

Chinese Placement Procedures at U.S. Postsecondary Institutions

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Abstract

This quant-QUAL sequential explanatory mixed methods study describes a framework for evaluating the communicative competence (Canale and Swain 1980; Canale 1983) of non-beginner students of Chinese for placement purposes at U.S. four-year postsecondary institutions. Three data sources informed this study: (1) a sample of randomly-selected institutional websites on Chinese placement procedures ($n1 = 226$), (2) an online survey of program coordinators' perceptions ($n2 = 27$), and (3) a follow-up semi-structured individual interview with Chinese program coordinators ($n3 = 20$). Findings revealed five commonly-used procedures: (1) written test, (2) oral interview, (3) background questionnaire, (4) standardized tests (Advanced Placement, and International Baccalaureate[®]), and (5) seat-time equivalency. In addition, the data demonstrated that one method does not fit all: only a combination of multidimensional measures can holistically evaluate increasingly heterogeneous students' Chinese communicative competence.

Keywords: articulation, Chinese, communicative competence, placement, postsecondary institution

1. Introduction

Historically, the first Chinese language class in the United States was instituted at Yale University in 1871 (Tsu 1970). World War II not only accelerated the foreign or world language (F/WL) instruction as a discipline, but also extended classes of some critical languages, such as Chinese, from elite universities to more institutions and K-12 schools in a top-down fashion (Yu 2007; Zhou 2011). Goldberg, Looney, and Lusin (2015) conducted a nationwide survey on behalf of Modern Language Association (MLA) during 2012-2013. In their survey on U.S. higher education institutions, 2,435 out of 2,616 responded institutions had enrollments in languages other than English in 2013. In terms of enrollment number, Chinese was ranked 7th after Spanish, French, American Sign Language, German, Italian, and Japanese. Chinese is *the only* critical language among the top 15 commonly taught languages (CTLs) at U.S. postsecondary institutions that showed steadily increase enrollment (2%) in spite of overall fewer enrollments at U.S. postsecondary level in 2013. The ratio of student enrollment in introductory and advanced courses in Chinese was 4:1 as opposed to other languages with larger differences between introductory and advanced courses (from 5:1 to 11:1). The ratio in the recent report became 3:1 (Looney and Lusin 2019). This small ratio implied that proportionally, more students at the college level continue Chinese courses than other languages. Therefore, it highlights the importance of articulation of program curriculum and a seamless continuum of courses in a program (Wei 2017).

For all content areas, a placement procedure is about articulation, a critical decision to place and transit students from different tracks and curricula to another when they continue learning the subject. Language is no exception. Articulation can be defined as the well-motivated and well-designed curriculum for a sequence of courses and coordination of instruction that build systematically from one course to the next as a continuum without gaps or unnecessary repetition to achieve toward certain learning goals (Byrnes 1990:281; Lally 2001:17; Dretzke and Jordon 2010:70). In the past, school considered seat-time equivalency – the amount of time s/he spent learning the target language in a classroom – as the criterion to place students. However, the

seat-time equivalency oversimplified placement without considering factors such as course intensity and the potential gaps among different curricula. As a consequence, many programs replaced the seat-time equivalency with certain placement procedures – mostly tests – for a more accurate placement (Dretzke and Jordon 2010).

Very few studies have addressed placement procedures at U.S. postsecondary institutions (Bloom and Allison 1949; Heilenman 1983; Shohamy 1998; Bernhardt, Rivera and Kamil 2004; O’Sullivan 2011; Kane 2012). Even fewer studies have been conducted on placement of Chinese as a second language (CSL) in China (Li, Cai and Liu 2003; Chen and Deng 2005), and no study has been conducted with regard to Chinese or any other less commonly taught languages (LCTLs) at U.S. postsecondary institutions. The growth of Chinese programs in the U.S. makes it urgent to investigate the current Chinese placement procedures.

2. Literature Review

2.1 F/WL Placement Procedures at U.S. Postsecondary Institutions

The history of F/WL placement procedures at the U.S. college level parallels the development and evolving of language testing (Spolsky 2000; Latoja 2001). From the early 1900s to the present, the majority of placement procedures has employed standardized tests as a placement tool, even though it has been criticized in recent years for its decontextualization, grammar-centered, reading and reception-orientation. To date no study on any placement procedures of LCTLs in any educational setting in the United States has been conducted. Twelve studies on placement procedures in different contexts (Van Arsdal, Sedlacek and Farver 1970; Hilenman 1983; Weshe 1993; Wall, Clapham, and Alderson 1994; Bernhardt et al. 2004; Wheritt and Cleary 1990; Fairclough 2006; Shakoor 2006; Green 2011; Li et al. 2003; Chen and Deng 2005) have been conducted. Strictly speaking, none of any existing studies can be applied to Chinese placement procedures at U.S. postsecondary institutions considering the discrepancies of participants, contexts, target language(s) and research foci.

