The Effect of Placement Tests on Student Achievement: Study at Qimam Al-Ulum Institute for Languages (2024-2025)

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Abstract

In recent years, the suggestion of testing EFL learners has increased widely throughout the world. Most students entering university or seeking to improve their English proficiency in an institute have a placement test before they start their courses. This test efficiently places students in the correct place and begins at the appropriate level. This study explores the role of placement tests in student achievement. The study was conducted to evaluate the institution's program and to achieve the following objectives: 1. To determine how the placement test aligns with the standards of the European system. 2. To identify how the placement test aligns with standards for Qimm Al-Ulum Institute. 3. To explore how the placement test aligns with standards for students 4. To discover how the placement test places the students at their correct level. The study is also considered an analysis of the needs for improving every ongoing program. The researcher employed a descriptive research method to achieve the research objectives. A placement test was used to collect the data. The students who were registered to start their course in the institution were the participants of the study. They were of different ages. After that, the collected data were analyzed statistically to evaluate the test results. The results indicated that the test is effective for students and puts them in the correct place to start learning the language.

Keywords: categories of language tests, types of tests, placement test, CEFR, and application of CEFR in placement testing

1. Introduction

Assessment is an essential tool for teachers and learners in both teaching and learning processes. Most assessments are conducted to show the information that most students need to learn a second language. This paper examines the effects of placement tests on learners' achievements. The result of this study is an analysis of students who started an English course at an institute in Makkah. This study aims to investigate the impact of placement tests on students' language learning achievements and provide insights and recommendations for improving placement testing practices. One of the ways that can be used to assess students to know their levels of learning a language is to give them a test that contains several language proficiency levels. This paper analyzes and discusses the placement tests in student achievement. The given test is not related to any course or syllabus that students enrolled in during their previous studies in the English language. The test was a set of multiple-choice questions, containing 40 questions. The questions test different parts of the language: vocabulary, grammar, and spelling. The test is taken from the European system.

Assessment serves as a fundamental tool in both teaching and learning, offering insight into students' current proficiency and guiding educational planning. This study examines how placement tests impact student achievement by analyzing how learners at Qimam Al-Ulum Institute are placed using a CEFR-based assessment. The test is independent of prior coursework and evaluates language proficiency through multiple-choice items in grammar, vocabulary, and spelling.

Morante (1989) noted the need for such a process to assist student success and uphold the institution's academic standards. Well-known scholars have also written about the need for mandatory assessment and placement (Casazza& Silverman,1996; Maxwell,1997; Macabe,2000; Neuburger, 1999; Roueche& Roueche,1999). Their research shows that it contributes to facilitating students' success by placing them into the most appropriate beginning courses and supporting academic standards.

2. Review of Literature

For a long time, language tests have been considered an important task in learning a language. A test is "about assessing learners' progress, providing feedback, and deciding on the next step in the teaching and learning process." Albert, (2017). So, a test measures the learner's ability in each context.

Scholars have divided tests into two types:

a. Testing skills such as reading, writing, listening, and speaking; subskills such as vocabulary, spelling, grammar, comprehension, and punctuation.

b.   Testing by knowledge. Various tests, such as aptitude, achievement, non-referential, and diagnostic tests, serve to assess language learners' understanding.

2.1 The Effects of Tests on Achievements

Richard P. Phelps (2012) highlights that testing can influence academic achievement through motivation, feedback, and the 'testing effect.' Students may be intrinsically motivated to perform well for personal satisfaction or extrinsically motivated by grades, certification, or advancement. In this context, placement tests influence academic pathways by determining initial instructional levels.

Pfacilitates, Richard P. (2012) mentioned that" Psychologists have been studying the effects of testing on educational achievement (and memory) for a century. They theorize that testing affects achievement through certain mediating factors such as motivation, feedback, alignment, and the "pure" testing effect. Test motivation has two forms: intrinsic and extrinsic. While intrinsically motivated, a student may work harder or better to perform well on a test simply for their satisfaction, even if that test has no stakes (i.e., consequences). While extrinsically motivated, a student may work harder or better to perform well on a test with stakes such as course completion, certification, graduation, or grade promotion".

Two categories for language tests facilitate the administrators and teachers make program-level decisions (proficiency and placement decisions), and another category facilitates teachers to make classroom-level decisions (diagnostic and achievement decisions). These two categories are called norm-referenced tests and criterion-referenced tests.

