

UC Davis

UC Davis Previously Published Works

Title

Placement of multilingual writers: Is there a role for student voices?

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8nx683nt>

Authors

Ferris, Dana R
Evans, Katherine
Kurzer, Kendon

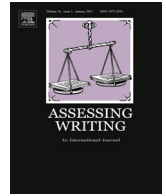
Publication Date

2017-04-01

DOI

10.1016/j.asw.2016.10.001

Peer reviewed



Placement of multilingual writers: Is there a role for student voices?



Dana R. Ferris*, Katherine Evans, Kendon Kurzer

University of California, Davis, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 30 July 2016

Received in revised form

27 September 2016

Accepted 31 October 2016

Keywords:

Directed self-placement

Placing multilingual writers

ABSTRACT

Directed Self-Placement (DSP) is one placement model that has been implemented in various composition programs in the U.S. but has yet to be investigated thoroughly in second language writing settings. Central to DSP is the belief that, if students are given agency to help determine their educational trajectory, they will be empowered and more motivated to succeed (Crusan, 2011; Royer & Gilles, 1998).

In this study, 1067 university L2 students completed both a voluntary self-assessment survey and the locally administered placement examination. We statistically compared the students' placement exam scores and their responses to the final question as to which level of a four-course writing program they thought would best meet their needs. We also examined a stratified random sample of 100 students' standardized test scores to see if there was a statistical relationship between those tests, our locally designed and administered placement test, and students' own self-placement scores. We conclude that student self-assessment might have a legitimate role in our placement process, but it probably cannot be used by itself to accurately place large numbers of multilingual students into a four-level sequence.

© 2016 Published by Elsevier Inc.

The appropriate placement of multilingual writers into the best courses for their needs has been a complex and often controversial issue (Crusan, 2006; Weigle, 2006). It is also a practical problem, as the most effective placement processes can be time-intensive and expensive (Silva, 1994). As colleges and universities in the U.S. and elsewhere aggressively recruit and matriculate increasing numbers of international students (Institute of International Education, 2015), the question of L2 writing placement has become even more pressing.

Colleges and universities that have large writing programs and/or English for Academic Purposes programs to prepare second language (L2) writers for college-level work have approached the placement process in a range of ways. Some rely on standardized admissions tests, such as the SAT[®] or the TOEFL[®],¹ to place students, reasoning that the sheer number of students involved prevents an in-house placement process from being feasible. Others use large-scale statewide proficiency examinations for local placement, such as the English Placement Test required by the California State University system. Some have used commercially available exams that provide automatic, machine-based scoring of student writing samples, such as the ACCUPLACER[®] test marketed by the College Board. Finally, many have developed and administered in-house placement processes and instruments, which may range from comprehensive testing of students' language skills (including speaking,

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: drferris@ucdavis.edu (D.R. Ferris).

¹ The Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) used most frequently for U.S. admissions is the Internet-Based Test (TOEFL-iBT), though paper-based tests still exist. For this paper, we use simply "TOEFL[®]" to refer to either option. Score ranges described are particular to the TOEFL-iBT.

grammar, reading, and so forth) to more targeted assessments of students' writing proficiency. All of these approaches to placement have different strengths and drawbacks.

Meanwhile, in the "mainstream" (not L2-focused) composition world, there has been continued interest in and enthusiasm for Directed Self-Placement (DSP) over the past 20 years or so (Inoue, 2009; Royer & Gilles, 1998, 2003; Sinha, 2014). Advocates argue that giving students a voice in their own placement is empowering and motivating, leading to their increased effort and engagement in writing courses. DSP as a model acknowledges that there is no perfect placement system, so student involvement in a decision that directly affects them may resonate with both students and program administrators.

For a variety of reasons, DSP has not really caught on as a placement approach for L2 writing programs (Crusan, 2006, 2011). Even those who are enthusiastic or sympathetic towards DSP in theory acknowledge that it carries risk: If students who are not fully aware (because of their differing cultural and educational experiences) of what language/writing proficiency entails, particularly in a demanding L2 academic environment, they might be more likely to aggressively place themselves so that they can make rapid progress through their degree requirements. Conversely, other students may lack confidence in their own abilities and place themselves lower than required. Not only can misplacement harm individual students themselves, but it can also make instructors' jobs much more difficult (if they have students with widely varying abilities in the same writing class) and lead to broader programmatic problems (such as difficulties in administering end-of-course assessments and high failure rates).

The program investigated in this study recently (in 2014) transitioned from relying on a statewide assessment instrument to a locally developed and administered placement examination for placing L2 writers into developmental writing courses. Though, as discussed below, this new placement process has functioned well thus far, the program is also growing quickly, and the annual administration of the exam has rapidly become a major budget line item. Considering both the effort and expense involved in writing, administering, and scoring the exam, as well as the appeal of the principles and philosophies behind DSP, we began investigating the feasibility of using student self-evaluation as part of the placement process by asking students taking the placement exam to separately complete a self-evaluation survey in which they assessed their own abilities in L2 reading, writing, vocabulary, and grammar. Our investigation was guided by one central question: Is there an appropriate and effective role for student voices in the placement process in this large developmental writing program for multilingual students? Our study of 1067 L2 students who took the exam and completed the survey in 2014–15 suggests that there could be.

2. Background: placement of L2 writers

Dialogue in the literature over the needs and placement of L2 writers began as early as the 1950s and has re-emerged intermittently but consistently since then (Crusan, 2002, 2006; Silva, 1994). A number of studies appeared in the 1980s–1990s on the merits of various placement procedures, and reviews of these options at different institutions have been conducted periodically. Placement procedures for determining which course is appropriate for a particular student have varied historically and across institutions. Such procedures may be *direct*, such as an essay examination, with the aim of testing one's "knowledge of the language as a whole" and with emphasis on "communication, authenticity, and context" (Crusan, 2002; p. 19). These are often developed and scored in-house, though writing samples may also be taken from the composition portions of commercially developed standardized admissions exams. Alternatively, placement assessments might be *indirect*, such as multiple-choice examinations, which aim to "to isolate and evaluate knowledge of specific components of language" (Crusan, 2002; p. 19). Some placement models might also use the two approaches in combination.

