

**Research Report**  
ETS RR-14-11

# English-as-a-Second-Language Programs for Matriculated Students in the United States: An Exploratory Survey and Some Issues

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December 2014

# ETS Research Report Series

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## RESEARCH REPORT

# English-as-a-Second-Language Programs for Matriculated Students in the United States: An Exploratory Survey and Some Issues

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Although English-as-a-second-language (ESL) programs for matriculated students have been a presence in U.S. higher education since the 1940s, little has been documented in the literature concerning ESL courses, ESL placement tests, and the procedures in which incoming students are placed into appropriate classes. The present study takes three approaches to explore the characteristics of ESL programs for matriculated students, with the purposes of drawing a clearer picture of such programs and preparing for a further exploration of validity issues that arise when using standardized English proficiency tests, such as the *TOEFL*<sup>®</sup> test, to assist with ESL placement decisions. We reviewed the websites of 152 postsecondary institutions, obtained information from 80 institutions through an online survey, and interviewed representatives of 24 ESL programs for matriculated students. Analyses of these three sources of data revealed that ESL programs for matriculated students exist in more than half of colleges and universities sampled, that they provide a wide range of ESL courses focusing on different language skills, and that these programs make use of a variety of placement tests and procedures. We summarize these different placement procedures using a general model, highlight issues that need further investigations, and conclude with key findings and limitations.

**Keywords** ESL program; matriculated students; placement test; placement procedure; ESL course

doi:10.1002/ets2.12010

Along with the ongoing increase of the nonnative English speakers (NNES) in the United States over the last several decades (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001; (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education, Division of Adult Education and Literacy [U.S. DoED], 2003)), the number of NNES students, or the English-as-a-second-language (ESL) students, has also increased in the U.S. higher education system (Douglass & Edelstein, 2009; Watkins, 1992; Wendler et al., 2010).

To accommodate the needs of ESL students, colleges and universities in the United States have been providing language-related assistance and resources through various forms, such as the ESL programs, since the 1940s (Alatis & LeClair, 1993; Matsuda, 2005). From the 1950s onward, colleges and universities began to employ proprietary criteria to screen students for ESL coursework (Gibian, 1951; Parr, Bradley, & Bingi, 1991; Young, 2008). For example, Harvard University created a “special section of English” in response to “the peculiar needs” of international students from Europe (Gibian, 1951, p. 157).

Despite their lasting presence, little is known about ESL programs for matriculated students at the postsecondary level, including the ESL courses offered, the procedures to place students into appropriate levels, and the tests used for placement. To explore answers to these questions, we decided to survey ESL programs and to provide a fleshed-out general picture of ESL programs for matriculated students in the postsecondary institutions of the United States.

## Literature Review

As there are multiple meanings associated with the term *ESL*, different formats of ESL programs exist in the U.S. postsecondary institutions, as reflected in ESL programs’ general purposes and their content foci. For example, there are English programs for academic purposes, English programs for professional purposes, test preparation programs, and travel preparation programs (Dehghanpisheh, 1987). ESL programs may also differ by the institution type (public or private,

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research-oriented institutions, or community colleges), as well as the student body's academic ability, ethnic background, first language, and language proficiency (Dehghanpisheh, 1987; Young, 2008).

There are at least two types of ESL programs at the postsecondary level. One is the ESL program for matriculated students, who have been admitted to degree-granting programs (Dehghanpisheh, 1987). Matriculated students typically need to satisfy a set of admission requirements, including being proficient enough in English. In reality, many matriculated students still encounter English language-related difficulty in their coursework (Chang & Kanno, 2010); therefore, they are often advised to take additional English courses (Dehghanpisheh, 1987). The other types of ESL programs are for nonmatriculated students (i.e., not yet admitted to a degree-granting program), such as the *intensive* ESL program (IEP), where students typically take ESL classes for 20 or more hours every week.

As seen from the descriptions above about different types of ESL programs, the terms *ESL* or *ESL programs* may have different meanings depending on when and where they are used. It seems likely that an ESL program at a particular institution may serve multiple types of students, varying from fully matriculated students, students who are studying English intensively for different purposes, and students who are conditionally admitted contingent on satisfying language requirements by either completing a preparatory English course or passing a proficiency test.

Not surprisingly, it is hard to decide whether the studies or discussions reviewed below are specifically for matriculated ESL students alone or for all different types of ESL students. However, we hope that these findings would be helpful to understand the case with ESL programs for matriculated students.

In the early years, it seems that oral skills were emphasized above writing and reading (Fries, 1945; Silva, 1990). Since the 1970s, however, academic writing skills have become the focus of ESL programs for matriculated students (Silva, 1990; Williams, 1995). Nevertheless, Dehghanpisheh (1987), without distinguishing different types of ESL programs, found the four language modalities (reading, writing, listening, and speaking) being taught in ESL programs, separately or in a combined way. With the rapid change of ESL population, there might have been changes since then on ESL programs' content and skill foci.

Placement tests, if well designed, provide accurate and reliable information about students' actual English-language proficiency and help to group students of homogeneous English abilities (Brown, 1981). Researchers have suggested that both standardized language tests (e.g., *TOEFL iBT*<sup>®</sup>) and in-house tests could be used for ESL placement (Alderson, Krahnke, & Stansfield, 1987; Brown, 1989). Standardized tests have several features that make them potentially good placement aids (Jamieson, Jones, Kirsh, Mosenthal, & Taylor, 2000). Using the TOEFL iBT test as an example, it is administered under standardized conditions, has desirable psychometric properties, offers scores on the four language modalities, and provides a common scale that allows for comparison of the scores of all candidates. Such type of standardized test, if validated, could help greatly with the ESL placement process and make it more efficient and cost effective without losing much placement accuracy.

On the other hand, locally developed tests have the advantage of being flexible and customizable in reflecting the unique characteristics and course content of the local program and having direct involvement of faculty members who have better knowledge of students and courses (e.g., Brown, 1981; Weaver, 1987; White, 1989). However, a local test that is highly customized to the characteristics of a single group of students (i.e., the student sample from which the test is developed in a particular year) may not generalize well to new populations of students in subsequent years, which could impose a serious threat to the reliability and validity of a local placement test (Brown, 1984). Other threats could be related with the fact that local tests were originally developed using small samples and had limited psychometric analysis (Brown, 1989; Leki, 1992).