In terms of the U.S. postsecondary contexts, six out of the twelve studies discussed placement procedures (Bloom and Allison 1949; Van Arsdale et al. 1970; Heileman 1983; Wherritt and Cleary 1990; Berhardt et al. 2004; Fairclough 2006) on placement procedures focus either on general guidelines for placement at the college level or on CTLs. Nevertheless, half of these studies placed students according to reading comprehension: paragraph reading with multiple choice, and/or cloze for vocabulary and tense (Van Arsdale et al. 1970; Heileman 1983; Weshe 1993; Berhardt et al. 2004; Fairclough 2006; Green 2011), while only Fairclough (2006) suggested adding a writing session of formal style in the new computerized test to improve traditional Spanish pen-and-paper placement test at University of Houston. Heileman (1983) argued that cloze tests worked better in French placement test for advanced levels at Northwestern University than lower levels. Studies on larger programs that use written tests of different items mainly on reading for placement illustrated the consideration of practicality over accuracy (Spolsky 2000). Only Li et al. (2003)'s study focused on oral skills in a CSL context. Just two studies (Bloom and Allison 1949; Chen and Deng 2005) as scholarly work provided overall suggestions and guidelines. Among these studies, Fairclough (2006) distinguished heritage students in the two tracks provided by the Spanish program at University of Houston.

It is natural and convenient for teachers and students to think that placement procedures serve for students' smooth transition from one program to another and that it has to be in accordance with a program curriculum. However, it is difficult to compare across studies, programs, and target languages among proficiency levels that are simplistically labeled by these programs. These studies have limited generalizability to Chinese placement procedures for the differences between target languages and student heterogeneity. Therefore, no studies on CTLs can shed light on Chinese placement procedures at U.S. postsecondary institutions.

2.2 Placement Guidelines

Test developers create a placement test in a language proficiency theory orientation or in the learning objectives of the curriculum orientation (Green and

Weir 2004; Brown 2005; Green 2011). Many scholars provided key features of high quality tests: reliability, construct validity, authenticity, interactiveness, positive impact, and practicality (Messick 1989; Bachman 1990; Bachman and Palmer 1996; Bernhardt et al. 2004). A placement test, as one of the commonly used language tests, should contain not only these features but also predictive validity – predicting students’ proficiency level and placing students accurately in a sequence of courses for optimal learning at an institution. An ideal placement test should align with curriculum so that a student feels that the course in which s/he is placed is challenging but not overwhelming. Scholars’ suggested guidelines for creating an appropriate placement test include the following characteristics: (1) heterogeneity of student body while considering individualization, (2) emphasis on demonstrated competence, (3) well-defined standards of achievement, (4) minimal level of achievement, (5) sequential arrangement of the academic program, (6) clarity of educational objectives, (7) special opportunity for learning, and (8) localization (Bloom and Allison 1949:211-215; Heilenman 1983:121; Shohamy 1998:258; Bernhardt et al. 2004:359; O’Sullivan 2011; Kane 2012:43-45).

These guidelines lead present test makers for developing tests as one of the placement procedures. Bloom and Allison (1949) noticed the diversity among students. This echoes the attention of American Educational Research Association (AERA), American Psychological Association (APA), and National Council on Measurement in Education (NCME) to fairness as one of the major standards (AERA, APA and NCME 2014). Li, Wen and Xie (2014) indicated that the increasing diversity among students of Chinese at the U.S. college-level well reflected the overall student population in the United States. That said, in order to maintain fairness of any tests, schools need to fulfill certain individualization to meet students’ needs.

Although Kane (2012:45) specified that the cut scores should be a letter grade B or above of the placed equivalent course in an achievement placement test, whether Chinese programs followed this for placement test decisions remain to be investigated. The sequential arrangement of the academic program and its educational objectives are relevant to the program’s localization because the

contexts of each program are different. O’Sullivan (2011) referred to localization as “those learner-focused factors that can impact on linguistic performance (p. 7).” Given the increasing diversity of student body of Chinese at U.S. postsecondary institutions, any assessment should consider the backgrounds and needs of individual students. Rather, considering practicality, efficiency, and feasibility, the majority of existing placement procedures tend to be paper-and-pencil testing or computer-based testing (Spolsky 2000; Bernhardt et al. 2004:359). As a consequence, a quite different set of skills is tested in these assessments. Test takers do not necessarily write, speak, or listen to demonstrate their proficiency in these tests. Therefore, as the washback effect of a test, many courses alter learning objectives and instruction to prepare students for tests. This is particularly prevailing in programs with larger enrollments (Li et al. 2014).

2.3 Status Quo of Chinese Placement Procedures at U.S. Postsecondary Institutions

2.3.1 Advanced Placement

Chen (2011) indicated that the Advanced Placement (AP) Chinese courses started in 2006 and the first AP Chinese exam in spring 2007. Different from the AP CTLs – French, German, and Spanish – equivalent to the third year courses in college, and the AP Italian, that of a fourth-semester at college, the level of AP Chinese and Japanese courses is equivalent to those for the second semester of the second year in college (250 hours of language lessons). Cultural knowledge is integrated into the instruction of listening, speaking, reading and writing in the AP courses. Most of the AP Chinese Exam takers are heritage learners; therefore, test takers who score 5 out of 5 in the AP Chinese are the majority (85.5% in 2008, and 81.5% in 2009 respectively). The overall grades in 2007-2010, according to Chen, were much higher compared with those of other AP world language exams. However, in terms of student’s proceeding to advanced courses at college, it shows that the perfect score in the AP Chinese test may not adequately project students’ proficiency levels, given that the AP Chinese exam does not aim to evaluate proficiency levels above 250 Chinese contact hours. Students who take the AP Chinese exam and would like to continue taking

Chinese courses at college encounter some issues: the amount of 250 language hours – or seat-time equivalency – does not precisely reflect certain proficiency levels; target proficiency levels vary course to course, program to program, even among different teachers in the same program. The impacts of the AP Chinese exam on Chinese programs at U.S. postsecondary institutions include many: more students start to take Chinese courses at different levels; the AP Chinese exam also promotes Chinese courses in subject areas at higher proficiency levels; the washback effects of AP Chinese course also influence teaching and encourage more integration of the study of culture into a language course.