National investigations of L2 writer identification and placement procedures have been reported every decade or so. Williams (1995) reported on a nationwide survey of L2 writer identification procedures at private and public U.S. colleges. Of the 78 responding colleges that offered L2 writing courses, 37% used an institutionally developed standardized test alone (i.e., indirect assessment), 23% used a placement essay alone (i.e., direct assessment), 19% used some combination of a standardized test plus essay, and 26% reported using only TOEFL® scores for placement. In a later study of the Big Ten universities in the U.S., Crusan (2002) found that three used indirect methods only, two direct methods only, and six a combination of the two. In a recent research report initiated by ETS (Ling, Wolf, Cho, & Wang, 2014), a website search of 152 U.S. universities with ESL programs and surveys from 62 four-year universities revealed an even heavier reliance on standardized tests. The authors reported a "dominant majority" of programs studied using some version of the TOEFL® for placement purposes, with only one-third of programs using locally developed tests either alone or in combination with these standardized tests.

Researchers have also completed institutional case studies of current or potential placement procedures. For instance, Kokhan (2013) investigated the use of standardized test scores (SAT®, ACT®, and TOEFL®) as an alternative to a university's in-house placement examination, which consisted of an oral interview and a written test (only the written tests were analyzed in the study). A number of two-sample *t*-tests showed that very low ACT® English and SAT® Reading scores as well as the highest TOEFL® Total and Writing separated the students between the two possible placement levels, but these extremes accounted for fewer than 5% of the students tested. Other case studies have focused instead on students' perceptions of their placements and the placement process (Costino & Hyon, 2007; Ruecker, 2011), often with respect to placement between mainstream or sheltered composition courses. Participants in Ruecker's (2011) study expressed the belief that good placement processes should involve multiple information sources, and in particular, some reported a desire for interviews so they might have the opportunity to express their placement preferences.

For large institutions with a sizable L2 population, clearly the cost and timesaving benefits of indirect methods are appealing. However, the use of such methods remains controversial and is not yet widely supported in the literature. The *CCCC Statement on Second Language Writing and Writers* (CCCC, 2014) calls for placement procedures based specifically on writing proficiency, not generalized language or speaking proficiency, and advocates consulting multiple writing samples when possible. Many scholars in writing assessment in L1 and, increasingly, L2 studies, are pointing to the value of multiple placement measures. In particular, scholars call for procedures that involve consideration of students' self-evaluation of their placement (CCCC, 2014; Crusan, 2011; di Gennaro, 2008; Ruecker, 2011; White, 2008).

3. Directed self-Placement

One alternate method taken to mitigate some of the placement issues outlined earlier is Directed Self-Placement (see Royer & Gilles, 2003). Though DSP has taken different forms, it typically includes some kind of self-assessment questionnaire paired with an overview of the students' course placement options (see Appendix B in the Supplementary material for a sample). In some contexts, students are asked to write a timed essay as well, but this is primarily used to give the students a real-time experience with writing upon which to base their self-evaluations. Students then, depending upon the institution, might meet with an advisor to discuss their choices, or they may simply be allowed to enroll in the course option they have selected after completing the DSP instrument (Sinha, 2014).

The first large-scale DSP program at the university level was created by Royer and Gilles (1998), who found that 62% of the students placed into developmental writing classes at their university due to low ACT[®] scores felt that they had been incorrectly placed. These researchers also found no clear correlation between high ACT[®] scores and high grades in first-year composition (FYC) classes, and thus piloted DSP as a possible alternative to the placement measures previously used. At the end of their first round of DSP, Royer and Gilles found that stakeholders (administrators, teachers, and students) typically felt that DSP resulted in positive changes in the developmental and FYC classes.

Via DSP, students self-place into the appropriate writing class, rather than relying on standardized test scores (e.g. the ACT[®], SAT[®], or TOEFL[®]) or timed writing placement tests (Sinha, 2014). The "directed" portion of DSP stems from the inclusion of various factors to help students as they determine the best course for them: past writing experience, confidence/efficacy at writing, and descriptions of the courses themselves. Royer and Gilles (2003) argued that DSP promotes democracy in students' educations that results in "agency, choice, and self-determination" (p. 61), positive motivators in helping students become invested in their own learning. Similarly, DSP may support writing programs to better meet the local needs of a particular population and institution (Gere, Aull, Escudero, Lancaster, & Vander Lei, 2013; Huot, 2003). This would suggest that, when investigating the practicality or appropriateness of DSP as a placement option, institutions should consider their unique characteristics to develop an appropriate DSP approach for their own context (Sinha, 2014).

While many have advocated DSP as a feasible alternative to traditional placements (Blakesley, 2002; Blakesley, Harvey, & Reynolds, 2003; Chernekov, 2003; Cornell & Newton, 2003; Frus, 2003; Peckham, 2009; Pinter & Sims, 2003; Reynolds, 2003; Royer & Gilles, 1988, 2003; Tompkins, 2003), others have noted some possible disadvantages to DSP. Some fear that students may make faulty decisions, either over- or underestimating themselves, which would then result in increased stress on teachers as they try to navigate potentially mixed-level classes. Specifically, some argue that, because students may not all be suitably reflective or analytical of their own writing abilities, administrators and teachers should share placement responsibility (Lewiecki-Wilson, Sommers, & Tassoni, 2000; Bedore & Rossen-Knill, 2004; Nicolay, 2002). DSP also requires strong agreement on placement from students, teachers, advisers, and administrators to be run effectively (Blakesley, 2002), indicating that it may not be the "magic bullet" to solve placement issues that some may desire.