ESL placement decisions could have a great impact on students' academic lives and potentially their future careers. For example, being placed into remedial ESL classes lengthens the time needed to complete the degree and increases a student's financial burden. Therefore, it is important for programs to closely monitor the placement procedures and ensure the fairness and accuracy of placement decisions (Brown, 1989). Patkowski (1991) indicated that placement decisions could be made based on a single placement test rather than on a combination of all information that is available about the candidate, while an alternative approach is to use standardized English test scores and local placement test scores together to assist with the placement decision-making process (Brown, 1989). It is not clear how frequently these two approaches (or any other approaches) have been adopted by ESL programs, nor was it clear about the accuracy or fairness of decisions based on such approaches.

Dehghanpisheh (1987) summarized various placement procedures into four categories: conservative, traditional, bridge, and progressive models. The conservative model (also known as the *sink-or-swim* model; see Hargett &

Olszag, 1984) only has two tracks determined by the TOEFL scores alone. Students scoring below the cut point are placed into an intensive English class, and those scoring above the cut point into the freshman-level English class. The traditional model has a third track where students may be placed out of the intensive class but below the freshman-level class (i.e., pre-freshman English class). The bridging model is similar to the traditional model but substitutes a transitional English training stage (or semi-intensive English training) for the pre-freshman English class (Dehghanpisheh, 1987). Finally, the progressive model has no English-language proficiency prerequisites and accepts all applicants, using placement tests to classify them into an intensive, semi-intensive, or freshman English class. Dehghanpisheh (1987) suggested that the bridging model is more flexible, with some control of the English-language proficiency levels of the student body.

These four models provide a good overview of ESL placement processes, but it is not clear if there are differences among them when applied in matriculated and/or IEPs. The roles of standardized English proficiency tests and local tests are not specified in the models, nor are the details mentioned about the content, format, and scoring of local placement tests. Finally, not much information related to the ESL courses, their content focus, and so forth is described in Dehghanpisheh's (1987) study.

In summary, some useful information was found in previous studies, but limited effort was made to distinguish different types of ESL programs (e.g., matriculated vs. IEP). Little information about ESL programs for matriculated students, especially the placement procedures, placement tests used, and course content in ESL programs, was known. Little has been discussed about the use of different language modalities in placement tests and their roles in the placement decisions. Dehghanpisheh's (1987) summary of ESL program models does provide some useful general information about the structure of ESL programs. Nevertheless, it does not focus specifically on programs for matriculated students and is relatively out of date. It is the goal of this study to draw a clearer picture of placement procedures and curricula in ESL programs for matriculated students. To avoid confusion, the term *ESL students* hereafter refers to those NNES students who are studying in the United States; *matriculated students* refers to those who have been admitted to a degree program at the undergraduate level or beyond and can take major-related courses; and *ESL programs* refers to ESL programs for matriculated students.

## Research Questions

Three research questions were explored:

1. What are the characteristics of ESL programs for matriculated students (including ESL courses offered in these programs, number of course levels, foci of these courses, and the number of matriculated ESL students)?
2. What are the placement tests being used in ESL programs, and what English language skills do these tests focus on?
3. How is the placement decision made for individual students in ESL programs (what types of information are used, and how are multiple sources of information integrated in making the decision)?

## Method

We took an exploratory approach by consulting different sources of ESL-related information in three stages listed below.

### Stage 1. A Review of Websites

The websites of 440 ESL programs affiliated with U.S. colleges and universities were initially reviewed, among which 152 programs' websites were further reviewed more systematically to gather the following information.

1. Demographic information about a school, including control type (private vs. public) and the size of international student body
2. Language-proficiency requirements for admission
3. Information about an ESL program, for example, whether an ESL program is offered, placement test(s) used, the focus of the ESL program, the number of ESL courses offered
4. Contact information

### Stage 2. Online Survey

The main purpose of this stage was to verify the information from the website and collect more detailed information of the ESL programs. For example, more details of the admission tests, placement tests, and cut scores were targeted in

addition to the information found in the website review (see Appendix A). Information that was not found or not clearly interpretable from the website review was obtained or clarified in the survey questions and answers. Finally, the online survey was expected to help identify ESL programs for a future validity study of ESL placement.

Eighty institutions responded to the survey, but only 62 4-year universities had complete survey data. The 62 institutions were scattered across the four regions of the nation, with 19 institutions from the Midwest and 14–15 institutions from each of the Northeast, the South, and the West.

### Stage 3. Phone Interview

A disadvantage of a survey approach is that the accuracy of the survey results is dependent on the degree to which survey respondents share the same understanding of particular terms and descriptions, that is, the ESL program or ESL program for matriculated students. A more accurate way to address such limitations is to have a post hoc discussion with the survey respondents on related survey questions to clarify their understanding of particular terms and to confirm that their survey answers were accurate. For such purposes, we selected 30 ESL programs for the phone interview so that each program: (a) was for matriculated students, (b) had students' TOEFL iBT scores, (c) had more than 50 ESL students, and (d) expressed interest in the interview. We also took into account the geographical locations of the ESL programs to improve the sample's representativeness. In this stage, we confirmed the information collected in the website research and the online survey and obtained more details of the placement tests and procedures, such as the use of standardized tests, measures of the English speaking modality, and local placement tests in the placement procedures, through a structured list of questions (see Appendix B). We successfully conducted a follow-up phone interview at 24 ESL programs.

## Results

To better describe the findings, we have presented the results after each research question below.

### Research Question 1. Characteristics of English-as-a-Second-Language Programs

#### ***Adoption of English-as-a-Second-Language Programs for Matriculated Students***

We found that 79 programs (out of 152 programs that were systematically reviewed) had clear statements or descriptions related to English-language programs on their websites. Fifty-nine of them stated explicitly having an ESL program for matriculated students, while 20 of them stated explicitly having an IEP. Surprisingly, several large and well-known universities had no or little information about English-language programs for matriculated students, although each hosted more than 2,000 international students, according to OpenDoors (2008). All 62 programs that responded to the online survey confirmed that their institutions had an ESL program. All 24 programs interviewed confirmed their answers to this question after clarifying the term *ESL programs* for matriculated students.