2.3.2 Chinese Placement Procedures and Expected Exit Proficiency Level

Li et al. (2014:32-34) conducted the largest-scale survey of college-level Chinese language programs in North America and found out that among the 167 program directors who answered this question (out of the total surveyed 216 program directors), the majority of the programs (about 70%) placed students into appropriate courses by some kind of tests. Yet, 31% (52 out of 167) did not require students to take any placement procedures and their students were free to enroll in any courses they wished. While the largest group (36.5%; 61 out of 167) of current Chinese placement tests in the study used a paper-and-pencil test, and certain interviews other than the Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) by American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) (25.1%; 42 out of 167) was also common. Online tests also made up a significant portion (19%; 32 out of 167). An online test was typical for larger programs that offer at least two years of Chinese language courses for non-heritage students because of its efficiency in handling larger volumes. However, Li et al.'s study did not further ask about any specific questions on placing heritage speakers, curriculum, or handwriting, nor did they investigate details with regard to placement procedures other than OPI-based assessments.

As such, the research question guiding this study is: How do the U.S. four-year postsecondary institutions that offer Chinese courses place non-beginner students of Chinese?

3. Methodology

This sequential explanatory mixed-methods study used non-experimental research design to collect data regarding the current Chinese placement procedures at a sample of U.S. four-year postsecondary institutions and selected Chinese program directors/coordinators from these institutions. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected from the selected institutions offering Chinese courses and Chinese program directors/coordinators via (a) placement procedure information on the program websites ($n1 = 226$); (b) online survey of program directors' perceptions ($n2 = 27$); and (c) follow-up individual semi-structured interviews with program directors/coordinators ($n3 = 20$) (Creswell 2003). As such, the data collection and analysis took place in three phases: Phase 1 involved a single-stage, theoretical sampling procedure for website placement information and placement test item collection at U.S. four-year postsecondary institutions offering Chinese courses; Phase 2 involved an online survey for all the program directors/coordinators from the institutions in Phase 1; and Phase 3 involved a purposeful sample of semi-structured follow-up interviews with twenty Chinese program directors/coordinators from the online survey in Phase 2. The descriptive statistics including frequency distribution were reported for Phase 1 and Phase 2 data analysis.

3.1 Data Collection

3.1.1 Participants

The target population for this study was U.S. four-year postsecondary institutions that offer Chinese courses. The sample selection of the websites at U.S. four-year postsecondary institutions based on the population in Goldberg et al. (2015)'s survey was 26% (226 out of 867)¹. In Phases 1, 2, and 3, these institutions needed to meet the following requirements: (1) a not-for-profit U.S. four-year postsecondary institution that offers a sequence of Mandarin Chinese language courses and relevant courses that count towards degree requirement; and (2) having certain procedures or information regarding placing students who

¹ The enrollment number and program number may change year by year. The current study does not predict the number of Chinese programs in U.S. higher education.

intend to take Chinese courses at the institutions.

In Phase 2, an online survey was sent out to the participants who had these qualifications as follows: (1) the website information regarding Chinese placement procedures at his/her institution is collected in Phase 1; and (2) the person(s) in charge of placement procedures at his/her institution in Phase 1, usually a program director/coordinator.

In Phase 3, based on the survey result in Phase 2, the participants in the follow-up interviews needed to fulfill the following criteria: (1) complete the online survey in Phase 2; and (2) serve as directors/coordinators who have completed the online questionnaire and agree or volunteer to participate in the follow-up interviews and facilitate the data collection involved by potentially sharing placement test items.

3.1.2 Instruments

3.1.2.1 Phase 1

The target population for this study was U.S. four-year postsecondary institutions that offer Chinese courses. The sample selection of the websites at U.S. four-year postsecondary institutions based on the population in Goldberg et al. (2015)'s survey was 26% (226 out of 867). Although there was no fixed number for a sufficiently large sample for any given study, a rule of thumb was a large one can reduce sampling error (Fowler 2002). After a few rounds of website data collection using different search engines and professional networks for Phase 1, I found 226 institutions. These 226 institutions included private, public institutions in different regions with diverse program resources and concentrations. All the 226 institutions with Chinese programs had their own websites with different degree of information regarding placement procedures found at the institutional websites.

3.1.2.2 Phase 2

In order to confirm the website information and identify potential candidates for the follow-up interviews in Phase 3, I developed a short online survey with multiple choice questions and short open-ended questions, and sent the survey link to those people in charge of Chinese placement procedures at those

institutions in Phase 1. The survey questions were designed for the person in charge of Chinese placement procedures at his/her institution to confirm or refute the website information in Phase 1 considering that a program might alter and/or use more placement procedures than described on the website. In addition, the survey also sought out volunteer participants to participate in the follow-up interviews in Phase 3. I invited two experienced Chinese teachers at U.S. college level for expert validation and revised the survey accordingly. The survey result increased validity of Phase 1 data.

3.1.2.3 Phase 3

Using the interview protocol increased the comprehensiveness of the data and also provided an appropriate structure to make the best use of the time allotted for each interview (Patton 2002). Following Creswell's (2007, 2009:181-183) suggestions on interview protocol components, I structured an interview protocol based on the proposed research questions and sub questions. In order to increase content validity, I invited four experts for feedback for expert validation, all of whom are experienced Chinese teachers at different programs at U.S. college level, and three of them experienced in program coordination. Revisions were made according to the expert feedback.

