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## A comprehensive placement test tool for language centres

**Abstract:** One of the main problems relating to language courses offered at language centres is measuring the students' entry-level skills in a fast, efficient and reliable way. This problem is particularly acute in language centres with large numbers of students, especially at the beginning of the academic year, as a mechanism has to be implemented which serves to determine the language skills of students prior to the registration period. For this purpose we have developed a software tool that allows us to determine a student's level quickly and effectively, while managing volumes of approximately 600 students in each of the two academic periods in which the courses are offered. The tool presented has been tested and validated over four years of use, giving results that demonstrate a high degree of reliability. Also, given the program's flexibility, it can be adapted to other specific needs, and can also be used to assess proficiency in terms of the levels of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*.

**Keywords:** placement test, IT, test management

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## 1 Introduction

The implementation of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR; Council of Europe 2001) has provided a common basis for the development of language programmes and exams, by identifying levels of language proficiency that allow the assessment of students' progress and the measurement of language skills, thus enabling a comparison between systems. To implement this new system, language centres have gradually had to adapt the design and

content of their courses to the new definition of levels of language proficiency according to the particular conditions of their learning environment. Despite the differences in the manner in which language centres have adapted the CEFR levels, a problem common to all language centres is how to quickly and effectively determine the students' knowledge of the language before their enrolment on the courses, especially at the beginning of the academic term. At the Language Centre (CDL) of the Universidad Politécnica de Valencia (UPV) we have developed a computer-based placement test that allows the assessment of a large number of students in a reliable and efficient way.

One of the most important issues in the development of a test is determining the purpose for which it is designed. "The most important consideration in designing a test is the use for which it is intended so the most important quality criterion is its usefulness" (Bachman and Palmer 1997: 17). In fact, it is a two-way process in the sense that the same type of test can be used for different objectives, but also its purpose may determine the type of test to be used. Depending on their purpose, tests can be used either as a source of information for decision-making in an educational setting or as a tool for investigating specific aspects of language (Bachman 1990: 52). Placement and diagnostic tests fall within the first group and their aim is "identifying the appropriate instructional level or specific areas in which instruction is needed" (Bachman 1990: 70).

The design of a placement test for students in a language centre such as the CDL of the Universidad Politécnica de Valencia is a complicated task, given that a number of quality criteria must be taken into account in order for the results to be valid and reliable, while allowing for a rapid assessment of large numbers of students in a way which does not require considerable financial and human resources.

## 2 Contextual aspects

One of the main areas of work of the CDL is the provision to the university community of supplementary training in foreign languages, so as to facilitate the integration of its members into the European Higher Education Area, which is an essential part of the philosophy of internationalisation characterising the UPV. Given that the largest group within the university community is made up of students who are enrolled in the different schools and faculties of the university, the structuring of the courses offered by the CDL is governed by the academic calendar, which is divided into two semesters. Academic year timing constraints have led to the levels specified in the CEFR to be divided into two courses (Semester A and Semester B) to ensure that students acquire the language skills defined in the

CEFR. The courses offered by the CDL are 40 hours long, offered in both semesters of the university calendar. Therefore, there is a need to test a large number of new students in both the first and second semester in a very short period of time, especially in the case of the first semester due to its shorter duration (three teaching months). Additionally, a placement test is needed that clearly differentiates between the language skills corresponding to parts A and B of each CEFR level.

Other aspects taken into account when designing the placement test were that the test was not to exceed one hour and that the results should be almost immediately available, since most students are unwilling to spend an excessive amount of time undergoing testing or to return another day for their results. Also, from an organizational standpoint, it seemed more advantageous to design a flexible and effective test which foregoes the inclusion of more complex activities that extend the length of the test, since there is a higher administrative and management workload at the beginning of each academic year, and time and human resource management must be optimised accordingly. Therefore, the best solution, taking into account that there are about 600 students each semester, is to use a computer-based test, given its flexibility of use and the rapid analysis of results.

Although there are commercial programs available for determining a student's level, their cost is usually high (Taylor et al. 1999; Hinkelman and Grose 2004; Soh et al. 2004). Also, commercial programs tend to consider only European Framework levels, and it is unlikely that tests can be found on the market which are appropriate for the subdivision of CEFR levels made for the purpose of our courses. These academic and operational aspects led us to develop a computer-based placement test conforming to the specific characteristics of the CDL of our university.

### 3 Test requirements

Bachman and Palmer (1997) state that any test, regardless of its type, should meet two basic requirements: validity and reliability. According to Alderson et al. (1995), validity concerns what the test assesses, i.e. its purpose, which in our case is candidates' level of language proficiency for their placement in a specific course. Reliability measures the consistency of the scores, i.e. whether the students who take the test would obtain similar scores if they were to repeat the same test at another time.

With regard to validity, the question is not whether a test is valid or not but rather what its level of validity is (Caruso 2008: 38). In fact, as pointed out by Alderson et al. (1995), the validity of a test depends not on the test itself but rather

on its purpose. Therefore, a test whose purpose is to determine whether students have achieved the learning objectives set forth in a teaching plan (an achievement test) cannot be the same as a placement test, which serves to distribute students into different courses based on their proficiency. According to Hughes (1989: 26): “A test is said to have construct validity if it can be demonstrated that it measures just the ability which it is supposed to measure.” Hence, our test does not aim to comprehensively analyse all language skills as would be appropriate in the case of proficiency tests. Rather, its validity derives from the purpose for which it was designed, taking into account the contextual factors mentioned above.