#### ***English-as-a-Second-Language Courses and Modality Foci***

In the online survey, 50 ESL programs (all from 4-year colleges and universities) out of 62 programs provided information about the four language modalities and their focus in the ESL curriculum (i.e., reading, writing, listening, and speaking; see Table 1). Forty-eight programs reported offering writing-specific English courses, 45 programs reported offering speaking-specific and reading-specific English courses, and 43 programs reported offering listening-specific courses. More than half of the programs also reported having three or more course levels for particular language skills, including 38 programs offering three or more levels of writing courses (see Table 1).

Fifteen programs reported that each had more than 100 ESL students. The follow-up interview revealed that there were more undergraduate students than graduate students in most of these institutions.

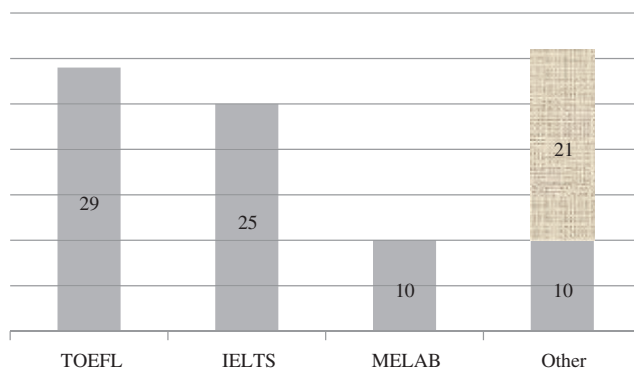
### Research Question 2. Placement Tests (Tests Used, Skills Tested, Cut Scores)

The website research revealed that 51 different placement tests (see Appendix C) were used in the ESL programs. Twenty-seven programs stated on their websites that English writing skills were tested, 20 stated that reading skills were tested,

**Table 1** English-as-a-Second-Language Courses and Levels by the Four Language Skills Among the 50 Programs

Courses	Listening	Speaking	Reading	Writing
No skill-specific course	7	5	5	2
At least one skill-specific course	43	45	45	48
With one course level	2	2	5	3
With two course levels	10	8	6	7
With three or more levels	31	35	34	38
Total	50	50	50	50

Note: Numbers in each cell represent the number of programs.



**Figure 1** Number of programs requiring each test for placement purposes. (Based on survey answers by 50 four-year colleges and universities.) IELTS = International English Language Testing System; MELAB = Michigan English Language Assessment Battery.

20 tested listening skills, and 18 tested speaking skills. Among these tests, 20 were clearly locally developed tests by the programs, and 18 were clearly the standardized and commercially available tests. The latter category included the TOEFL test (in 17 programs), International English Language Testing System (IELTS, 11), Speaking Proficiency English Assessment Kit (*SPEAK*<sup>®</sup>, 5), ACT tests and COMPASS tests (7), Michigan English Language Assessment Battery (MELAB) or Michigan Test of English Language-Proficiency (MTELP, 4), *ACCUPLACER*<sup>®</sup> (3), *TSE*<sup>®</sup> (3), and *SAT*<sup>®</sup> (3) tests.

Fifty out of 62 institutions in the survey reported that they either used the standardized English test scores as part of the admissions requirements or had their students take a separate English placement test to assist with the ESL placement decisions. The survey answers also revealed that tests used in ESL placement overlapped largely with those required for admissions. More specifically, the TOEFL iBT test was used by 29 programs for placement purposes, followed by IELTS (25) and MELAB (10). Thirty-one programs reported using other tests (see Figure 1), either along with the standardized tests (10 programs) or by themselves (21 programs). In addition, three programs also mentioned the TOEFL Institutional Testing Program (*TOEFL*<sup>®</sup> ITP assessment series [Educational Testing Service (ETS), 2012]) in the other tests category to assist with the placement process, together with the Compass ESL, *SLEP*<sup>®</sup> test, *ACCUPLACER* ESL, and a series of Michigan tests (e.g., Michigan Placement Test, MTELP, and Michigan English Language Institute College English Test [MELICET]). A more complete list of these tests can be found in Appendix C.

Twenty-one programs reported using the other tests exclusively to assist with the placement process (see the upper part of the *Other* bar in Figure 1), including nine programs that reported using the locally developed English-language tests alone to help place students.

According to the phone interview with 24 programs, 17 of them assessed reading and writing skills in the placement tests, while half of them (12) measured listening skills, and only four measured speaking skills in their placement tests.

### Research Question 3. Placement Procedures

#### *Placement Procedures and Information Used*

Thirty-one programs answered the open question about placement procedures in the survey. They all reported that writing skills were considered in making placement decisions, with most programs (25) considering more than one language skill