Based on the initial data collected and the analysis in Phase 1 and Phase 2 as an overview of current Chinese placement procedures, follow-up interviews in Phase 3 helped me gain a holistic understanding of the typical placement procedures that institutions with certain characteristics choose to use. I asked the interviewees to recommend other potential program directors/coordinators who might agree to participate in the follow-up interviews as chain or snowball sampling (Miles and Huberman 1994; Patton 2002; cited in Creswell 2007). A snowball sampling approach aimed to locate key informants for information-rich cases. The semi-structured interview approach ensured consistency in the data collection from each participant. Following the interview protocol consistently contributed to the reliability and validity of the data. The interview took place in person, or via phone or online synchronous software such as Google chat and Skype.

3.2 Data Handling and Analysis

3.2.1 Phase 1

The sampled data was stored electronically and analyzed for descriptive statistics, including frequency distribution and percentage of each placement procedure used was reported (Creswell 1994; Fink 1995). The following variables were collected from the websites: (1) method(s); (2) test item category; (3) policy regarding standardized tests: Chinese AP and International Baccalaureate® (IB); (4) institution locational region; and (5) public/private institution. Rather than treating unavailable or missing data by excluding them, I intended to include those institutions whose websites provide no or little information regarding placement because it showed the extent of needs and attention to placement that these institutions experienced.

3.2.2 Phase 2

The data collected in Phase 2 confirmed the following data in descriptive statistics in Phase 1 considering the short length of an online survey. These variables were clarified in Phase 2, including: (1) aspects of tested language skills; (2) placement length of time; (3) standards that placement procedures follow; (4) different tracks of placement procedures for students with varied language aspects or skills; (5) availability of background questionnaire, and (6) willingness to participate in the individual follow-up interview.

3.2.3 Phase 3

The audio-recorded interview data were transcribed verbatim. The interviews were transcribed as soon as the interview was conducted. The coding process was done using color coding and copying and pasting data in order to create categories and allow themes to emerge. A translation from Chinese to English for key strategies, causal conditions, consequences, and contextual and intervening conditions for the core phenomenon (placement) was available for thematic coding and analysis (Birks and Mills 2011). The 20 follow-up semi-structured individual interviews with program coordinators were recorded, transcribed, translated, and back-translated according to the methodology described.

4. Findings

4.1 Sample Selection and Online Survey Response Rate

The target population of this study is the U.S. four-year postsecondary institutions offering Chinese language courses. No records indicate the exact population of the postsecondary institutions offering Chinese language courses in the United States; the only two studies found regarding the number of Chinese programs at postsecondary institutions are Goldsburg et al. (2015)'s MLA survey and Li et al. (2014)'s survey. Li et al.'s study on behalf of Chinese Language Teachers' Association (CLTA) investigated placement procedures in U.S. and Canadian universities. The researchers collected the 167 responses from 216 program directors surveyed. In Goldsburg et al. (2015)'s survey, among the U.S. four-year postsecondary institutions who responded ($n = 2,662$), 0.03% (93 out of 2,662) institutions offered a Chinese major degree, and 25.88% (689 out of 2,662) offered Chinese language courses. The sample size of website data in this study represented 26% (226 out of 867) of the population of U.S. institutions that offer Chinese courses, based on Goldberg et al. (2015)'s MLA survey. The response rate for anonymous online survey in Phase 2 was 12% (27 out of 226).

4.2 Demographics Characteristics

Website information and individual interviews contained regions and institutional status, whereas the online survey sent to the 226 institutions individually was collected anonymously. Among the investigated 226 institutions, public institutions were 103 (45%), and private ones, 123 (55%). Regarding the states, the top three states with most postsecondary institutions offering Chinese courses in the present study were New York (27; 12%), California (21; 9%), and Massachusetts (17; 7.5%), and the states with no institutions offering Chinese courses were South Dakota and Montana.

4.3 Results

According to the website data ($n1 = 226$), certain institutions applied more than one procedure to place non-beginner students of Chinese. Among these procedures shown in the websites, the largest was a written test only (23%; 56 out of 226), and both written and oral tests took up the third largest portion (20%; 49

out of 226). However, the largest proportion of websites did not have available information regarding placement procedures (42%; 96 out of 226).

Because these 96 institutions did not indicate Chinese placement procedures, I analyzed the available website data only. Taking out the portion of non-available information (98 out of 226), Figure 1 indicates the portion of frequency distribution for each placement procedure:

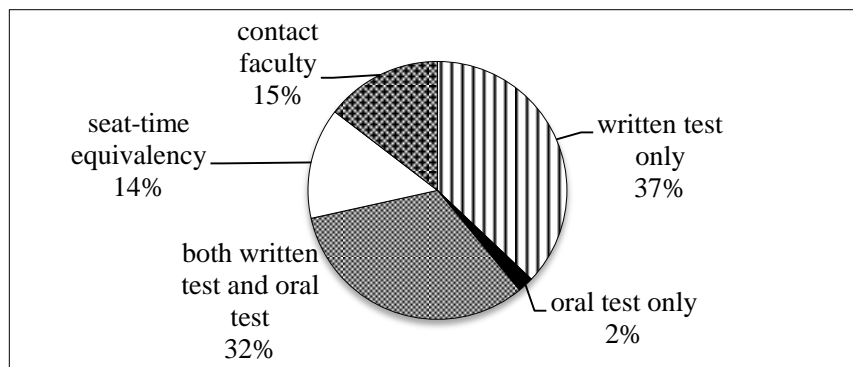


Figure 1: Chinese Placement Procedures on Institutional Websites Excluding Unavailable Data ($nI^a = 130$)