Other researchers have noted some discrepancies that occur along gender (Reynolds, 2003) and racial (Cornell & Newton, 2003) lines when students self-place, although both studies reported a general sense of satisfaction among students who self-placed despite these trends. Student satisfaction remains a strong component of DSP programs, with 95% of the students of the pilot DSP program of Kutztown University (Chernekov, 2003) and 84% of the students of the pilot DSP program of Southern Illinois University, Carbondale (Blakesley et al., 2003) indicating via post-composition course survey that they believed they had selected the appropriate course for their needs. Ultimately, a comparison of course grades also suggests that DSP is just as—if not more—effective as other forms of placement, with higher grades in a piloted DSP program at a community college than those placed from a timed test (Tompkins, 2003), at the University of Michigan with DSP students averaging a B+ in FYC (Frus, 2003), and in Southern Illinois University, Carbondale's stretch writing program with a 9% higher pass rate (Blakesley et al., 2003). Given the results of these early studies, it would seem that DSP, when implemented carefully, might serve as a viable and satisfying alternative to more expensive placement procedures.

While DSP has not yet become widely used as a placement measure, the known institutions that employ DSP use a few common approaches. All provide information about the possible classes students can take and ask students to determine which is most appropriate for them, either via online surveys or physical brochures (Sinha, 2014). Some have students take a placement/diagnostic test and provide a course recommendation, but students may override placements if desired. Others, such as Drew University, provide counseling or in-person guidance to students as they determine appropriate classes. Still others, like Louisiana State University, provide a recommended placement based on ACT[®]/SAT[®] scores, then let students challenge those placements via a writing test administered online (Peckham, 2009). Based on the various approaches commonly employed, one of the strengths of DSP is its ability to be adapted to individual programmatic requirements and characteristics. Importantly for the concerns of the present study, most empirical work on DSP has focused on binary choices

Table 1
Overview of Placement Levels (all test-takers).

Placement Levels	Year 1 (2014)	Year 2 (2015)	Totals (both years)
Level 1	124 (19%)	333 (29%)	457 (25%)
Level 2	315 (48%)	513 (44%)	828 (46%)
Level 3	164 (25%)	255 (22%)	419 (23%)
Level 4	48 (7%)	51 (4%)	99 (5.5%)
Totals	661	1152	1813

students can make (e.g., into a developmental course vs. a first-year course or into a two-term stretch course vs. a one-term course). It is unusual for DSP to be attempted or researched in contexts where students would have three or more options from which to choose (Sinha, 2014).

4. DSP in multilingual writing contexts

Very little research has been conducted on DSP in multilingual writing programs. Before DSP was implemented at the university level, LeBlanc and Painchaud (1985) had noted that adult language learners frequently self-select into ESL classes, based on their understanding of their own language abilities and specific needs. DSP has been implemented effectively in writing programs with large numbers of students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Inoue, 2009). Crusan (2011) pointed out that “DSP sends a powerful message to students because it affords them some agency and includes students’ self-evaluations as an essential component in the placement decision” (p. 778), and advocated the use of DSP in multilingual writing settings. Similarly, the CCCC *Statement on Second Language Writers and Writing* (2014) proposed that DSP may be one possible and even desirable placement method for multilingual writers. Despite a dearth of empirical evidence on the topic, the use of DSP in multilingual writing programs remains an intriguing possibility.

The recent rapid increases across the U.S. in admission of international students (Institute of International Education, 2015) further argue for a closer look at DSP (or at least some form of student agency in the placement process) for two important reasons. First, especially at state-supported institutions, international students typically pay a premium for their coursework, relative to their domestic peers. If students are required to take additional language/writing courses beyond their degree requirements, this imposes an additional financial burden and likely complicates their time to degree. If students feel that they have been unfairly or inaccurately placed in such courses and have no recourse to challenge or choose their placements, this could lead to frustration and resentment. Second, some students may find themselves placed in coursework that is beyond their real proficiency or ability level, and they may need a mechanism to self-place downward in the sequence so that they can be confident and successful. In short, the stakes—financial and academic—of misplacement are high; though there will never be a perfect, error-free placement system, adding students’ own judgments and voices may at least add face validity to the process and make it fairer.

With these general placement issues in mind, we aimed to investigate, in our large developmental L2 writing program, whether student self-assessments might have a legitimate role in our evolving placement system. We were guided by the following research questions:

- 1 What is the general relationship between students’ self-placement scores and their placement exam scores? Did it matter whether students completed the self-evaluation survey before or after taking the placement exam?
- 2 How close were students’ own judgments about their course placements to their actual placements based upon the exam? When the two judgments did not match, were they far apart (two or more levels off) or relatively close (only one level high or low)?
- 3 What was the relationship between students’ admissions test scores (TOEFL®, SAT®, etc.) and their self-placement scores and placement exam scores? Is there a role for these standardized test scores in the placement process?

5. Method

5.1. Institutional context

5.1.1. Student population

Data for this study were collected in a rapidly growing developmental writing program for first-year L2 students at a large U.S. university in Northern California. Though this program has existed in various forms for several decades, it was moved under the supervision of the university’s writing program in 2013, as a response to the needs of the rapidly growing international undergraduate population. As recently as 2010, only about 50 incoming multilingual freshmen were tested for placement in these courses. By 2015, this number had grown to over 1150 (see Table 1). The vast majority of the students now in the program are international visa-holders (80–85%), but there are still several hundred U.S.-educated multilingual students in the program each year. Most, but not all, of the international students are from China.