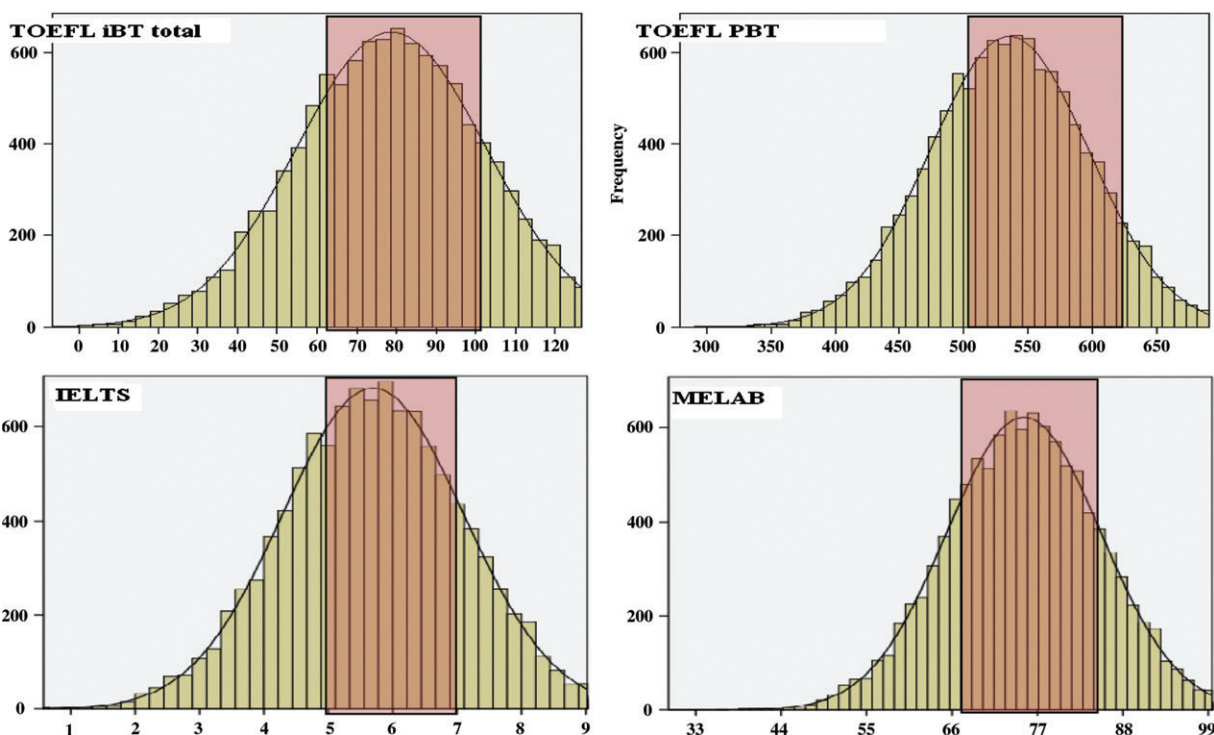


Figure 2 Cut scores on the four English-language tests for exemption from English-as-a-second-language courses.

in the placement. About a third (12) of the programs also considered listening and/or reading skills. Only five programs explicitly mentioned that students' speaking skills were considered in the placement process.

Three programs reported in the survey that placement decisions are based on a holistic or composite score computed from all placement tests scores (often a sum or weighted sum). Four programs reported using different test scores independently to determine placement into courses focusing on specific skills. For example, writing placement test scores are used alone to determine students' writing course levels, and speaking placement test scores are used alone to determine students' speaking course levels, acknowledging the uniqueness of specific skills. In each of these cases, explicit cut scores are used in determining students' placement status, either on the combined score or on each skill/test or section separately.

The phone interview results suggested that standardized English-language tests scores were typically used to screen and exempt students from taking the placement tests and/or the ESL courses (at 18 programs). However, the ways in which placement test scores were used differed across programs, consistent with what was found in the open question in the online survey. Five programs emphasized that placement decisions are solely based on placement test scores. Three programs mentioned that placement decisions are made on a case-by-case basis. For example, students' standardized test scores, placement test scores, essays, and other related information (e.g., major, level of study, etc.) are considered together by a group of ESL teachers and program director(s) to determine ESL course levels for each individual.

### ***Exemption Criteria for English-as-a-Second-Language Programs***

The survey responses suggested that students could be exempted from ESL coursework based on the standardized language test scores alone, the placement test scores alone, or a combination of both, with the last approach more widely adopted in more than half of the programs. Twenty-seven ESL programs set a higher cut score for graduate students than for undergraduate students, while the other programs applied the same cut score to all students. The reported ranges of cut scores for ESL course exemption are represented in Figure 2 for the four standardized English tests.

In general, the cut scores for exemption varied greatly across ESL programs on each of the standardized tests: from 61 to 100 on the TOEFL iBT test, 500 to 625 on the TOEFL paper-based test (PBT), 5 to 7 on the IELTS academic test, and 67 to 85 on the MELAB test (see Figure 2). The cut scores on the IELTS (Cambridge ESOL, 2010) and TOEFL PBT (ETS, 2010a) covered a wider range above the population mean than the range below it, while the cut scores on the TOEFL



iBT (ETS, 2010b) and MELAB (Johnson & Ohlrogge, 2010) were more symmetrically distributed around the population mean. In other words, more programs chose to set a score greater than the population mean as the exemption cut point when using the IELTS or TOEFL PBT than when using the TOEFL iBT or MELAB.

## Summary and Discussion

In this study, we explored the characteristics of ESL programs for matriculated students in the United States, including placement tests used, placement procedures, and ESL courses offered, based on a geographically diverse sample of colleges and universities. We found that ESL programs for matriculated students have been adopted by a noticeable number of institutions. We have summarized the findings for each research question below.

### *1. What are the characteristics of ESL programs for matriculated students (including ESL courses offered in these programs, number of course levels, foci of these courses, and the number of matriculated ESL students)?*

The ESL programs varied substantially on the program's size, the number of ESL courses offered, and the foci of these courses. The ESL courses were typically offered at multiple levels to improve more than one skill domain. Most programs acknowledged the high importance of English writing skills and emphasized writing skills more in their curricula than other English skills. Fewer programs had specific courses focusing on English reading and listening skills, and still fewer programs had courses on speaking skills.

### *2. What are the placement tests being used in ESL programs, and what English language skills do these tests focus on?*

The TOEFL iBT test, along with its previous versions, was the most commonly reported test to assist with the placement process. A substantial number of other tests were less widely reported being used in the placement process. Among these reported tests, there were some tests (e.g., SAT) that are traditionally used for native English-speaking students only and are not designated for NNES or for placement purposes.

Both standardized English-language tests and locally developed English tests were observed in the placement procedures, although a dominant majority of programs whose information was collected in this study used the TOEFL iBT or its previous versions. About a third of all programs reported using locally developed tests, either exclusively or in conjunction with standardized tests, to assist in placement decisions. English writing skills were more widely emphasized in placement tests and ESL courses, while speaking skills were considered in the placement process by fewer programs.