As for reliability, which is considered to be an indicator of the validity of the scores, it should be noted that the CDL team has developed a database of items corresponding to the contents of the syllabuses of the various courses. The reliability of the results has been extensively confirmed by the fact that the tool has been used for more than four years, during which it has only been necessary to re-place about 3% of the students.

## 4 Test design

The test was developed on the one hand by a group of experts comprising teachers with wide experience in the CDL, who are familiar with the organization and contents of the courses and are also members of official certificate examination boards with an extensive background in testing; and on the other by technicians who have worked extensively with the CDL and are aware of its needs.

Among the advantages of a custom-designed test are its greater flexibility, the immediate release of results, lower stress, the management of large volumes of students, the optimisation of time and human resources, lower costs and adaptation to the specific requirements of the centre (Cubeta 2008).

Our test is designed to measure CEFR levels A2–C1. It was not considered necessary to include level A1 since students at this level have no or a very low knowledge of English, and so they can directly enrol on the corresponding courses. The test consists of two parts: a computer-based section with 50 multiple-choice and cloze questions covering grammar, vocabulary and syntax; and a three-part listening comprehension section that uses multiple-choice questions to test for CEFR levels B1, B2 and C1. To better gauge results, students who score above the B1 level are orally interviewed in pairs to judge more accurately which course best suits their skills. Currently, we have a bank of approximately 1,000 items classified by level and language skill, which has allowed us to create different models for each testing session. This is important given that some students take the

placement test in successive sessions: the fact that items are changed from one session to the next makes it impossible to study or rely on one's memory of an earlier session. Additionally, having a large bank of items facilitates the development of placement tests tailored to each academic semester since, as previously mentioned, each level of the CEFR is divided into two parts, Semester A and Semester B. Also, the flexibility of the tool allows tests to be designed for a particular level of language proficiency, which is useful given that in some cases we are required to organize specific courses for certain university groups.

## 5 Test management

Before enrolling on any course offered by the CDL, new students are required to take a placement test. Due to the large number of students and the limited time available prior to the commencement of the courses, in addition to the fact that the Language Centre only has one multimedia lab equipped with 24 workplaces, it was necessary to set up a system enabling testing to be managed as efficiently as possible. To avoid long waits, the university's course management platform is used. In this way, groups of 20 people sit the test on an hourly basis, one hour being the maximum duration of the computer-based test. Students register for testing on-line by selecting a specific time and day. Before entering the classroom, students are given a general explanation of how the test works. However, the program includes an instruction section that students are required to read and confirm having read before starting the test.

The test has two sections. The first section assesses grammar and vocabulary and consists of 50 multiple-choice and cloze questions in which students have to complete sentences with one word. The program automatically limits the time for this section to 30 minutes. Within this time, students can review and change their answers as often as they wish, knowing that wrong answers are not penalized. The second part of the computer-based test consists of listening comprehension. This section comprises three separate recordings corresponding to levels B1, B2 and C1. Each listening exercise has a set time. Students read the questions before listening to the recording and after listening they are required to answer multiple-choice questions. While the tests are in progress, there is always a computer technician and a team member available to respond to both logistical and technical questions.

Following the completion of the test, the data are entered into a spreadsheet and, in accordance with the established marking scheme, those students with scores corresponding to a B1 level or lower are requested to sign a form to indicate their conformity with the level into which they have been placed. Students who

have obtained higher scores are required to take an oral test to judge more accurately the group into which they should be placed.

While a new group takes the computer-based test, students required to take the oral test are divided into pairs and interviewed by different examiners. These examiners are experienced professionals who are mostly members of official certificate examination boards. However, to ensure that all the oral examiners have the same evaluation criteria, they are provided with a battery of questions grouped by level of language proficiency, which allow the examiners to judge more accurately which are the most appropriate groups for the students' linguistic knowledge.

Each day, the final test data for the students, together with their group assignment, are transferred to the university's Centre for Lifelong Learning, which is responsible for the registration process. The students may then enrol on-line for the language courses offered. This system makes it possible to place approximately 600 students into the appropriate levels in about five days with highly satisfactory results.

## 6 Conclusions

The use of computer-based tests for the placement of students according to their level of proficiency is the best solution in contexts such as language centres managing large numbers of students, especially during the periods prior to registration. Although there are programs on the market that offer level tests, their cost is usually high and it is unlikely that they can be adapted to the specific characteristics of each centre. The tool described here is flexible, fast and effective and has proven to be valid and reliable for the specific purpose for which it was designed. Its implementation at the Language Centre of the Universidad Politécnica de Valencia has allowed us to optimise the management of registration, and also to reduce costs, time and human resources employed, while increasing student satisfaction. Currently, the team is expanding the capabilities of the tool, so that it can be used for course achievement testing, and in the future, for certification purposes.

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