5.1.2. *The program*

The L2 writing program consists of four course levels (each one quarter—ten weeks—long). Students can be placed into any of the four levels of this program at entry. After they pass the highest level, they are deemed to have satisfied the university's entry-level writing requirement and can proceed to one of several choices for completing the first-year writing requirement. The first three L2 courses in the university's writing program carry general graduation credit and, as of fall 2016, are letter-graded (they were previously pass/no pass graded). The fourth and final course carries only workload credit and does not count towards graduation units.² As [Table 1](#) shows, the most common initial placement in 2014–15 was in Level 2, and the placements skewed slightly lower in 2015 than in 2014.

The courses in the L2 program are fast-paced and demanding reading-writing classes that also include an integrated focus on grammar and vocabulary development. They are theme-based courses (to narrow and control the amount of content students must deal with as they work on their academic language and literacy skills), and they focus on providing students with opportunities to read and write in a wide range of academic genres. Following the advice of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, in its (2014) *CCCC Statement on L2 Writing and Writers*, students' course outcomes at each level are determined by assessment of their final portfolios. The instructors in the program are well qualified L2 writing professionals who have earned at minimum MAs in TESOL or applied linguistics and who have advanced training and/or experience in teaching academic writing to L2 students at the college level.

5.2. *The placement process*

Throughout the program's history, students had been placed at the various course levels on the basis of their performance of a statewide writing examination required of all incoming freshmen unless they were exempted by a standardized test score, such as on the SAT[®] or an Advanced Placement[®] examination. There were problems with this previous approach to placement. First, the exam itself was designed to have a binary outcome: Either the student was deemed to have satisfied the entry-level writing requirement—or not. Because the exam is difficult, especially for L2 students, a “failing” grade did not give precise enough information about which of the four developmental levels would best serve each student. An exam with a scoring rubric that was more precisely tailored to the levels in our program was needed.

Second, because the exam had to be taken in person, new international students from around the world had to wait until their arrival on campus in September to take a version of the test. Often they would take it while jet-lagged and overloaded with other activities in a packed orientation week. Even more importantly, the writing program and the students would not know exact course placements until right before classes began in the fall term, leading to logistical problems for everyone—the students, who could not finalize their class schedules until the last minute, and the program, which did not know how many sections of each course level to schedule (and how many instructors to hire). Considering the program's large and rapidly increasing numbers, it was clear that this was not a sustainable approach.

With both issues in mind, we designed a new placement instrument and a revamped examination process. The new instrument, called the English Language Placement Examination (ELPE), was designed with the experience and background knowledge of L2 students in mind and to more precisely place students in one of the four developmental course levels. It consists of two short readings on a given topic, seven short-answer reading questions, and an essay prompt. A sample ELPE is shown in [Appendix A](#) in the Supplementary material, together with the rubric used to score the essays. This rubric is explicitly tied to the entrance competencies articulated for each level in the program's curriculum document. The design of the instrument followed the principles and suggestions from [Weigle \(2006\)](#), specifically as to the integration of reading and writing tasks and short-answer responses in addition to an essay.

Incoming L2 first-year students now take the exam online from their home locations during the U.S. summer months, with various test dates offered from the end of May to the middle of July and different versions of the exam administered on each date. Instructors in the program score the exam, and students receive their placements by the end of July, in plenty of time to consult with advisers and register for fall courses, which begin in late September. While test security and possible cheating were noted as concerns as we developed the new placement process, students are strongly cautioned that if their in-person writing ability when they arrive on campus is demonstrably different from what they submitted remotely for the ELPE, their placement can be changed either upward or downward, possibly leading to disruption of their fall class schedule. This warning has worked thus far: There have been very few placement changes in the two years since we switched to the remote ELPE and almost none that suggested that the student had cheated on the ELPE. Indeed, there were more in-term placement changes under the previous placement model (due to the problems previously noted) than with the current one.

² This rather odd discrepancy is related to a period (over 20 years ago) in program history when, during a state budget crisis, this specific course was outsourced to a local community college to save the university money. We note it for accuracy but do not attempt to justify it.

Though the initial results of our changes in the placement process have been positive, and, for the most part, the students are pleased as well,³ for the reasons already discussed, we also wondered if there might be some role for student self-assessment in our decision-making.

To investigate a possible role for student self-assessment in this placement process, we began collecting data from students as the new ELPE was being implemented in 2014. We designed a self-evaluation questionnaire (adapted from instruments used by successful models of programs using DSP, such as the University of Michigan and San Francisco State University) that asks students to self-rate their abilities in reading, writing, vocabulary, and grammar in English. In the final question of the survey, the four developmental levels of the writing program are briefly described, and students are asked, based upon these descriptions and their answers to the self-assessment questions, which course they think would best meet their needs. Students completed the online survey separately from the placement exam; they were sent a link to the survey via email. Completion of the survey was voluntary but not anonymous, as we wanted to be able to compare their placement results (on the ELPE) to their survey responses. Students were assured that their responses would be kept separate from the scoring of the ELPE. In 2014, students took the survey several days after the ELPE. In 2015, we instead sent them the survey a few days before the ELPE, as we wanted to see whether the experience of having taken the ELPE might have influenced students' survey responses in the first year. The 2014 (pre-ELPE) version of the survey is shown in Appendix B in the Supplementary material.

5.3. Data collected

The data collected include all student surveys completed in 2014 (N=383) and 2015 (N=684), a total of 1067 responses. Since we had 1813 students placed via the ELPE in 2014–15 (661 in 2014 and 1152 in 2015), this was a total response rate of 59%, with the 2015 response rate being a bit higher than the 2014 return. The survey responses were exported from the online collector, Survey Monkey®, into an Excel document, and the ELPE score for each survey respondent was added to the document. This compiled spreadsheet was uploaded to the statistical software package SPSS® and was the primary data source for statistical analyses to address Research Questions 1 and 2.