### *3. How is the placement decision made for individual students in ESL programs (what types of information are used, and how are multiple sources of information integrated in making the decision)?*

The standardized English-language tests scores (e.g., the TOEFL iBT) and placement tests scores were both used to inform placement decisions. A few programs used either type of these scores for the placement, while more programs used both types of scores conjointly or sequentially (e.g., using the TOEFL score to make exemption decisions and then the placement test scores to determine appropriate course levels). Cut scores were applied, sometimes on each test separately and sometimes on the combined scores. However, some programs also reported that placement decisions were made on a case-by-case nature (with no or very vague prespecified cut rules).

Students were often exempted from ESL coursework based on their performance on standardized language tests prior to arrival or based on placement tests taken upon arrival. The cut scores for exemption for graduate students were generally equal to or higher than those for undergraduate students.

In comparing the current findings on placement procedures with those of previous studies, such as Dehghanpisheh (1987), we found that the programs included in this study can be described in a general model of ESL programs (see Figure 3), which can be treated as a modification of Dehghanpisheh's bridging model.

For all NNES applicants, there are three general tracks (see paths A, B, and C in Figure 3). First, the students are considered officially admitted or matriculated (see path A in Figure 3) if they have satisfactory scores on English-language tests as part of the admissions requirements (e.g., the TOEFL iBT or other tests). In most colleges and universities, admitted students are asked to take placement test(s) (A2 in Figure 3) and subsequently either placed in ESL course(s) on academic

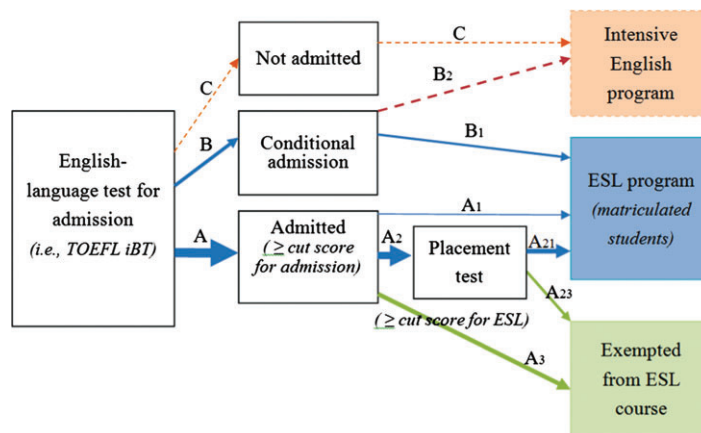


Figure 3 A typical model of English-as-a-second-language programs for matriculated students.

English skills or exempted, given their placement test scores (visualized in Figure 3 through path A-A2-A21 or A-A2-A23). Some institutions may choose to exempt students or place them in an ESL level only on the basis of their English language tests scores required for admissions (see path A-A1 or A-A3 in Figure 3).

A smaller group of schools has a conditional admissions policy, where students who partially satisfy the language-proficiency admissions requirement are considered matriculated. Conditionally admitted students are often required to take ESL courses (see path B-B1 in Figure 3). In some schools, conditionally admitted students are not officially matriculated and are required to complete an intensive English program before they can take degree-oriented courses (see path B-B2 in Figure 3). The third track is for students who fail to meet the English language requirements for admission and are not admitted. In this case, if the students wish to be considered for future admissions, they typically need to take the intensive English language courses (often full-time) for 1 or 2 years (see path C in Figure 3). It should be noted that the terms used in Figure 3 may not be exactly the same as those used in individual ESL programs. Moreover, extra paths may be added in the model described in Figure 3 for other unique placement practices.

## Implications

There are several findings in this study that may have important implications for practitioners in the area of ESL teaching, learning, and assessment at the postsecondary level.

A substantial number of colleges and universities that we included in this study reported having an ESL program designated for matriculated students. This finding coincides with a demographic shift in both the K-12 system and the higher education system, where the absolute number and the proportion of ESL students have consistently increased over the last several decades (Douglass & Edelstein, 2009; U.S. Census Bureau, 2001; U.S. DoED, 2003; Watkins, 1992; Wendler et al., 2010). This indicates that many colleges and universities have acknowledged the necessity to support admitted students on improving their English-language proficiency and have been relying on their ESL programs to address this need. However, questions remain on the quality and effectiveness of the placement decisions in these programs and the appropriateness of their ESL course design.

More specifically, standardized English test (e.g., the TOEFL iBT) scores have been used by a good proportion of programs to assist in exemption and placement decisions. In some institutions, the TOEFL iBT section scores (e.g., Writing or Speaking) are used together with local placement test scores to determine in which course level a student should be placed. More evidence is needed to support the validity of such uses of the TOEFL iBT and other tests. Considering the variations among ESL programs in terms of demographics of the ESL student body, the academic selectivity, the average level of English-language proficiency, and the major areas of study represented in the ESL student body, different types of evidence may be required. In schools where only a local placement test is used to make placement decisions, it may be fruitful to investigate its effectiveness and whether a standardized English language test (i.e., the TOEFL iBT) might serve the same purpose or enhance the effectiveness of existing placement procedures.

As was found in this study, it seems common that students are exempted from ESL courses based on their scores on the TOEFL iBT or other tests. A good number of large ESL programs also reported treating the exemption and placement

as a two-stage process. That is, exempting students from ESL courses in the first place, and then deciding to which course level the nonexempted students should be assigned. The two-stage approach may also have some financial advantages for the program because the exemption decisions can be made with the help of standardized test scores for admissions; thus, not all incoming students need to take the locally administered placement tests.

Despite the fact that researchers and practitioners have acknowledged the importance of English speaking skills for ESL students (Dehghanpisheh, 1987; Laborda, 2007), we found that speaking skills receive less emphasis in placement decision making, with most programs emphasizing reading or writing skills. It could be that changes in ESL programs lag behind those in standardized testing programs. Another possibility is that there are practical challenges that make it difficult for ESL programs to include speaking measures in their placement tests and to consider speaking skills in placement decisions. Instead of developing a speaking test for placement purposes, practitioners might be able to take advantage of the speaking measures of a standardized English proficiency test. For example, the TOEFL Online Speech Sample Service (ETS, 2010c) may be helpful in this regard, where schools can have free access to the speech sample of an integrated speaking response produced by the applicant, which may help to provide a more direct inference about the applicant's speaking proficiency level. More efforts might be made to investigate the validity associated with such use.

