Title of Project:
“Hard to Place”: Multilingual Immigrant-Origin Students in Community Colleges

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Project Summary:

Assessment and placement practices at community colleges play a key role in shaping the academic pathways of students (Hughes & Scott-Clayton, 2011), and determining remedial status is now a central function of community colleges due to an increase in the number of “underprepared” students (Deil-Amen, 2011). The increasing role of English remediation is occurring in tandem with a rise in the number of culturally and linguistically diverse students at community colleges (Szelenyi & Chang, 2002), where immigrants and the children of immigrants are more likely to enroll (Erisman & Looney, 2007; Teranishi, Suárez-Orozco, & Suárez-Orozco, 2011). Although all students are confronted with the potholes of the transition to college, the testing and placement process can be both particularly problematic for students with different patterns of competencies, identity formations, and educational histories who may be “hard to place” and, therefore, experience difficulties due to mismatches between placement and students’ needs and perceptions (Bunch, Endris, Panayatova, Romero, & Llosa 2011; Marshall, 2009; Nero, 2005; Salas, Portes, D’Amico & Rios-Aguilar, 2011). Given that community colleges are important sites for academic and social integration for immigrant origin youth (Szelenyi & Chang, 2002), it is imperative to understand how students respond to institutional practices that can impact their engagement and trajectories during the critical first year of attendance.

This study examined assessment and placement as a social, ideological process, and combined critical language testing, (Shohamy, 2001), theories of dynamic bilingualism, (García, 2009), and cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957) to answer three questions:

1) What are the patterns of bilingual competencies and language identity described by immigrant students in community colleges?
2) a) What are assessment and placement practices at community colleges, and how do they differ from each other?
b) How do immigrant students perceive and respond to the testing and placement practices?
3) How do the practices of assessment and placement at community colleges interact with bilingual competencies and language identity?

The methods of this study were based on the aim to describe rather than ascribe, thus, resulting in a mixed methods design that combined cluster analysis (which discerns categories in data rather than analyzing assigned categories) and a grounded theory approach to students’ narratives that described their abilities and experiences. Three campuses\(^1\) were selected: a historically Latino-serving institution (“Taino”); a diverse, urban technical institution offering both four-year and two-year degrees (“Domino”); and a suburban college that has experienced recent growth in its Latino population (“Oakmont”). Analyzed data included responses of 347 immigrant-origin current community college students (aged 18-25) to a survey and a Bilingual Confidence questionnaire, as well as a purposive sub-sample of 42 semi-structured interviews with immigrant-origin students.

**Research Question 1: How Do Students Perceive their Bilingual Abilities?**

Results of this analysis showed that overall students exhibited high levels of confidence in their abilities in both English and the home language, and that speaking their home language was important. Cluster analysis uncovered a group of confident bilingual, less confident bilinguals and English Dominant students. Both quantitative and qualitative results suggested that the ways that students perceive their abilities differed in significant ways from the institutional categories in use. Categories such as “ESL student” were not aligned with student perceptions, and perceptions were fluid and relative rather than fixed and inherent.

**Research Question 2: How Do Students Experience Assessment and Placement Practices?**

The three campuses differed widely in how they placed and interpreted tests scores, especially how they constructed a line between “ESL” and “English remedial.” These differences were predicated on local ideologies about language and in response to local student populations. Categories such as “ESL student” were locally constructed even when institutions used standardized assessments and procedures designed to assist students with proper placement. For example, students at the suburban campus Oakmont experienced more dissonance and also more prevalent racialized discourses that conflated ‘ESL’ with Hispanics. Preliminary analysis also suggested that students who attended Taino (a campus focused on identifying and supporting recent arrivals) had the lowest incidence of dissonance and perceived misplacement.