In addition, to investigate Research Question 3 (how ELPE and self-placement scores compared to standardized admission test scores), for a stratified random sample of 100 test- and survey-takers (who had a proportionate range of ELPE scores), their other admissions data were obtained, specifically (where applicable), SAT® scores (including subscores for reading and writing), ACT® scores, and TOEFL® scores (and subscores, including reading, writing, and speaking). A program staff member recorded these data on a separate Excel sheet for further analysis; the staff member also noted whether or not the student was international and if the student had graduated from a U.S. high school.

5.4. Data analysis

We conducted several different statistical tests to address the first research question. First, we examined, by conducting independent samples *t*-tests, whether there were any significant differences in survey responses (specifically, the final self-placement question) between 2014 (survey taken after the ELPE) and 2015 (survey taken before the ELPE). We found that there were not, so our subsequent analyses considered all survey takers as a group, regardless of which year they entered the program. Second, we examined the relationship, using paired-samples *t*-tests, between students' ELPE scores and their self-placement scores (i.e., responses to the final question on the survey). Both sets of scores were on 100-point scales: Scores between 60 and 69 corresponded to a Level 1 (lowest course level) placement, 70–79 to Level 2, 80–89 to Level 3, and 90–99 to Level 4. There were also a few outliers whose ELPE results suggested that their proficiency levels were below Level 1 or above Level 4.

Third, to investigate Research Question 2, we looked carefully at how closely individual students' ELPE scores matched or differed from their self-placement scores: Were they the same? One level different, or two, or three? If they were a level (or two or three) different, did they tend to place themselves higher or lower than the ELPE did? To complete this analysis, working from the spreadsheet that matched students' self-placement scores (from the surveys) with their ELPE scores, we calculated differences for each student and examined the frequencies and percentages across the whole group of 1067 respondents for matches (same ELPE and self-placement score) and differences (students' self-placement responses were higher or lower than the ELPE scores). This analysis is described in more detail in the Results Section under Research Question 2.

We felt that this secondary analysis was important because most existing DSP research looks at processes that give students only two choices. We wanted to examine how well students might be able to handle autonomy when there are four different placement levels to choose from. If, for example, we saw that most students' self-placements either matched their ELPE scores or were only one level different, perhaps self-assessments could play a role in their placement outcome.

³ For example, in a survey of students completing Level 2 at the end of fall 2015 (N=72), 58% said they believed they had been in the right level. Another 32% said that even though they thought the course was "a bit too easy" or a "bit too difficult," they were nonetheless satisfied with having taken Level 2 that quarter. Fewer than 10% (7 students) expressed dissatisfaction with their placement and wished that they had taken a level higher or lower (or no L2 writing classes at all). (data from Evans's in-progress doctoral dissertation)

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics for ELPE & Self-Placement Scores (N = 1067).

Score (both on 100-point scale)	Mean	Standard Deviation	Standard Error of the Mean
Placement Exam (ELPE)	74.64	8.39	0.26
Self-Placement Score (from final survey question)	78.04	9.72	0.30

Table 3
Results of Paired-Samples *t*-test: ELPE Score-Self-Placement Score.

Paired Differences				t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	
Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
			Lower				Upper
3.3955	11.5208	0.3527	2.7034	4.0876	9.627	1066	0.000

However, if many students placed themselves two or three levels higher or lower than the placement exam did, that would suggest that heavy/sole reliance on DSP could be a risky venture in our program, leading to many misplaced students and problems for them and their teachers.

Finally, for the 100 students in our separate stratified random sample, we examined correlations among the ELPE scores, the self-placement scores, and their other test scores submitted for initial university admission. We also sorted the Excel sheet to examine frequencies and percentages regarding these 100 students' international student status and if they had graduated from a U.S. high school. The purpose of this analysis was to assess whether these test scores, on exams students have to take anyway to be admitted to the university, could shed light on the placement process.

6. Results and discussion

In this section, we present our results, organized under the specific research questions listed above, with some accompanying comments.

6.1. Relationship between students' ELPE scores and self-Placement assessments (RQ 1)

Table 2 shows the overall descriptive statistics for the ELPE and the self-placement scores for the entire sample (N = 1067). As the percentages in Table 2 suggest, the mean ELPE score (74.64) was in the Level 2 band (70–79). While the mean self-placement score (78.04) was higher than the ELPE score, it was not excessively so, and indeed either score would place a student in Level 2 of the four-level sequence. Also, the standard deviations were fewer than 10 points for both scores (or slightly less than one course level difference, overall).

The descriptive statistics in Table 2 therefore suggest that, in general, there was a good fit between the ELPE results and students' own evaluation of their abilities and placement needs. However, because of the sizable N, the paired-samples *t*-tests showed that this was in fact a statistically significant difference. The *t*-test results are shown in Table 3. To examine this apparent discrepancy further (or at least its practical implications), we undertook the secondary analysis described above and reported further under Research Question 2 below.

6.2. Fit Between Self-Placement Scores and ELPE Scores (RQ 2)

As discussed above, our initial results suggested that there was not a strong enough statistical relationship between ELPE scores and self-placement scores to justify a recommendation of using the self-evaluation survey in place of the ELPE (see Table 3). However, because the mean scores (Table 2) actually indicate that the average student might be accurately placed by either method, we decided to undertake a more precise secondary analysis of the ELPE and self-placement score data. To do this, we looked not just at raw scores on the 0–100 scale but also specifically at what they meant as to placement in one of the four course levels. Any score in the 70s, for example, would place a student into Level 2. We were curious about how close the student self-placements were to the ELPE scores. Were students' self-assessments typically at the same level as the ELPE, one level or more "off," and were self-placement scores, when "off," usually higher or lower than the corresponding ELPE scores?