A variety of tests, from standardized English language tests to locally developed tests, are used in combination to help ESL programs place students. The specific ways in which the tests are used, individually or in combination, reflect the specific needs and goals of different institutions and ESL programs. In many cases, the psychometric properties of these locally developed tests are either not available or not well examined. More research is needed to provide empirical evidence in support of the use of these test scores for placement purposes, especially in programs where such placement decisions would have consequential effects on both individual students and ESL programs.

Different placement test cut scores were found for undergraduate- and graduate-level students. It is not clear how these cut scores are set, or to what extent using them can support fair and effective placement decisions. Different methods of using multiple placement test scores in placement decisions were also found across programs. Some programs use a combined score or a holistic score (e.g., the sum of all test scores or other forms of composite scores) to determine students' placement status, while other programs set a separate cut score on each of the placement tests and make placement decisions based on different test scores separately. Such different ways of using different sources of information in placement decisions may pose potential risks to placement accuracy and fairness. One major concern is which method is more appropriate or effective when using multiple scores or multiple sources of information in assisting with placement decisions. Another issue is how to evaluate the accuracy and fairness of placement procedures. Although most programs mentioned that ESL course teachers sometimes reexamine individual students' placement decisions and correct the misplaced cases, more research may be necessary to optimize the initial placement decisions so as to minimize costs resulting from the misclassification or misplacement of matriculated students.

## Limitations and Future Studies

The sample included in this study may seem small relative to the large number of colleges and universities in the United States, which prompts necessary caution when making inference of the current findings to the ESL program's population. Although it was clearly stated in the survey that the study was focusing on ESL programs for students who have been admitted to a degree-granting program, several respondents reported being confused by the term *ESL program* in the survey and the phone interview. This might be related to the fact that multiple meanings and interpretations of the term *ESL program* exist, which varies by the user's or respondent's background and the context where it appears. Finally, possible differences between graduate and undergraduate students in terms of ESL placement and ESL training are better separated for further exploration, though we do not expect this to affect the current results regarding the adoption of ESL for matriculated students, the placement tests used, and the placement procedures.

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## Appendix A

### ESL Program Online Survey

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this short survey about your institution's ESL program requirements. It should take you only about 5 minutes to complete.

This survey will cover questions related to your institution's English-language requirements for admission, as well as the design of your ESL program for international students who are admitted to a degree program. If you are not sure of the answer to a particular question, we ask that you provide your best guess. Please be aware that the information collected during this survey will be used for research purposes only.

1. First, which of the following best describes your institution?
  - A. Two-year community college
  - B. Four-year institution which DOES NOT offer graduate level courses
  - C. Four-year institution which DOES offer graduate level courses
2. Does your institution require English-as-a-second-language (ESL) applicants to demonstrate their English-language proficiency in order to be considered for admission?
  - A. Yes
  - B. No
3. Which of the following tests are used to satisfy your institution's admission requirements for ESL applicants? Please check all that apply.
  - A. TOEFL iBT (Internet-Based Test)
  - B. TOEFL PBT (Paper-Based Test)
  - C. IELTS
  - D. MELAB
  - E. Other (please specify: \_\_\_\_\_)
4. Does your institution have an ESL program that provides ESL courses to admitted students with a limited level of English?
  - A. Yes
  - B. No
5. Are ESL students required to either submit a score from an English-language test or take a test when they arrive to determine whether they need to take ESL courses in addition to their major-related coursework?
  - A. Yes
  - B. No

6. Which of the following tests does your institution use to determine if a student should be placed into your ESL program? Please select all that apply.

- A. TOEFL iBT (Internet-Based Test)
- B. TOEFL PBT (Paper- Based Test)
- C. IELTS
- D. MELAB
- E. Other

7. To be exempted from all ESL coursework, what is the minimum score that undergraduate students must achieve on each of the tests below? Please fill in applicable information for the tests your institution accepts.

- A. TOEFL iBT (Internet-Based Test)
- B. TOEFL PBT (Paper- Based Test)
- C. IELTS
- D. MELAB

8. To be exempted from all ESL coursework, what is the minimum score that first-year graduate students must achieve on each of the tests below? Please fill in applicable information for the tests your institution accepts.

- A. TOEFL iBT (Internet-Based Test)
- B. TOEFL PBT (Paper- Based Test)
- C. IELTS
- D. MELAB

9. Thinking about the fall 2008 semester, approximately how many of the following newly admitted students were enrolled in at least one ESL course? Please fill in all applicable information.

Freshman \_\_\_\_\_

First-year graduate student \_\_\_\_\_

10. You mentioned that you use an English-Language Proficiency test other than TOEFL iBT, TOEFL PBT, IELTS, or MELAB to place students in your ESL program.

What is the name of this test? \_\_\_\_\_

Who is the publisher of this test? \_\_\_\_\_

11. To be exempted from all ESL coursework, what is the minimum score on this other test that ESL students must achieve? Please only fill in applicable information.

Freshman \_\_\_\_\_

First-year graduate student \_\_\_\_\_

12. How many levels of ESL courses does your program currently offer for each of the four skills listed below? If your courses cover more than one skill, please check those skills covered at that level.

	1 level only	2 levels	3 levels or more	None—Do not offer ESL courses in this skill
Listening				
Speaking				
Reading				
Writing				

13. OPTIONAL—What is the process your program uses to determine the appropriate level of ESL coursework for individual ESL students (e.g., whether and how the cut scores on the placement test are used to assist in the placement decision).

\_\_\_\_\_.

ETS is conducting a research study on the efficacy of ESL placement tests for matriculated ESL students, and we are looking for participants for this study. Your participation may include providing us with information on ESL-related courses and placement tests. No personally identifiable information about your students, teachers, or institution would be required. There will be monetary compensation as well as customized research reports provided to your institution as gratitude for participation.

