

ACTION ITEM

Department of Foreign Languages Placement Test: A PROPOSAL

Helpful Definitions:

SLA students – Second Language Acquisition learners are individuals who are studying a language for the first time; they are outsiders to the target language because it is not a part of their cultural heritage nor family history; students with minimal exposure/knowledge of the target language.

HL students – A heritage language learner is an individual who may be at one of several levels of knowledge of a target language other than English; they are insiders of the language because of their cultural heritage or family history. This learner may be at different places on the spectrum. HL language learners may:

- Have grown up immersed in the heritage language and culture but for an array of reasons may not or may minimally produce the target language. They may resort to the dominant language (English), although they identify with the culture and may understand it fluently. These individuals are known as passive bilingual;
- Be a balanced bilingual (able to understand and produce both English and the heritage language equally). These language learners are productive bilingual;
- Fall anywhere on the above bilingual spectrum.

Present situation in SLA 1

- All level one (1) classes in the Dept. of Foreign Languages (Arabic 1, Chinese 1, French 1, etc.) are designed for SLA students.
- Presently, in a level one class we have true beginners, beginning students that have not previously studied the language (i.e., Spanish) and whose family does not have a history with the language.
- There are also students who took one semester of Spanish or more in high school, and passed it.
- A pilot survey begun this semester found that 50% of our students enrolled in level 1 Spanish actually qualify as heritage learners.

Consequences to enrolled students

- True SLA learners are often intimidated by other students in the class that are more knowledgeable of the language.
- More advanced students may not enroll in the appropriate level class and do not progress as much, since they know the material, and consequently may lose interest.
- HL learners in SLA courses do not benefit from a curriculum that teaches their language as if they were outsiders. HL classes build on what the student brings to the table rather than a linear and/or traditional approach to second language acquisition.
- HL learners benefit from culturally based curriculum that is engaging to them and productive for them. HL students in SLA courses often leave feeling that their Spanish is "bad", rather than feeling pride in what they've produced all along.
- HL learners are enrolled in a class where their knowledge of the language is not maximized to the point of giving them the tools that can best contribute to their success in the future.
- Counselors need the best possible tools to help them place students in the most appropriate class for them.
- Instruction in language classes is dictated by faculty who must teach to the course outline of record which may bring little benefit to those who should be enrolled at some other level.

Proposed solution and recommendations by the Department of Foreign Languages

The faculty of the Department of Foreign Languages (DFL) recommends that the college adopt a foreign language placement test to better serve our students for the following reasons:

- As in English and Math, the establishment of a Placement Exam will facilitate the placement of students at the level in which they belong, thus providing them with skills at their respective level which could best help them;
- When qualifying, students with previous language (i.e., Spanish) experience would be placed in the correct level.
- HL students will be pointed in a separate direction which leads them to a HL test that would place them at a level that will provide them the greatest advantage educationally and best ensure their success.

The faculty of the Department of Foreign Languages (DFL) recommends that the college pilot the **Avant Placement Exam** for the following reasons:

- The Avant Placement Exam provides placement exam for every language/level taught.
- The instrument evaluates 3 of the 4 areas of concentration in the languages taught in our department: <http://www.avantassessment.com/> (These areas are reading, writing and listening comprehension.)
- The instrument is graded by individuals (hired by the publisher) who are qualified to do so.
- The exam is written in such a way that it mimics real life situations, allowing for testing individuals at different levels of the language.
- Avant will assist the college by providing documentation required by the Chancellor's office and will work with the DFL with the request for approval to use the test.

Cost

- If after piloting the Avant instrument the college should adopt its use, the cost is relatively small in comparison to the benefits of placing our students accurately. Currently, the cost is \$11.00 or less per student.
- In meeting with the Dean of Humanities and the Director of Assessment and Matriculation, the Department of Foreign Languages was instructed to not focus on cost until the department has determined that the instrument is appropriate for the college's needs.
- If the DFL chooses to adopt the instrument, the department and the division will request district funding in the same manner that other departments have been funded for use of their placement instruments.
- As with other placement instruments, students will not be charged a fee for foreign language placement testing.

Implementation

A foreign language placement exam for SLA students is necessary to provide Mt. SAC students who are enrolling in language classes the benefit of accurate placement at their respective levels of competency. This will ensure that students gain the most positive experience possible when taking a foreign language course, and provide the maximum advantage in the material being disseminated, as well as a greater possibility of success. The DFL would anticipate piloting the Avant test by fall, 2015 wherein the test would be piloted and validated to our courses. Concurrently, the DFL will be participating in a NHLRC (National Heritage Language Resource Center) grant project with UCLA that will provide a placement exam and curriculum that will further address the needs of our HL students and refine our HL offerings.