Among the available website data ($nI^a = 130$), the single most frequently used placement procedure was a written test only (37%). When a student indicated an intention to take a placement procedure, s/he contacted faculty in the Chinese program for individual assessment that might involve an oral interview and certain forms of written evaluation. Because contacting faculty entailed both written test and oral test, I combined the two categories of contacting faculty and both written test and oral test for analysis. Other than these procedures, certain institutions also asked non-beginner students of Chinese to complete a background questionnaire that could be a part of the written test or an individual section. The following analysis discusses these major categories: (1) both written test and oral test and contact faculty; (2) a written test and its content; (3) standardized tests including AP and IB; (4) seat-time equivalency; and (5) items and their functions in the background questionnaire.

4.3.1 Both Written Test and Oral Test and Contact Faculty

In Figure 1, the portion of combining both written test and oral test (32%) and contacting faculty (15%) took the largest proportion (47%) of the available website data ($nI^a = 130$). In the online survey, 74% (20 out of 27) of institutions conducted a written test and other procedures for placement purposes, while only 26% (7 out of 27) reported using only a written placement test.

4.3.2 Written Test Only

All the three sets of data indicated use of written tests. One interviewee indicated that they used final examinations of each level, while two other interviewees used modified final examinations for the written tests. Only two interviewees who were seasoned program directors indicated that they had different sets of written tests for rotation. Their abundant experiences may explain why they had more available written tests for rotation.

As shown in Figure 1, written test only itself took the largest portion (37%, 56 out of 130) in the available website data. From the collected written test items, most were computer-based and reading-focused, while certain online standardized tests were also used such as the Regents Exams developed by New York State, Avant by University of Oregon, Web-based Computer Adaptive Placement Exam (WebCAPE) and Foreign Language Achievement Testing (FLAT) by Brigham Young University (BYU). All these online, written, and computerized tests used multiple-choice formats for grading efficiency. The allowed time to complete these written tests ranged from 15 minutes to no limit. The result of the online survey indicated that 63% (17 out of 27) of respondents answered that they did not use a timed exam; those with time limits ranged between 30-120 minutes. One respondent specified his/her exam as the Test of Chinese as a Foreign Language (TOCFL, or Test of Proficiency-huayu) developed in Taiwan that included separate sections for reading and listening comprehension, and each section lasted 40 minutes. That particular institution used this in addition to a 100-150-character essay for placing second- and third-year students. Another respondent provided additional information indicating that his/her placement procedures involved a 30-minute OPI and a

90-minute section for reading and listening comprehension. Three interviewees expressed their experiences in using written tests and decisions to switch and/or modify them accordingly. The following sections discuss the content of written tests.

4.3.2.1 Content of Written Test: Frequency Distribution

In terms of frequency distribution indicated from the institutional websites regarding written placement tests (see Figure 2), different test item categories included (1) reading comprehension, (2) listening comprehension, (3) grammar, (4) writing (an essay) through typing, (5) standardized tests, (6) recording a speaking section (not interview), (7) vocabulary, (8) handwriting composition, (9) translation, and (10) dictation. The top three most frequently used categories were (1) reading comprehension, (2) listening comprehension, and (3) grammar.

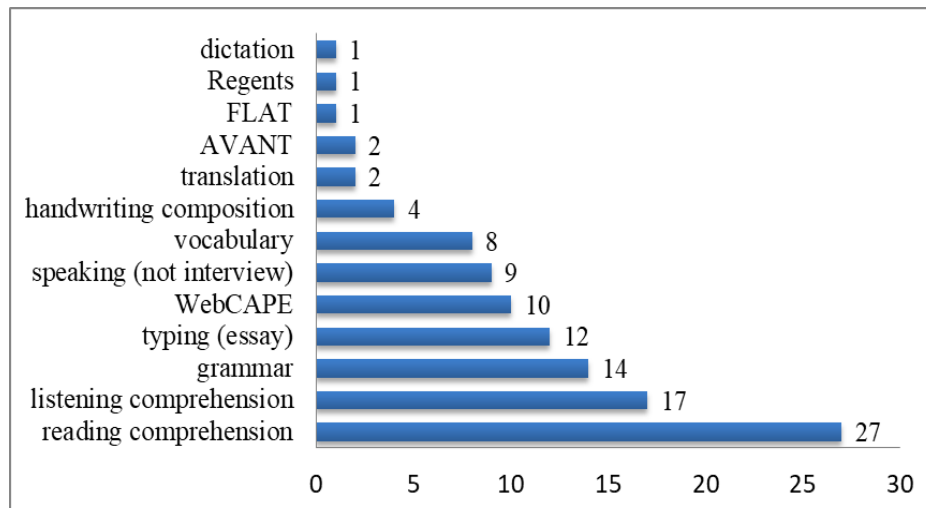


Figure 2: Frequency Distribution of Item Categories in a Written Test for Chinese Placement from Institutional Websites

Only less than 2% (4 out of 226) of institutions from the website data specified a handwriting section in the written test. In addition, only one out of the 226 institutions indicated a dictation section as a part of writing test on its website. One interviewee had students do dictation on vocabulary items, and 25% (5 out of 20) of interviewed programs had a portion of essay writing by hand. The

majority of the online survey respondents (59.2%, 16 out of 27) indicated that their written tests involved a handwriting section, whereas 14.8% (4 out of 27) involved typing for the writing section. Nearly 4% (1 out of 27) had both handwriting and typing sections for a written test, whereas 22.2% (6 out of 27) had neither typing nor handwriting for writing (see Table 1).