14. Are you interested in learning more about participating in this study?

A. Yes                      B. No

15. Please provide the following information so that we can contact you.

Name

Title

Institution Name

E-mail Address

Phone Number

## Appendix B

### Phone Interview Protocol

#### For the TOEFL iBT ESL Placement Study

College Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Contact: \_\_\_\_\_ Title: \_\_\_\_\_ Phone: (\_\_\_\_) \_\_\_\_\_

**(This section is to confirm the information obtained from the online survey.)**

1. You mentioned that your institution has an ESL program that is designed to help admitted ESL students with their degree-related studies on their English language.

- a. Is this true?
- b. Is the admission conditional?

2. *(if the placement test is indicated in the survey)*

In the survey, you indicated that \_\_\_\_\_ **(names of tests)** are used to place ESL students at your program. Is this correct?

How will the tests be administered to the incoming 2009 fall semester ESL students?

3. You indicated approximately \_\_\_\_ freshmen will register for at least one ESL course in the fall semester of 2009. Is this number correct?

4. Is a TOEFL iBT score required for all of these students?

If not, approximately what is the proportion of students with a TOEFL iBT score?

**(This section is to collect detail information of the placement test and the ESL courses.)**

I have a couple of questions related to the **placement tests** and the ESL courses at your program. Do you mind if I ask them now?

1. I understand that the program uses \_\_\_\_\_ (name of placement tests) for ESL students. Are the following skills measured by **the placement test(s)**?

Reading? Writing? Listening? Speaking?

If not, do you measure these skills in other ways?

2. How is the test scored (e.g., rubrics, raters)?

And what are the minimum and maximum scores possible on this test?

Are there any documents about the scoring and scales that you can share with us?

3. You indicated that your institution offers \_\_\_\_ levels of ESL courses.



- a. Is this correct?
- b. How are these course levels defined and determined? For example, do you have any descriptions of the different levels of ESL courses?

*[If explained]*

Possible follow-up questions:

“Is there a URL where these descriptions can be accessed?”

“Can you e-mail or fax me those descriptions?”

If said no or not know, “Where can we find the related information for the study?”

Before I move on to the introduction of the study, do you have any questions about the survey or the study?

**(This section is to collect more information about the feasibility of data collection at the institution.)**

We understand that we might need to go through your university’s/college’s human subject review committee. This research study has been approved by the ETS IRB review. We can certainly provide a copy of the approved ETS IRB, if that would be helpful.

- 1. Do you have any information on whether, how, and when we can start this process?
  - a. *[If yes]*
    - i. How can we help? (we can help to fill out the IRB screening form or application form if necessary)
    - ii. How long does it typically take to obtain approval from your institution’s IRB?
  - b. *[If no]*
    - i. When and where can we find related information?

Given this conversation, do you have any questions or concerns about this research study?

**Take home message:**

Thank you for your time and patience in answering these important questions. The final list of participating ESL programs will be selected within the next couple of weeks, and we will let you know via e-mail. In the meantime, if you have any updates regarding the IRB review at your institution or if you have any questions related to this study, please feel free to contact us by phone (609-xxx-xxxx or 609-xxx-xxxx) or by e-mail ([xxxxx@ets.org](mailto:xxxxx@ets.org)).

Note: After the phone interview, a follow-up e-mail will be sent to the program director/coordinator to thank participation and inform the program of the next steps.

**Appendix C**

**English-Language Proficiency Tests Reported Being Used for Placement Purposes**

Acronym	Full name	Notes
ETS tests		
TOEFL IBT/CBT/PBT	TOEFL Internet-based test/computer-based test/paper-	<a href="http://www.ets.org/toefl/ibt/about/">http://www.ets.org/toefl/ibt/about/</a>

Acronym	Full name	Notes
	based test	
TOEFL ITP		<a href="https://www.ets.org/toefl_itp/about/">https://www.ets.org/toefl_itp/about/</a>
TOEIC		<a href="http://www.ets.org/toEIC/">http://www.ets.org/toEIC/</a>
SLEP	<i>Secondary Level English Proficiency™</i> test	<a href="https://www.ets.org/slep/about">https://www.ets.org/slep/about</a>
SPEAK		
TSE		
GRE® test	<i>Graduate Record Examinations®</i> General Test	<a href="http://www.ets.org/gre">http://www.ets.org/gre</a>
Cambridge tests		
IELTS	International English Language Testing System	<a href="http://www.ielts.org">http://www.ielts.org</a>
CPE	Cambridge English: Proficiency	<a href="http://www.cambridgeesol.org/exams/cpe/index.html">http://www.cambridgeesol.org/exams/cpe/index.html</a>
CAE	Cambridge English: Advanced	<a href="http://www.cambridgeesol.org/exams/cae/index.html">http://www.cambridgeesol.org/exams/cae/index.html</a>
GCE O-level	General Certificate of Education Ordinary Level	Phased out in favor of GCSE from 1988
GCE A-level	General Certificate of Education Advanced Level	
GCSE A-level	General Certificate of Secondary Education Advanced Level	
Tests from the University of Michigan English Language Institute		
MELAB	Michigan English Language Assessment Battery	<a href="http://www.cambridgemichigan.org/melab">http://www.cambridgemichigan.org/melab</a>
AEE	Academic English Evaluation	<a href="http://www.lsa.umich.edu/eli/news/newproceduresrelatedtoaeineffectaugust2011mon18jul2011_ci">http://www.lsa.umich.edu/eli/news/newproceduresrelatedtoaeineffectaugust2011mon18jul2011_ci</a>
ECCE	Examination for the Certificate of Competency in English	<a href="http://www.cambridgemichigan.org/ecce">http://www.cambridgemichigan.org/ecce</a>
ECPE	Examination for the Certificate of Proficiency in English	<a href="http://www.cambridgemichigan.org/ecpe">http://www.cambridgemichigan.org/ecpe</a>