Using mathematical formulas in the Excel® spreadsheet program, we calculated the differences between each survey respondent's self-placement score and their ELPE score. This scale allowed us to compare where the two sets of scores would actually place students in the four-level developmental writing sequence. The results of this analysis are shown in Table 4. This table suggests that most students' (79%) self-placement scores were within one course level of their actual placement on the ELPE, while only about 20% were 2 or 3 course levels off. Only 23% placed themselves lower than their ELPE score, while 39% placed themselves higher. This latter observation—that students were more likely to self-place themselves higher than the placement exam scores—would seem to lend support to concerns of previous researchers looking at DSP

Table 4
Course-Level Comparison of Self-Placement Scores with ELPE scores.

Group	Frequency (%) (N = 1067)
0 (ELPE score matches self-placement score)	364 (34%)
1 (Self-placement score is one level <i>higher</i> than ELPE score)	288 (27%)
2 (Self-placement score is one level <i>lower</i> than ELPE score)	194 (18%)
3 (Self-placement score is two levels <i>higher</i> than ELPE score)	138 (13%)
4 (Self-placement score is two levels <i>lower</i> than ELPE score)	54 (5%)
5 (Self-placement score is three levels <i>higher</i> than ELPE score)	24 (2%)
6 (Self-placement score is three levels <i>lower</i> than ELPE score)	5 (.004%)

Table 5
Match between Self-Placement Score & ELPE score, by Course Level.

Course Level Placement (ELPE score)	Self-Placement (SP) Matches ELPE Score	SP one level off from ELPE Score	SP two levels off from ELPE Score	SP three levels off from ELPE Score
Level 1 (N = 253)	70 (28%)	96 (38%)	63 (25%)	24 (9%)
Level 2 (N = 508)	182 (36%)	251 (49%)	75 (15%)	0
Level 3 (N = 248)	92 (37%)	119 (48%)	37 (15%)	0
Level 4 (N = 58)	20 (35%)	16 (28%)	17 (29%)	5 (9%)
Totals (N = 1067)	364 (34%)	482 (45%)	192 (18%)	29 (0.3%)

that L2 students, given the opportunity, would be overambitious in their self-placement choices. However, when the 34% of students whose self-placements *matched* their ELPE scores are combined with the 23% who assessed themselves at a level *below* their ELPE scores, we see a different picture: Over half of the students (57%) did *not* place themselves at higher levels than the ELPE scores suggested. We conclude from this analysis that program administrators and instructors should not automatically assume that L2 writers cannot be trusted to provide input about their placement outcomes.

We were also curious as to whether students' proficiency/course levels within the program would influence their self-placement assessments as compared with their ELPE results. Thus, we looked at how far students who placed at each level on the ELPE were "off" in their self-evaluation score (one level, two, or three, regardless of direction). These results are shown in Table 5. This analysis suggests that students placed by the ELPE at the lowest level of the program were more likely than students placed at higher levels to have a mismatch between their own self-assessment and their ELPE scores (only 28% "matched" ELPE scores in their self-placement judgments, compared with mid-30% results for the other three groups), and 33% of the students placed into Level 1 thought they belonged in courses two or three levels higher than the ELPE indicated. Interestingly, while the students placed at Levels 2–3 were quite consistent in their self-assessments (either matching or being only one level off from their ELPE scores at a rate of 85–87%), the students placed in Level 4 were most likely (53%) to self-rate their abilities *lower* than their actual placements. In short, the students at the bottom and top of the placement outcomes were more likely to over- or underrate themselves than were the two groups in the middle.

To summarize this point, our various analyses did not completely convince us that self-assessment alone would work for effective placement of students in our four-level L2 writing program—but they also did not demonstrate that incorporation of such student input would be a complete disaster, either. On the contrary, students for the most part were reasonably close in their self-assessments to their ELPE scores, with 79% either a direct match or just one level higher or lower. Still, the ones on the edges—the 18% or so who were two or three levels off in their self-evaluation, particularly the group of students placed by the ELPE at the lowest level—concern us, suggesting that student self-assessments alone cannot do the work of placement for this large program.

6.3. Predictive value of standardized admissions test scores (RQ 3)

As explained above, we obtained admissions test scores and other information for a stratified random sample of 100 students from our larger group of 1067 survey respondents. One student was excluded from the sample because his test scores could not be retrieved. Basic descriptive information from the 99 other students is shown in Table 6 below. The majority were international students (71), with 67 of those reporting TOEFL® scores. This minor discrepancy can be explained by the fact that a few international students graduated from U.S. high schools and were not required to submit TOEFL® scores for admission. The vast majority (88) submitted SAT® scores for admission; of the 23 who submitted ACT® scores, 16 also submitted SAT® scores. The mean scores from the SAT® and the ACT® for this student sample were all substantially below the average for the entering freshman class at this university (www.ucdavis.edu). However, the average TOEFL® scores and subscores were on the high side for what U.S. four-year universities typically require for international student admission (Educational Testing Service, 2015).⁴

⁴ It is also worth noting that these 99 students sampled were those placed at developmental levels of writing instruction upon admission. There were other multilingual students who placed right into first-year composition courses. It is likely that their SAT®/TOEFL® numbers would be higher than those of this population.

Table 6
Characteristics from Stratified Random Sample.

Descriptor	Number (out of 99 students sampled)	Mean	S.D.
ELPE Placements	99	74	10.4
Self-Placements	99	78	9.2
Reported SAT scores	88		
SAT Reading scores		523	87
SAT Writing scores		546	88
Reported TOEFL scores	67		
TOEFL Writing scores		23	3.7
TOEFL Speaking scores		23	2.9
TOEFL total scores		92	17.6
Reported ACT scores	23	21.7	3.7
Had international (visa) status	71		
Graduated from a U.S. high school	38		

Table 7
Correlations from Stratified Random Sample (ELPE with other test scores).

