring services to support their academic success.

Guidance can extend after the registration process to the first day or week of instruction. At this time, classroom faculty may identify students who could benefit from enrollment in a different ESL or English course. This determination may be based on the results of an initial assignment or in-class diagnostic. Low-stake assignments and in-class diagnostics are generally used to assist instructors in streamlining course content and pedagogies based on students' knowledge and skills at the beginning of the term; however, they can also be useful tools in helping students recognize if they are in the appropriate course level. Depending on registration deadlines, class availability, and students' interests, instructors may facilitate enrollment in a different course that is a better fit for their language background and experience.

Recommended Strategies

The tools and practices colleges integrate into their GSP process may influence how successful ELLs are at gauging their English language abilities and level of preparedness for college-level coursework. While there are various approaches colleges can use to structure their GSP model, ultimately, the process should result in placement recommendations that maximize the likelihood ELLs complete degree and transfer requirements in English within three years.

The authors reviewed ESL literature with the purpose of identifying strategies colleges can consider incorporating into their GSP process to ensure students are equipped with the information and support necessary to make an informed placement decision. The section below provides four explicit strategies and considerations extracted from the literature review that may enhance implementation of a GSP model. For a summary of relevant ESL literature, please access: [Assessment Measures for English as a Second Language in College \(RP Group, 2021\)](#).

Encourage participation from ESL and English stakeholders in developing and testing a GSP model (Blakesley, 2002). It is important to determine who should be involved at the onset. Ideally there should be representation from classroom faculty, students, counselors and advisors, and administrators.

Explain the purpose and impact of the GSP process to students (Bedore & Rossen-Knill, 2004; Blakesley 2002; Bunch et al., 2011; Crusan, 2011; Sinha, 2014). Offer clear and consistent information on why GSP is an appropriate placement method and how it

benefits students. This discussion should include the implications placement decisions will have on the sequence of courses students will likely encounter.

Provide students with an overview of the GSP process, including how to change or appeal their initial placement if necessary (Blakesley, 2002; Bunch et al., 2011; Crusan, 2011; Sinha, 2014). Explain how GSP works and what each step involves. Inform students of the support services available, whom to contact for answers to their questions or academic advising, and what happens after they receive their placement recommendation, including how to accept or override the result.

Align GSP tools with ESL course-level curriculum (Ross, 2008). Design self-assessments, reading/writing prompts, can-do statements, and other placement instruments in a way that the response options correspond to the ESL course levels available. This pairing will help students make a more informed decision about which course to enroll and the level of difficulty they can expect.

Conclusion

GSP creates an opportunity for students to reflect on their own knowledge, skills, and background to help them make a more informed placement decision. To advance implementation efforts, colleges should aim to adopt a comprehensive approach in their GSP model that includes an examination of the students' academic history, educational goals, and English language experience.

It is important to determine whether the methods used to place students are appropriate for the linguistically diverse populations they serve. Following implementation, colleges can evaluate their GSP process for validity and reliability and make adjustments as needed. Validity indicates the extent to which the GSP model measures what it is supposed to measure. In other words, how accurately the model places students. To test a model's "goodness of fit," colleges can compare placement recommendations with student outcomes data to understand how ELLs ultimately performed. Reliability refers to consistency in the results across multiple administrations and students. Colleges should check to determine if their GSP process produces consistent outcomes under repeated measurement conditions (e.g., students with similar language backgrounds and skills place at the same or close to the same course level).

Additionally, placement tools should be assessed for instrument bias and cognitive overload. Instrument bias occurs when students are unfamiliar with some aspect of the placement tool. For example, including culturally specific references with which some students may be unfamiliar, or requiring the placement process be completed online may present a challenge for students who have little computer experience. Cognitive overload occurs when students are presented with more information than they can reasonably process. If a college's GSP model is too complicated or time consuming, students may struggle to complete the process. Colleges may want to examine the following aspects of their GSP model to identify instrument bias or cognitive overload:

- The clarity of GSP instructions and the usage of specific terms, phrasing, and examples in the placement instruments;
- The sequencing, formatting, and presentation of prompts in the placement tool, including the layout and how much information is displayed on each page or screen; and
- The total time needed to complete the GSP process and the number of steps students must complete before receiving a placement recommendation.

By examining the GSP process, colleges learn whether the instruments and methodology used in their GSP model are comprehensible and achieve the desired outcomes. Ultimately, placement instruments and tools should reflect the skills and knowledge students actually need to be successful in ESL courses.

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The Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges

As the representative organization for Institutional Research, Planning, and Effectiveness (IRPE) professionals in the California Community Colleges (CCC) system, the RP Group strengthens the ability of CCC to discover and undertake high-quality research, planning, and assessments that improve evidence-based decision-making, institutional effectiveness, and success for all students.

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