Characteristic	Norm-Referenced	Criterion-Referenced
Type of Interpretation	Relative (A student's performance is compared to all other students in percentile terms.)	Absolute (A student's performance is compared only to the amount, or percentage, of material learned.)
Type of Measurement	To measure general language abilities or proficiencies	To measure specific objectives based on language points
Purpose of Testing	Spread students out along a continuum of general abilities or proficiencies.	Assess the amount of material known, or learned, by each student.
Distribution of Scores	Normal distribution of scores around a mean	Varies, usually non-normal (students who know all of the material should all score 100%)
Test Structure	A few relatively long subtests with a variety of question contents	A series of short, well-defined subtests with similar question contents
Knowledge of Questions	Students have little or no idea what content to expect in questions	Students know exactly what content to expect in test questions

(Adapted from Testing in Language Programs (p. 5), by J. D. Brown, 1996, Prentice Hall Regents)

Proficiency tests are norm-referenced and are intended to "measure global language abilities" (Brown, 2005, p. 2). One characteristic of a proficiency test, as a norm-referenced test, is that it should produce "scores which fall into a normal distribution" (p. 5), which allows relative interpretations of the test scores in terms of "how each student's performance relates to the performances of all other students" (p. 4). A second characteristic is its test structure: The test "is relatively long and contains a wide variety of question content types" (p. 5) and usually consists of "a few subtests on rather general language skills like reading comprehension, listening comprehension, grammar, writing, and so on" (p. 5). Further, a third characteristic of the test is that "the test must provide scores that form a wide distribution so that interpretations of the differences among students will be as fair as possible" (p. 8). In other words, a proficiency test tends to test overall general language proficiency

2.1.1 Placement Tests

A placement test evaluates an individual's language proficiency to determine the level at which they should study. Assessment and placement processes must accurately determine students' capabilities and avoid unnecessary skill remediation (Scott-Clayton et al.,2014; Bahr et al., 2019). Language placement tests have become critical to ensure accurate placement, fair assessment, and effective language instruction (Brown, 1989). Hille and Cho (2020) state that "accurate placement is expected to optimize teaching and learning because a placement result indicates the level of instruction a student needs. As pointed out by Long et al (2018), "Brown (1989), a central purpose of placement testing is to '[sort] students into relatively homogeneous language-ability groupings, sometimes within specific skill areas'" (Avizia Long et al, 2018) of improving or enhancing the teaching and learning. Further, placement tests can be designed to spread out these groupings along a continuum from lower to higher scoring students or to distinguish students who have mastered specific learning objectives from those who have not (Green, 2012).

Placement tests are important in determining student proficiency. They are used to place students at the correct level, neither too easy nor too difficult - this can influence their academic performance and motivation. (Fulcher, 2010)

As its name implies, a placement test is designed initially to place learners in a program or course at an appropriate level. As Richards et al. (1989) note, the term "placement test" does not refer to what a test contains or how it is constructed but to the purpose for which it is used. Placement tests should be seen as a way of improving and developing the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) in the teaching and learning of a foreign language. A placement test measures language skills to group learners who are similarly skilled together.

2.1.2 The Goal of the Placement Test

The goal of a placement test is "to situate the student in the course or treatment that will challenge him but will not overwhelm him to

prevent his wasting time or being bored on the one hand and to prevent his failure due to lack of preparation or lack of sufficient repetition or explication on the other" (Hills, 1971: p. 702). It is noted that some students prefer not to take placement tests and start the courses from the beginning.

2.1.3 Types of Placement Tests

There are different types of placement tests depending on the subject area and institution. They are:

1. Standardized Tests (TOEFL and IELTS) are a broad measure of Language Proficiency (Bachman, 1990). A standardized proficiency test measures people's ability in a language, regardless of any training they may have in that language. In other words, it is not linked to any course of instruction but measures the learner's general level of language mastery. An example of a standardized proficiency test is the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), produced by the Educational Testing Service.

2. Diagnostic Tests – These focus on identifying students' specific strengths and weaknesses in language skills (Alderson, 2005). A test is given to students after a lesson, unit, or course to determine whether they have achieved the learning points. The objectives of the diagnostic test are:

    - Helping learners find a way to test their language knowledge.

    - Providing learners with better information about their strengths and weaknesses

3. Computer-Adaptive Tests (CATs)—These tests adjust the difficulty level based on students' responses, providing a more precise assessment of their abilities (Douglas, 2010).

