

An assessment of whether there is a need for a placement test at the University of Namibia Language Centre

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Abstract: *This paper is a literature review that assesses whether there could be a need to implement placement testing at the University of Namibia (UNAM) Language Centre (LC). At the moment, students are placed into different course levels based on their high school leaving scores of English. The paper highlighted the qualities of testing that make a test result reliable and valid for the intended decision. Therefore, both literature on the use of placement tests and high school leaving score were reviewed for a well-informed assessment results. Literature shows that although the placement testing seems to have yield good results in some settings, comparably, it also seems to be in favour of the use school leaving scores in language placements*

Introduction

The University of Namibia (UNAM) Language Centre (LC) is the Centre for language learning, teaching and research. The key focus is on the upgrading of competence in the use of English, and the teaching of the University core courses, namely: Academic Writing for Postgraduate Students, English for Academic Purposes, English Communication and Study Skills and English for General Communications. Currently, the placement of students in various English language courses is determined by the grades that the students obtained in English, when they completed grade 12. Students may have obtained grades A, B, C or D in the Namibia Secondary School Certificate Ordinary level (NSSC-O), or Grades 1, 2, 3, or 4 in the Namibia Secondary School Certificate Ordinary Higher level (NSSC-H). In the NSSC-O and NSSC-H, outgoing high school students seat for standardized examinations papers of English Second Language, English First Language, as well as other local and foreign languages, and content subjects. In addition, placement and exemption criteria (See annexure 1) are also in place for placement of students (who

matriculated different education system in other countries) in the appropriate LC courses.

In contrast, some universities require the incoming students to seat for a placement test (California State University, 2013; Polytechnic of Namibia, 2014; Rhodes University, 2014; University of Illinois, 2012). The primary purpose of a placement test is to determine where in a specific program students should begin their coursework (Di Gennaro, 2006). Commentators of the English placement test (EPT) believe that it helps the test users to determine accurate placement of test takers in the English as a Second Language (ESL) courses (University of Illinois, 2012).

This paper is written in response to the debate whether there is a need to implement a language placement test at the UNAM LC. The finding of the study inform the UNAM LC stakeholders in decision-making in relation to whether it is necessary to implement placement test or to rather continue using the NSSC-O/NSSC-H scores for placement of incoming students in the LC language courses.

Issues in language placements

In order for language testers to select and design placement tests that best serve their purpose, such tests should have six qualities, namely: reliability, validity, impact, practicality, authenticity, and interactiveness (Bachman & Palmer, 2006). Bachman and Palmer (2006) warn that one test may not meet all the six qualities in Bachman and Palmer's (1996) model; therefore, test users must determine the relative importance of each element for their particular testing situation.

In large-scale and high-stake testing situation such as placement testing, of the six qualities, 'practicality' tends to be of great significance (Bachman & Palmer, 2006). Practicality refers to the resources (economic, human, and temporal) that may be required to design, administer, score, and report results for a given test (Bachman & Palmer, 2006; Brown & Abeywickrama, 2010). For example, for Namibian students admitted at Rhodes University, it was not possible to write a placement test for logistical reasons (Rhodes University, 2014). Di Gennaro (2006) illustrates test practicality as follows:

Time is needed initially to create the testing instrument and scoring rubric, but time is also needed to administer, proctor, and score the tests. Human raters are required to judge the quality of the tests, and money is needed to compensate those who administer and rate the tests. Test-takers, as well, are affected by a test's practicality, as they must find the time to take the test and, in some cases, may incur some of the test administration costs. In short, performance tests (such as direct essay-writing tests) require a great deal of resources and, for this reason, are often considered costly and time-consuming.

Alternatively, it is most likely that some universities may try to avoid less practical performance tests (for example, essay writing) if there are other tests or examinations scores that can serve the same purpose. Thus, some universities (such as UNAM) tend to use the

grades from the NSSC-O/NSSC-H as an alternative to local placement testing, believing that such scores can serve the secondary purpose of providing information for both admissions and placement decisions - reducing time and costs.

Using high school grades and placement tests for students' placements

Placement tests

Advocates of placement tests argue that using scores (for example SAT or NSSC-O/NSSC-H) beyond the primary purpose (exiting high school or admission to university) to placement within a specific program may be potentially more efficient but at the same time reducing fairness to test-takers (Crusan, 2002; Di Gennaro, 2006; Frey, 2012; Harklau, Losey, & Siegal, 1999). Placement tests also serve a diagnostic purpose which enable teachers to enter the language classroom knowing the students' language level. Hence, they know what materials to bring too class, so as to suit the students' linguistic needs, interest and proficiency level (Di Gennaro, 2006).

Harrington (2005) believes that administrators are able to develop a placement testing program well informed by theory, accommodating the needs of all students, despite costs and time constraints. Universities that employ placement testing claim that it enables administrators to place incoming students into appropriate course levels (California State University, 2013; Polytechnic of Namibia, 2014; Rhodes University, 2014; University of Illinois, 2012). However, in order to determine how well student would cope with a certain course level, a large number of well-designed test tasks may be required and they should parallel the classroom tasks closely (Coombe, O'Sullivan, & Stoyloff, 2012). Hence, Coombe et al. (2012) warns that it may not be practically easy to meet the requirements within the limitations of time and resources (costs and human).

According to Bachman and Palmer (1997), validity and reliability should be considered with

primacy in any test development and administration. Validity defines what the test assesses or the purpose of the test (Pastor, Guilot & Mora, C., 2011). In this case, candidates' level of language proficiency is tested for their placement in a specific language course level. Reliability determines the dependability of the test scores; whether the test takers would obtain similar scores if tested multiple times at different times, as well as rated by different raters (Pastor et al., 2011). Thus, Crusan (2002) warns that, practicality should not outshine all other testing concerns, since focusing on saving time or money only, may sacrifice and reduce fairness to test-takers.

Nevertheless, developers and administrators of placements tests end up compromising 'validity and reliability' as they set tests that omit language items (such as writing long pieces) that may be a threat to the practicality of the test (Kunnan, 1997).

High school grades

Research has shown that high school grades are a better predictor of student success in college, than placement test scores (Belfield & Crosta, 2012; Burdman, 2012). In their study, Belfield and Crosta (2012) found that the relationship between high school grades and student success at university level is so powerful that it would seem important for colleges to opt for high school grade in deciding on placement.

In fact, a recent study looked at the academic records of 123,000 at Wake Forest University, Bowdoin College, Smith College and College of the Holy Cross (O'Shaughnessy, 2014). The findings strongly suggest that students who have strong grade point averages in high school are likely to do well in college, even if their standardized test scores are poor. In addition, school leaving examinations tend to assess satisfactory amount of content that could be reliably predictive of students' language proficiency levels (Crosta, 2012).

According to Burdman's (2012) analysis, unlike high school leaving examinations, placement tests do not measure some skills required for performance at university level, such as persistence, motivation, and critical thinking. He (2012) highlighted a situation where a student had a bad day, obtained a low score, and get placed in lower course that s/he was actually supposed to be. In this way, reliability and fairness is being jeopardized; hence, a student's time is wasted because s/he has to spend a year or semester in a lower course.

Conclusion

Although the literature reviewed seem to highlight the importance of placement testing, at the same time, it does not seem to dispute the usefulness of high school leaving scores in language placements. Literature does not seem to suggest that there is a need for placement test at the language centre. Therefore, the UNAM LC should thoroughly define and evaluate their testing situation before they suspend the current placement method, and implement placement testing. The testing situation should be one that satisfactorily qualifies to Bachman and Palmer's (2006) qualities of testing.

Author's Biography

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