Table 1: The Aspects of Language Skills Placement Procedures Involved from the Online Survey ($n = 27$)

Aspect of Language Skills	Percentage	<i>n</i>
Reading	92.6%	25
Listening	88.9%	24
Speaking	81.5%	22
Writing by Hand	63.0%	17
Writing through Typing	18.5%	5
Other	7.4%	2
Total	100%	27

In addition, one respondent answered, “We will have additional oral interviews and on-the-site writing if the placement result does not match students’ actual proficiency.” The other placement procedure was “translation.”

4.3.2.2 Standardized Tests

Among the commonly-used standardized tests, four were identified other than AP and IB: (1) WebCAPE, and (2) FLAT both developed by BYU, (3) Avant, originally developed by University of Oregon, and (4) Standards-based Measurement of Proficiency Four Skills (STAMPTM4S; another set of Avant tests), originally developed by the Center for Applied Second Language Studies at University of Oregon. Most test items of all these four standardized tests use multiple-choice for grading efficiency. A summary comparison between these standardized tests found on their websites is illustrated as Table 2.

Table 2: Comparisons between the Four Chinese Standardized Tests for Placement Purposes

Test Type	WebCAPE ¹	FLAT ²	Avant ³	STAMPTM4S ⁴
Reading	Grammar, vocabulary	Grammar	Passages	Passages
Writing (via typing)	No	No	No	Yes
Speaking/Recording	No	No	Yes	Yes
Listening	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Questionnaire	No	No	Yes	No
ACTFL Standards-based	No	No	No	Novice low to Advanced low
Note	First 3-6 semesters (to set up the program's own calibration)	Pass/fail (achievement test for the first 3 semesters at college level)	Self-assessment for questionnaire	

Note: ¹ <http://www.perpetualworks.com/languages/chinese/>

² <http://flats.byu.edu/>

³ <https://avantassessment.com/about>

⁴ <https://avantassessment.com/stamp4s>

All the four standardized tests are originally developed by major language testing research institutions such as BYU and University of Hawaii and further computerized and commercialized by language testing companies for wider use among other institutions. WebCAPE was created as the Computer-Adaptive Test for Reading Chinese (CATRC) by BYU's Chinese Flagship Center and Humanities Technology and Research Support Center, and University of Hawaii through the grant of U.S. Department of Education. Two Avant test sets were developed by University of Oregon, and FLAT was created and own by BYU. As Table 2 illustrates, all the four tests include reading sections and only the latest developed STAMPTM4S includes a section of writing through typing while both Avant and STAMPTM4S include recording oral responses for speaking. Different

from the other three tests, FLAT is an achievement test assessing the first three semesters at a collegial level. STAMPTM4S is the only test aligned with the ACTFL proficiency scale, though WebCAPE states to work on matching the test with it by using item response theory.

WebCAPE is available for Spanish, French, German, Russian, English as a second language (ESL), Chinese, and Italian. However, Chinese is their only LCTL test. Chinese WebCAPE includes only reading, as with other languages that WebCAPE provides.

4.3.2.3 AP and IB

The AP Chinese test is aligned with the ACTFL standards, focusing on four language skills: reading, speaking, listening, and writing through typing (The College Board 2015, 2019). Both AP and IB tests claim to evaluate students' language competence holistically and integrate the curriculum and tests with different tasks of communicative modes—interpersonal, interpretative, and presentational. The website data indicate that 57.5% (130 out of 226) accept the AP Chinese exam and 27.8% (63 out of 226) recognize the IB Chinese exam.

Seven out of twenty interviewees expressed that they had no students or were unaware of these standardized tests high school graduates commonly take with the intention of transferring credits. As one interviewee pointed out, this revealed the disconnected pipeline between K-12 Chinese language education, AP Chinese curriculum, and higher education.

4.3.2.4 Evaluated Aspects of Language Skills

All the three sets of data showed that each institution varied in assessing of listening, speaking, reading, writing through typing, and handwriting, such as dictation or essay writing. Among these aspects of language skills, writing (both by hand and through typing) was the least valued and tested because four out of the twenty interviewed program coordinators did not think this was the most useful and practical aspect of students' proficiency. In addition, two interviewees also mentioned that many students did not perform well because of little review and retention when taking a placement test. For test instruction, three interviewees expressed that students might be confused and did not follow the

instructions, and making objective evaluations was not easy. For school policy at certain institutions, tests of writing skills was not required. For efficiency, it was the most time-consuming to evaluate (for test takers and graders), as two interviewees indicated.