2.2 The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) is crucial for evaluating language skills. Developed by the Council of Europe, the CEFR is a widely adopted system for measuring language proficiency. It offers a clear and standardized method to assess language abilities across different languages and learning settings. The framework is organized into six levels, from A1 (Beginner) to C2 (Mastery), grouped into three main categories.

- Basic User: A1 and A2

- Independent User: B1 and B2

- Proficient User: C1 and C2

What a learner is expected to achieve is a "can-do" statement that describes it for each level. For example, someone at the A1 level can understand and use basic phrases in everyday situations. These guidelines facilitate teachers in setting learning objectives and ensure consistency in language education worldwide.

2.2.1 Using CEFR for Placement Testing

CEFR plays a key role in placement testing, facilitating learners to accurately assess a student's language level. By designing tests based on CEFR descriptors, schools and institutions can place students in courses that match their abilities. This makes the assessment process more standardized and gives learners a clear roadmap for their language progress.

3. Methodology

This research study adopted a quantitative method. The test is designed for students registered to study the English Language at Qimam Al-Ulum Institute and is taken from The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). The data were collected through a placement test. (50) participants were selected randomly to participate in the study from those registered in the institution. The participants were students and graduates of different ages and proficiency levels." the goal of placement tests as defined by (Hills, 1971: p. 702) was, "to situate the student in the course or treatment that will challenge him, but will not overwhelm him to prevent his wasting time or being bored on the one hand and to prevent his failure due to lack of preparation or lack of sufficient repetition or explication on the other"

4. Data Analysis

Table 1. **Test's Questions**

No	Statement	Correct answer	Wrong Answer
1	I like ___ in the evening. **A)** that I work **B)** working **C)** work **D)** to be work	39	11
2	It's ten ___ nine. **A)** to **B)** for **C)** at **D)** at	41	9
3	Would you like ___ drink? **A)** other **B)** another **C)** some other **D)** more one	37	13
4	They didn' ___ the tickets. **A)** booking **B)** booked **C)** to book **D)** book	42	8
5	I haven't ___ this picture before. **A)** seen **B)** saw **C)** to see **D)** see	44	6
6	It ___ when they went out.	46	4

	A) has rained B) was raining C) is raining D) was to rain		
7	Did you ___ TV last night? A) watch B) see C) look at D) listen	44	6
8	That's the hotel ___ we had lunch. A) what B) where C) that D) which	40	10
9	Diana ___ some wine when she went to France. A) bought B) buyed C) boot D) did buy	46	4
10	I don't get ___ very well with my brother. A) by B) from C) on D) to	34	16
11	Having _____ his driving test several times, Paul finally passed at the fourth attempt. A) taken B) made C) had D) attended	21	29
12	Gospel music has been a major influence _____ other musical styles, especially soul. A) with B) to C) about D) on	20	30
13	Maintaining an accurate balance sheet is essential. _____ business you're in. A) however B) wherever C) whatever D) whenever	32	18
14	Your diet is terrible. You don't eat _____. A) many vegetables B) enough vegetables C) vegetables enough D) many vegetable	44	6
15	If we had the money, we ___ get a taxi. A) will can B) can C) would can D) could	33	17
16	___ my best friend since 1999. A) I've known B) I knew C) I'm knowing D) I know	35	15
17	You ___ the new café in town. The coffee's terrible. A) aren't like B) won't like C) isn't like D) won't liking	37	13
18	There's always a lot of traffic going ___ the bridge. A) over B) in C) at D) through	20	30
19	If the film is a _____ success, the director will get most of the credit. A) big B) high C) large D) good	19	31
20	By the end of today's seminar, I will _____ to each of you individually. A) speak B) have spoken C) be speaking D) have been speaking	3	47
21	This is a photo of my little sister _____ ice cream on the beach. A) eat B) eating C) was eating D) having eaten	32	18
22	Our students take their responsibilities very _____. A) considerably B) thoroughly C) seriously D) strongly	39	11
23	Ali _____ delighted with the birthday present. A) very B) completely C) fairly D) absolutely	19	31
24	It's _____ likely that this novel will win a literary prize. A) totally B) deeply C) strongly D) highly	20	30
25	It's no _____ for me to get Brad's phone number - I'll be seeing him tonight. A) point B) wonder C) secret D) problem	14	36
26	The number of turtles on the island _____ by 70% over the last decade. A) has declined B) has been declining C) has been declined D) is declining	18	32

The data from the test questions indicate that the instrument is effective and aligns with both the CEFR standards and the curriculum at Qimam Al-Ulum Institute.