Analysis of students’ perceptions of assessment and placement revealed a number of important findings. First, students perceived assessments to be valid and unquestionable, resulting in

\(^1\) These names are pseudonyms.
“testing tautology” – the belief that tests were accurate, and that students knew tests were valid because the tests revealed their abilities. Testing tautology meant that students did not often articulate misplacement and very few reported actively advocating for another placement in spite of the fact that all of the colleges in the study had such mechanisms in place. Students had a number of explanatory narratives related to passing or failing assessments, including issues with second language acquisition, distraction during the exam, and “forgetting the material.” These narratives aligned with perceptions of their bilingual abilities. Overall, students placed blame on themselves or circumstances rather than questioning the validity of the college’s assessment and placement practices.

**Research Question 3: Dynamic Interactions between Perceptions and Practices**

This study explored the complex dynamic between perceptions related to their bilingual confidence and placement practices. During analysis the theme of dissonance arose, which led to using theories of Cognitive Dissonance (Festinger, 1957), as students must resolve the difference between their perceptions of themselves – their readiness for college, their process of learning English, their belief in the value of hard work – and their experiences with assessments and courses. Four themes related to assessment and placement dissonance were found: “becoming remedial,” “speaker identity dissonance,” “course challenge,” and “hard work doesn’t pay.” These types of dissonance were also implicated in other processes, such as “testing as ritual,” a marker of college belonging; “whirlpooling,” when students spend more than three semesters in remedial in a cycle of fueled by failing tests; and “inducement,” when students change their identity to conform to institutional norms. Reports of dissonance occurred frequently in the qualitative sample, as approximately one-third (15 of 42) of students experienced some type of dissonance, and the majority of these students fell in the Confident and Less Confident Bilingual clusters (11 out of 15).

The experience of dissonance had various effects. First, dissonance was found to incur the internalization of deficit narratives that affected the engagement and academic trajectories of students. Since rightness of placement was found to depend much on peer relationships, misplacement could also diminish a student’s ability to form supportive relationships with peers that could increase belonging and persistence. Assessment and placement practices were therefore powerful agents in forming student perceptions and feelings of belonging, of identity – they communicated, they sent messages, which students then reacted to, resisted, and / or internalized.

Findings suggest that assessment and placement experiences were not equally distributed or interpreted similarly across student populations, but differentially affected students whose language performance, identities and developmental trajectories may differ from norms. One’s linguistic background, rather than one’s immigrant-origin background, appeared to contribute to the saliency of English assessments in college trajectories, as second-generation bilingual students experienced more difficulties and dissonance compared to monolingual immigrant-origin youth.
Implications for Policy and Practice

Currently, community colleges do not collect data or use any information related to the home language, speaking ability, or immigration factors when making placement decisions and do not have any category that refers to students as bilinguals or multilinguals. Instead, decisions are made based solely on language assessment scores, which have been found to be unreliable predictors of success in English courses (Scott-Clayton, 2012). The use of a bilingual confidence questionnaire (as was developed for this study), demographic information, or including student input in placement decisions would ensure that coursework would be aligned with student needs and perceptions, thus reducing misplacement.

Assessment and placement practices were found to be particularly problematic for linguistically diverse students and produced multiple types of dissonance that could lead to disengagement. Because of “testing tautology”, community colleges should not rely on students initiating challenges of their placements and instead enact more proactive approaches to identifying misplaced students and mechanisms to change initial English courses. Additionally, counselors were not always sensitive to the needs and identities of linguistically diverse students, and were responsible for placing such students down or ascribing an ESL identification based on appearance or assumptions. Counselors with such power need additional training to appropriately handle placement decisions and cannot be seen as a solution to unreliable test scores.

This study’s findings further the argument that in light of the unreliable nature of assessments and the realities of an extremely diverse population, the binaries of “ready” and “not ready” should be replaced by with a system of supports that are gradually reduced as students progress. Assessments should focus instead on the identification of students in early stages of acquisition. Recent arrivals may take longer to pass assessments due to time it takes to acquire language, and students reported losing financial aid or facing expulsion due to multiple test failures. Such policies should not withdraw funds or frame these students as failures.

Investigating the impact of assessment and placement as gatekeeping mechanisms is crucial for understanding the academic pathways of immigrant youth and has important implications for equity and integration in globalized spaces. My future research will examine these results quantitatively and extend findings to K-12 settings and the transition between high school and higher education.
References


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