Many interviewees (7 out of 20) addressed their concerns about writing skills through handwriting. Therefore, it is necessary to investigate writing competence in Chinese. Writing in Chinese is unique in any F/WL placement procedure due to the different nature between Chinese writing system and those of CLTs. In addition, Huang and Liao (1981) highlighted two differences between Chinese script and alphabetic languages. The first difference is that the Chinese script, unlike the alphabetic writing systems, does not have an obvious sound-script correspondence. The complexity of graphic configuration of Chinese characters makes it difficult for students of Chinese as a F/WL. Strokes compose a radical, the basic meaning component in a Chinese character. The second difference is that the phonetic radicals do not always carry the identical pronunciation of the characters in modern Chinese. Yin and Butterworth (1992) conclude that only 36% of all the phonetic radicals still reliably represent the pronunciation of the character in modern Chinese. As such, Ke, Wen and Kottenbeutel (2001) conducted a survey on U.S. college students of Chinese and suggested that character learning is the most challenging aspect of Chinese for students. Chin (1973) conducted a study on whether it was necessary to require writing in learning Chinese characters with two groups of beginning-level college students of Chinese in an intensive Chinese class and concluded that those students required to write characters perform better both in character recognition and production compared with those not required to write characters, even the highly-motivated ones. Shen (2004) suggests that elaborate encoding, which involves deeper processing, is superior to pure rote memorization – the shallow processing – in learning Chinese characters. The instructor should provide knowledge, such as etymology, phonology, orthography, and semantics, and other elaborations (context-based, visual, acoustical, oral, tactile, motor, and imagery modalities) to facilitate students' deeper processing encoding strategies. Learning and retaining characters requires more cognitive effort and strategies than merely

typing Chinese characters phonetically. Therefore, any computerized tests with typing sections for assessing writing do not evaluate producing characters by memorization as effectively as handwriting.

Typing Chinese characters in most phonetic input methods does not demonstrate the ability to memorize characters by handwriting, due to the logographic nature of Chinese language. Dictation can assess students' ability to reproduce characters by memorization without any computerized aid. However, the reading-focused written placement procedures ignore the increasing student heterogeneity and therefore cannot assess accurately students with unbalanced skills, especially those who have different levels of reading and writing skills than oral conversational skills. In the written tests, most institutions use multiple-choice test items for grading efficiency, and they all evaluate reception-oriented skills that focus mainly on grammatical competence only, rather than all four components of communicative competence (Canale and Swain 1980; Canale 1983). Another criticism of these test items, due to the nature of multiple-choice questions in a limited timeframe, is de-contextualization (Burdman 2015). However, a typing essay section that assesses students' writing skills is sometimes included to evaluate other areas of students' communicative competence, including discourse competence and sociolinguistic competence (Canale and Swain 1980; Canale 1983).

4.3.2.5 Background Questionnaire

Background questionnaires were commonly used by the investigated institutions to better understand students' Chinese proficiency level. Certain institutions incorporated a background questionnaire as a part of the written test or during the oral interview and therefore did not specify it. The majority of the online survey respondents (66.7%, 18 out of 27) answered that their placement procedure contained a questionnaire, whereas 33.3% (9 out of 27) did not. The items found in the questionnaire included: (1) purpose of taking Chinese class(es), (2) experiences in learning other languages, (3) textbooks used, (4) number of Chinese character learned, (5) linguistic background, (6) Chinese language modalities, (7) Chinese computer input method preferences, (8) character

preference: simplified characters or traditional characters, (9) standardized tests taken, (10) experiences of Chinese language studies, and (11) expected class(es) to be placed in.

4.3.3 Seat-time Equivalency

From the institutional website information and interview data, seat-time equivalency represented a smaller portion (13.7%; 31 out of 226) among the placement procedures. Most programs equated one year of high school language instruction as one semester at a collegial level; however, seat time equivalency did not evaluate any aspects of communicative competence (Canale and Swain 1980; Canale 1983) and oversimplified different curricula in terms of intensity, contact hours, heterogeneity of student body and courses, and students' experiences of studying abroad. Two interviewees whose programs used seat-time equivalency as one of the placement criteria also expressed that they would evaluate students with individual interviews for the final placement recommendation.

5. Conclusion and Limitations

Any language placement procedure aimed to evaluate a student's proficiency, or communicative competence (Canale and Swain 1980; Canale 1983) in a target language and to assign or recommend the best-fit level of course(s) in the program curriculum is for the student to continue learning the language. In the lens of pragmatism, this study aims to identify the issues. The findings of this study confirm Li et al. (2014)'s survey results that most Chinese programs at U.S. postsecondary institutions placed students with written tests (37%, 56 out of 130 available websites), with only a few programs that used oral interviews (2%, 3 out of 130 using oral tests; 15%, 22 out of 130 using contacting faculty for certain oral interviews). This study also discusses the standardized tests (AP and IB) that Li et al. (2014)'s study did not cover. In the meantime, the findings also elaborate the contents of a written test and the effectiveness of each placement procedure in light of evaluating students' communicative competence (Canale and Swain 1980; Canale 1983) in Chinese.

5.1 Only Multiple Measures Can Evaluate Holistically Students' Communicative Competence

The most commonly used procedure, a written test with multiple choice questions for grading efficiency evaluates only grammatical competence, mostly in reading. It is similar to standardized tests (e.g., AP and IB) that evaluate other language skills, such as speaking, listening, and writing through typing, separately with limited integration. No authentic or simulated interaction in these tests evaluates discourse, strategic, and sociolinguistic competences. An oral test can assess all four sub-competencies of oral communicative competence holistically because students needed to comprehend the questions during an oral test or interview and respond appropriately in the target language. This involves both linguistic reception and production and using strategic competence to gather information or instruction, to exchange ideas, to function, and to achieve given tasks in a socio-linguistically appropriate manner. Students also needed to apply discourse competence to understand as well as to adhere to the coherence of a topic so that they can maintain the conversation during an oral interview. A combination of a written test and an oral interview with a faculty member can better evaluate all sub-competences consisting of communicative competence in all aspects of Chinese language skills (Canale and Swain 1980; Canale 1983; see Table 1). In addition, a background questionnaire and seat-time equivalency can provide additional information for the program to gain an understanding of a student's learning experiences, motivation, educational goals, and linguistic background apart from his/her language proficiency. The data indicate that many programs apply more than just one procedure for placement purposes.