1. To determine how the placement test is considered adequate for the European system.

2. To identify how the placement test aligns with standards for Qimm Al-Ulum Institute

Table 2. **Distribution of students into levels**

	A1	A2	B1	B2	C1	C2
Number of Students	0	3	9	25	14	0

It shows that the test is adequate for students and puts them in the correct place to start learning the language correctly. A1 students are placed at level 1. A2 is placed on level 2. B1 students are placed in level three, and B2 students are placed in level 4. C1 students are placed at level 5, and C2 students are placed at level 6. The result shows that three students should start from level 2, nine students should start level three, 25 students should start level 4, and fourteen students should start level five. None of the students should start at level one or level six.

These results show that most students (25 at B2 and 14 at C1) were placed in intermediate to upper-intermediate levels, indicating that the test effectively captured a wide range of proficiency. No students were placed at A1 or C2, suggesting that the population had a minimum

foundational knowledge of English, but not near-native mastery

3. To explore how the placement test aligns with standards for students

The study confirms that placement tests are crucial in assessing students' language proficiency before they begin their courses. The test at Qimam Al-Ulum Institute, modeled after the European system, effectively identifies students' current language levels. This ensures that learners are placed in courses that match their abilities, preventing mismatches that could hinder their academic progress. The placement test used in this study is considered largely adequate for students at Qimam Al-Ulum Institute. It demonstrates reasonable and meaningful distribution across proficiency levels, aligning with CEFR standards. Nonetheless, the inclusion of additional skill assessments — particularly speaking and listening — would further improve the test's comprehensiveness and accuracy.

4. To discover how the placement test places the students at their correct level

The findings indicate that most students were placed between B1 and C1 levels, suggesting that most had prior English knowledge but required further structured learning. The absence of students in A1 and C2 levels suggests that the test successfully filters out complete beginners or those with near-native proficiency.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper explores the role of placement tests in determining students' levels and how they help institutions place learners in the correct places. Considering the research results, the following recommendations can be made to improve the placement tests.

- To improve the effectiveness of placement tests, they should include all skills, such as listening and speaking. The current test concerns grammar, vocabulary, and reading. However, productive skills such as speaking skills and the receptive skill of listening are critical in language learning. Including an oral interview or an automated speaking test can facilitate assessing students' ability to use English in real-life situations.

- Students who take the placement test should be able to provide feedback on the test experience. Their views can facilitate refining the test and make it more effective.

- The placement test should be reviewed every academic year to ensure the questions reflect current language usage trends and align with the latest CEFR guidelines.

- The institution should periodically analyze students' test performances to identify patterns of strengths and weaknesses. This data can be used to modify the test and improve accuracy in student placement.

- Students should have the option to take the placement test online, with AI-driven proctoring to ensure integrity.

Based on the findings and educational review of literature, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance the test's effectiveness and support improved student outcomes:

1. Assess All Language Skills: To evaluate comprehensive proficiency better, the test should incorporate speaking and listening components in addition to grammar, vocabulary, and reading. This provides a fuller picture of student ability.

2. Gather Student Feedback: Students should be allowed to reflect on their testing experience through feedback forms. Their perspectives can identify test limitations and areas for improvement.

3. Review the Test Annually: The placement test should be updated regularly to reflect changes in English usage and updates in CEFR descriptors. This ensures relevance and accuracy over time.

4. Use Performance Data to Refine the Test: The institution should analyze student outcomes to their placement results to identify trends. This data-driven approach can improve placement precision and instructional alignment.

5. Offer Online Testing with Secure Tools: To enhance accessibility, students should be allowed to take the placement test remotely through secure platforms with AI-based proctoring.

By implementing these measures, Qimam Al-Ulum Institute can further strengthen the role of placement testing in improving student achievement, aligning with the broader goals of language proficiency development and educational quality.

Authors' contributions

Dr. Omsalma Ahmed was responsible for conceptualizing and designing the study, as well as developing the research methodology. She conducted the primary analysis and interpretation of data and played a key role in drafting and revising the manuscript for intellectual content. Dr. Omsalma also provided critical feedback throughout the study, ensuring the integrity and quality of the final work.

Competing interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests regarding the publication of this paper.

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