Acronym	Full name	Notes
MET	Michigan English Test	<a href="http://www.cambridgemichigan.org/met">http://www.cambridgemichigan.org/met</a>
EPT	English Placement Test	<a href="http://www.cambridgemichigan.org/ept">http://www.cambridgemichigan.org/ept</a>
MTELP	Michigan Test of English Language Proficiency	<a href="http://www.cambridgemichigan.org/mtelp">http://www.cambridgemichigan.org/mtelp</a>
ACT tests		
ACT		-
ACT Compass/ESL		<a href="http://www.act.org/compass">http://www.act.org/compass</a>
e-Write	Compass Essay Writing Test	<a href="http://www.act.org/compass/tests/writingessay.html">http://www.act.org/compass/tests/writingessay.html</a>
College Board tests		
ACCUPLACER		
ACCUPLACER ESL	ACCUPLACER ESL, including reading skills, language use, sentence meaning, write placer, College ESL Essay Test, and listening	<a href="http://www.collegeboard.com/student/testing/accuplacer/accuplacer-esl-tests.html">http://www.collegeboard.com/student/testing/accuplacer/accuplacer-esl-tests.html</a>
ACCUPLACER ESL LOEP	ACCUPLACER ESL Levels of English Proficiency	<a href="http://accuplacer.collegeboard.org/students">http://accuplacer.collegeboard.org/students</a>
SAT		<a href="http://sat.collegeboard.org/home">http://sat.collegeboard.org/home</a>
APIEL	Advanced Placement International English Language Examination	<a href="http://apcentral.collegeboard.com/apc/public/courses/teachers_corner/4153.html">http://apcentral.collegeboard.com/apc/public/courses/teachers_corner/4153.html</a>
ELPT	English Language Proficiency Test	(SAT II subject test for foreign languages) <a href="http://professionals.collegeboard.com/testing/sat-subject/scores/average">http://professionals.collegeboard.com/testing/sat-subject/scores/average</a>
Other commercial tests		
MELICET	Michigan English Language Institute College English Test	<a href="http://www.michigan-proficiency-exams.com/melicet.html">http://www.michigan-proficiency-exams.com/melicet.html</a>
CELSA	Combined English Language Skills Assessment	<a href="http://www.assessment-testing.com/celsa.htm">http://www.assessment-testing.com/celsa.htm</a>
GMAT	Graduate Management Admission Test	<a href="http://www.mba.com/us">http://www.mba.com/us</a>

Acronym	Full name	Notes
iTEP	International Test of English Proficiency	<a href="http://www.itepexam.com">http://www.itepexam.com</a>
OOPT/OPT	Oxford Online Placement Test/Oxford Placement Test	<a href="http://www.oxfordenglishtesting.com">http://www.oxfordenglishtesting.com</a>
PTE	Pearson Test of English	<a href="http://www.pearsonpte.com/ptegeneral/pages/home.aspx">http://www.pearsonpte.com/ptegeneral/pages/home.aspx</a>
CELT	Comprehensive English Language Test	<a href="http://canadiantestcentre.com">http://canadiantestcentre.com</a>
Tests of local institutions		
AWPE	Analytical Writing Placement Exam (used in University of California system)	<a href="http://elwr.ucr.edu/placement.html">http://elwr.ucr.edu/placement.html</a>
EEA	Emory English Assessment	<a href="http://college.emory.edu/home/academic/learning/esl/assessment.html">http://college.emory.edu/home/academic/learning/esl/assessment.html</a>
ELIPT	English Language Institute Placement Test	<a href="http://www.hawaii.edu/eli/students/elipt_qa.html">http://www.hawaii.edu/eli/students/elipt_qa.html</a>
ELPE	English Language Proficiency Exam	<a href="http://eli.tamu.edu/elpe.php">http://eli.tamu.edu/elpe.php</a>
ELPE	English Language Proficiency Exam	<a href="http://elpp.uwaterloo.ca/elpe.html">http://elpp.uwaterloo.ca/elpe.html</a>
EPE	English Placement Exam	<a href="http://international.utk.edu/check-in-and-orientation/students/">http://international.utk.edu/check-in-and-orientation/students/</a>
EPR	English Proficiency Review	<a href="http://www.iit.edu/graduate_college/pdfs/Technical_Communication.pdf">www.iit.edu/graduate_college/pdfs/Technical_Communication.pdf</a>
ESLAT	UW-ESL Assessment Test	<a href="http://www.english.wisc.edu/esl/degree-placement.htm">http://www.english.wisc.edu/esl/degree-placement.htm</a>
ESLPT	English as a Second Language Placement Test	<a href="http://www.sfsu.edu/~testing/eslpt.html">http://www.sfsu.edu/~testing/eslpt.html</a>
ESLPE	English-as-a-Second-Language Placement Examination	<a href="http://www.cs.ucla.edu/academics/graduate-program/graduate-student-handbook/english-as-a-second-language-placement-examination-eslpe">http://www.cs.ucla.edu/academics/graduate-program/graduate-student-handbook/english-as-a-second-language-placement-examination-eslpe</a>

Acronym	Full name	Notes
Florida CPT	State of Florida College Entry-Level Placement Test	<a href="http://www.fldoe.org/asp/fcelpt/">http://www.fldoe.org/asp/fcelpt/</a>
GSTEP	Georgia State Test of English Proficiency	<a href="http://www2.gsu.edu/~wwwtep/">www2.gsu.edu/~wwwtep/</a>
ISE	International Student English Examination	<a href="http://www.dornsife.usc.edu/ali/ise/">http://www.dornsife.usc.edu/ali/ise/</a>
MNB	Minnesota Battery Test	<a href="http://www.cce.umn.edu/Minnesota-English-Language-Program/Minnesota-Battery-Test/index.html">http://www.cce.umn.edu/Minnesota-English-Language-Program/Minnesota-Battery-Test/index.html</a>
Washington State AEP	Academic English Language Program Placement Test	<a href="http://www.washington.edu/oea/services/testing_center/exams/aep.html">http://www.washington.edu/oea/services/testing_center/exams/aep.html</a>
	Applied English Center English Proficiency Test	<a href="http://www2.ku.edu/~oip/students/mepr/">http://www2.ku.edu/~oip/students/mepr/</a>
	CUNY ESL Placement Test	
	Harvard English Language Placement Test	
	Stanford Written Placement Test	
	University of Virginia English Language Proficiency Exam	

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