	Self-Placement	SAT-Reading	SAT-Writing	TOEFL-Speaking	TOEFL-Writing	TOEFL-Total	ACT
Pearson Correlation	0.128	0.224	0.104	0.287	0.291	0.039	0.270
Significance (2-tailed)	0.207	0.036	0.335	0.019	0.017	0.755	0.224
N		88	88	66	67	67	22

The bold values are those that are significant at the level $p < .05$ (or better/lower).

To investigate whether the reported standardized test scores had any observable relationship to the ELPE scores and to the self-placement scores, we examined correlations among test scores. There were no statistically significant correlations between the students' self-placement scores and any of the test scores or subscores. However, the SAT[®] reading score (but not the writing score), the TOEFL[®] writing subscore, and the TOEFL[®] speaking score (but not the overall TOEFL[®] score) correlated significantly with the ELPE score (Table 7). Though statistically significant, these correlations were still small, suggesting that the standardized test scores have limited predictive value for placement purposes, with the possible exception of the SAT[®] Reading score (R -squared = .50). It was interesting that the SAT[®] Writing scores did not correlate significantly with the ELPE scores (which are primarily based upon student writing). Because the ELPE reading/writing task was more complex and the scoring rubric (shown in Appendix A in the Supplementary material) required more source use and rhetorical sophistication, it perhaps is not surprising that results of the SAT[®] Writing test did not effectively predict the scores on the ELPE writing task.

7. Implications and conclusion

Our data analysis leads us to look for some middle-ground solutions, neither completely adopting student self-assessment for our program and discarding the ELPE nor entirely abandoning the idea of giving students a voice in their placement. For our particular program, based upon our data, two follow-up ideas could be piloted in the near future. First, when the ELPE is scored, raters currently can assign a range of scores for each course level. For example, if the overall assessment is that the student likely belongs in Level 2 (70–79 score), the score assigned might be 70 (Level 2-minus), 74 (Level 2), or 77 (Level 2-plus). A test group of students who score at the “plus” or “minus” end of a particular level and who indicated on their self-assessment surveys that they believe one course level higher or lower would be best for their needs could be invited to make an informed choice: “Your ELPE score suggests that Level 2 is right for you, but you indicated that Level 3 would be best for you. Please think it over and choose Level 2 or Level 3 for your placement.” Those students could then be tracked as they begin their writing/language course sequence, first consulting with their instructor about their first-day diagnostic sample (Does it suggest the student is at the right level?) and then following the students' progress and their ongoing opinions about their placement. If this targeted self-placement option works out well, the opportunity could be extended to more students, allowing them to re-place themselves up (or down) one level if they so desire.

Second, student background information and their self-assessment survey responses are already being incorporated as part of the scoring for the 2016 ELPE administrations. Whereas in the previous two years, this information was gathered separately from the ELPE and was not available to the exam scorers, for the 2016 version, students completed the DSP questionnaire as part of the exam, and a half hour was added to the exam time for this purpose. Scorers, during training and norming, were told to feel free to consider the students' self-placement suggestions, especially if the scorers think the exam is on the borderline between two levels. Another benefit of the revised/expanded ELPE is that information about incoming students—their placement exams, background questionnaires, and self-evaluations—can easily be made available to their instructors. This can help teachers have a better picture of their classes and individual students as they prepare for new courses.

In addition to the self-placement information, our data suggested that we might examine students' SAT[®] Reading and TOEFL[®] Speaking scores during placement, when applicable, to see if those scores shed additional light on the information

provided by the ELPE instrument itself and by the students in their questionnaires. While our analysis (discussed under Research Question 3 above) did not persuade us that standardized test scores alone could provide substantial placement information for our program, it did appear (in our limited sample) that certain subscores could add some predictive value and potentially enhance the accuracy of the placement process.

Another direction for future research is to look more closely at responses to the specific self-assessment items on the survey (Appendix B in the Supplementary material). For the purposes of this initial analysis, we focused on only the last question (in which course level students felt they belonged), assuming that the earlier questions simply served as consciousness-raising prompts that would help respondents more appropriately answer the final question. However, it could be valuable to see if certain questions or sets of questions were more likely to influence the students' own self-placement judgments and/or to correspond to students' ELPE results.

Placement is important in L2 writing programs. If programs do a poor job of placement, they could either frustrate their students (if they feel they have been placed unfairly), or create havoc for teachers if too many students are in the wrong course levels, which could negatively affect instruction and student progress. Our study did not demonstrate a path forward for placement in our program that is necessarily easier or less expensive than what we already have, but we may have discovered some options that can improve our placement process and make it more informed by those who are most affected by it—the students themselves.

Acknowledgments

We are grateful to Helen Sutton, the program staff member who compiled the test data used to address Research Question 3, and especially to the 1067 students who completed the self-assessment survey used for this study. We also would like to thank Professor Deborah Crusan of Wright State University (Ohio, USA) for her very helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper. Finally, we would like to acknowledge the substantial contributions of Professor Grant Eckstein of Brigham Young University in the development of the ELPE and the self-assessment survey used for this study in 2014.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.asw.2016.10.001>.