5.2 Potential Issues within the Tests and within the Institutions Exist When Postsecondary Institutions Use Standardized Tests for Placement Purposes

Within the tests, two issues need to be addressed: the highest score as baseline, and writing competence through typing Chinese characters. The original design of AP Chinese tests signifies test takers' performance ranging from 1 to 5. The highest score serves as a baseline above a certain proficiency level:

Intermediate-mid for LCTLs or Advanced-low level for CTLs, according to the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines. Therefore, the AP test cannot capture performances above the ACTFL Intermediate-mid for LCTLs or Advanced-low for CTLs. In the case of the AP Chinese language and literature test and courses, students can reach approximately 250 college-level contact hours of classroom instruction or the 4th semester at a college level (The College Board 2015:4, 2019:7).

In addition, both AP and IB exams assess students' writing competence in the target language through typing. Typing in Chinese does not assess a test taker's ability to form the characters correctly. This can also result in a wash back effect. Although AP curriculum requires students to be able to handwrite characters and type for writing, much Chinese teaching in high schools focus on typing only, without teaching and assessing students' handwriting of Chinese characters. Those students with little preparation for memorizing characters by handwriting them might be able to score high on the Chinese AP exams, but they might encounter difficulties being placed to a desired level of a Chinese course due to the significantly less advanced skills of memorizing characters by handwriting.

Within U.S. postsecondary institutions, many have only one policy for all the AP or IB language exam results, assuming a top score on the AP or IB exam is equivalent to the Advanced-low ACTFL proficiency level. However, one size does not fit all. In addition, IB language exams, including Chinese, do not provide a specific rating scale for proficiency to the public as the AP Chinese exam does. Most AP and IB exam takers are native English speakers (The College Board 2015), who typically require significantly more study hours to reach certain levels in Category IV languages, including LCTLs such as Chinese. In fact, study time can be three or four the amount as much as Category I languages – mostly CTLs (Malone, Rifkin, Christian and Johnson 2003). In a similar vein, issues arise when an institution uses the same standards to assess students' F/WL proficiency levels based on the scores of these standardized tests for placement purposes without considering the differences among these language tests and the discrepancies among different F/WL curricula at the

institution.

Computerized testing services assess students' proficiency with limitations. Among the available testing services of the Chinese language, institutions using the WebCAPE developed by BYU need to be aware of the following requirements, including: (1) setting their own calibration levels; (2) establishing and publishing a policy for test re-takers at their institutions; and (3) securing financial support for the WebCAPE service. WebCAPE uses multiple-choice items to evaluate students' proficiency. It does not evaluate students' speaking or writing (typing or handwriting) production. For new or novice program directors, it may be difficult to calibrate the cutoff scores as the WebCAPE suggests if they need to start or expand the program. Without students at certain proficiency levels to take the test and set the cutoff scores, it is nearly impossible to determine a good-fit calibration for their programs. Although the institution can use online resources and/or mechanisms to set the limit of taking the same test, sufficient budgets for paying the WebCAPE service can be an issue for certain institutions that do not have enough financial support for F/WL placement.

5.3 Students' Characteristics and Backgrounds Have Become Increasingly Heterogeneous

Many interviewees expressed the challenges of using only single placement procedure regarding different student backgrounds. For those who have studied Chinese in a formal educational setting, proficiency levels may vary depending on the instruction and curriculum, such as distance instruction, Chinese (weekend) schools, Confucius Classrooms, regular Chinese language classes and the Chinese AP or IB curriculum in K-12 school settings. Experiences abroad are no longer limited to short-term language study programs. Missionaries, students who follow parental job assignments and live abroad for quite a few years, and those who used to work and mingle with native Chinese speakers are common students of Chinese as well. All these characteristics make traditional computerized tests less accurate when they only consider reading proficiency as the dominant criterion for placement purposes. An individualized assessment on both reception and production of the Chinese language helps the programs and teachers gain a

better understanding of each student's characteristics, his/her proficiency level, educational goals, and Chinese learning history.

5.4 Limitation of Study

Due to the impossibility to reach out to all the U.S. four-year postsecondary institutions that offer Chinese courses, this study included only a number of U.S. four-year postsecondary institutions that offered Chinese courses as a sample. It was not a poll for the entire population. In addition, the present study was limited to program director/coordinator's perspectives, excluding other stakeholders of placement procedures such as students who take placement assessments, teachers, organizations, or companies that design or proctor the placement, and administrators at the institutions. Further investigations from these perspectives could be developed on the basis of the present study in the future.

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摘要

本研究以量化、質化綜合研究方法探討美國四年制非營利大學非零起點中文學生中文溝通能力 (Canale and Swain 1980; Canale 1983) 的分班機制。通過隨機抽選的大學網頁資訊 (共 226 所)、中文項目分班負責人的網上問卷 (共二十七份), 以及與中文項目分班負責人的一對一訪談 (共二十人) 三組蒐集的資料得出研究結果。結果顯示五種常見的中文分班方式為: 筆試、口語面談、背景問卷填寫、標準化測試 (如 AP 與 IB) 與修課時長對應 (seat-time equivalency)。此外, 並無任何一種單一分班方式可以放諸四海適用; 唯有多重評量方式才能較全面地評估日趨多元、異質性學生的中文溝通能力。

關鍵詞: 中文 分班 高等教育機構 溝通能力 銜接性