References

- Bedore, P., & Rossen-Knill, D. F. (2004). Informed self-placement: Is a choice offered a choice received? *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, 28(1-2), 55–78.
- Blakesley, D., Harvey, E., & Reynolds, E. (2003). Southern Illinois University Carbondale as an institutional model: The English 100/101 stretch and directed self-placement program. In D. J. Royer, & R. Gilles (Eds.), *Directed self-placement: Principles and practices* (pp. 31–47). Cresskill, New Jersey: Hampton Press.
- Blakesley, D. (2002). Directed self-placement in the university. *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, 25(2), 9–39.
- Conference on College Composition and Communication. (2014). *CCCC statement on second-language writing and writers*. <http://www.ncte.org/cccc/resources/positions/secondlangwriting>
- Cherneckoff, J. (2003). Introducing directed self-placement to Kutztown University. In D. J. Royer, & R. Gilles (Eds.), *Directed self-placement: Principles and practices* (pp. 149–178). Cresskill, New Jersey: Hampton Press.
- Cornell, C. E., & Newton, R. D. (2003). The case of a small liberal arts university: Directed self-placement at DePauw. In D. J. Royer, & R. Gilles (Eds.), *Directed self-placement: Principles and practices* (pp. 149–178). Cresskill, New Jersey: Hampton Press.
- Costino, K. A., & Hyon, S. (2007). A Class for Students Like Me: Reconsidering relationships among identity labels, residency status, and students' preferences for mainstream or multilingual composition. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 16(2), 63–81.
- Crusan, D. (2002). An assessment of ESL writing placement assessment. *Assessing Writing*, 8(1), 17–30.
- Crusan, D. (2006). The politics of implementing online directed self-placement for second language writers. In P. K. Matsuda, C. Ortmeier-Hooper, & X. You (Eds.), *The politics of second language writing: In search of the promised land* (pp. 205–221). West Lafayette, Indiana: Parlor Press.
- Crusan, D. (2011). The promise of directed self-placement for second language writers. *TESOL Quarterly*, 45(4), 774–780.
- Frus, P. (2003). Directed self-placement at a large research university: A writing center perspective. In D. J. Royer, & R. Gilles (Eds.), *Directed self-placement: Principles and practices* (pp. 179–191). Cresskill, New Jersey: Hampton Press.
- Gere, A. R., Aull, L., Escudero, M. D. P., Lancaster, Z., & Vander Lei, E. (2013). Local assessment: Using genre analysis to validate directed self-placement. *College Composition and Communication*, 64(4), 605.
- Huot, B. (2003). *Rearranging writing assessment for teaching and learning*. University Press of Colorado.
- Inoue, A.B., 2009. Self-Assessment as programmatic center: The first year writing program and its assessment at California State University Fresno. In *Composition Forum*, 20 (3), Retrieved from <http://compositionforum.com/issue/20/calstate-fresno.php>.
- Institute of International Education. (2015). *International student enrollment trends. open doors report on international educational exchange..* Retrieved from <http://www.iie.org/opendoors/> (Accessed 17 July 2016)
- Kokhan, K. (2013). An argument against using standardized test scores for placement of international undergraduate students in English as a Second Language (ESL) courses. *Language Testing*, 30(4), 467–489.
- LeBlanc, R., & Painchaud, G. (1985). Self-assessment as a second language placement instrument. *TESOL Quarterly*, 19(4), 673–687. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/3586670>
- Lewiecki-Wilson, C., Sommers, J., & Tassoni, J. P. (2000). Rhetoric and the writer's profile: Problematising directed self-placement. *Assessing Writing*, 7(2), 165–183.
- Ling, G., Wolf, M. K., Cho, Y., & Wang, Y. (2014). English-as-a-Second-Language programs for matriculated students in the United States: An exploratory survey and some issues. *ETS Research Report Series*, 2, 1–19.
- Nicolay, T. F. (2002). Placement and instruction in context: Situating writing within a first-year program. *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, 25(3), 41–59.
- Peckham, I. (2009). Online placement in first-year writing. *College Composition and Communication*, 60(3), 517–540.

- Pinter, R., & Sims, E. (2003). Directed self-placement at Belmont University: Sharing power, forming relationships, fostering reflection. In D. J. Royer, & R. Gilles (Eds.), *Directed self-placement: Principles and practices* (pp. 107–125). Cresskill, New Jersey: Hampton Press.
- Reynolds, E. J. (2003). *The role of self-efficacy in writing and directed self-placement*.
- Royer, D. J., & Gilles, R. (1998). Directed self-placement: An attitude of orientation. *College Composition and Communication*, 50(1), 54–70.
- Royer, D. J., & Gilles, R. (Eds.). (2003). *Directed self-placement: Principles and practices*. (pp. 73–105). Cresskill, New Jersey: Hampton Press.
- Ruecker, T. (2011). Improving the placement of L2 writers: The students' perspective. *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, 35(1), 91–117.
- Silva, T. (1994). An examination of writing program administrators' options for the placement of ESL students in first year writing classes. *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, 18, 37–43.
- Sinha, A. (2014). *Exploring directed self placement as a placement alternative for first year college students in writing classes (Unpublished doctoral dissertation)*. Davis, California: University of California.
- Tompkins, P. (2003). Directed self-placement in a community college context. In D. J. Royer, & R. Gilles (Eds.), *Directed self-placement: Principles and practices* (pp. 192–206). Cresskill, New Jersey: Hampton Press.
- Weigle, S. C. (2006). Investing in assessment: Designing tests to promote positive washback. In P. K. Matsuda, C. Ortmeier-Hooper, & X. You (Eds.), *The politics of second language writing: In search of the promised land* (pp. 222–244). West Lafayette, Indiana: Parlor Press.
- White, E. M. (2008). Testing in and testing out. *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, 32(1), 129–142.
- Williams, J. (1995). ESL composition program administration in the United States. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 4(2), 157–217.
- di Gennaro, K. (2008). Assessment of Generation 1.5 learners for placement into college writing courses. *Journal of Basic Writing*, 27(1), 61–79.

Dana Ferris is Professor in the University Writing Program at the University of California, Davis, where she directs the second language writing program. Katherine Evans and Kendon Kurzer are Ph.D. candidates at UC Davis, Evans in Linguistics and Kurzer in Education.