

Placement Testing in China:
A Case Study of Dalian Maple
Leaf International School

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Summary

Language learning in China is proceeding at a break-neck pace and English language schools are popping up on what would seem like every other street corner. The number of students enrolling into language programmes is on the increase, but it would appear that some schools are not equipped to effectively deal with the influx. While testing new students to determine their language skills and to place them into appropriate classes is crucial for all involved, it doesn't always happen at language schools in China. While a lack of placement testing may occur occasionally in various institutions elsewhere in the world, being placed wrongly can be draining for Chinese students as aspects of Chinese culture make it difficult, if not impossible, for erroneously placed students to achieve their highest potential.

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Chapter One

1.1 Introduction

Assessing a student's language ability is the first step in deciding where that student is to be placed to maximize their potential for learning. Having students write a placement test to assist in assessing their language skills and language needs is a universal method of gauging language abilities. However, placement testing with newly enrolled students does not always occur. The purpose of this paper is to introduce a Placement Assessment created purposely for Chinese students in mainland China, statistically analyse the Placement Assessment and results for reliability and examine the reactions of teachers and students to the Placement Assessment. Following this, the paper intends to scrutinise the placement procedures in place in an ESL Department at an International School in China and suggest why improper placement of students in China may have devastating consequences on the students involved. Finally, this paper intends to make a small number of proposals to improve the placement procedures at the International School in China.

1.2 Dalian Maple Leaf International School (DMLIS)

Dalian Maple Leaf International School (DMLIS) is a privately owned school in the city of Dalian, in the north-eastern province of Liaoning, China. It is a joint venture international school filed with the Chinese Ministry of Education, and accredited by the British Columbia (BC) Ministry of Education in Canada to teach the British Columbian high school curriculum and bestow Canadian high school diplomas. It is composed of four separate locations around the city of Dalian including Elementary, Junior and Senior High Schools and an adult Education Training Centre.

The majority of the students at both locations have had some English instruction in public school, and have come to DMLIS to increase their chances of going to an educational institution abroad. While the overall goal of the students is to study overseas, the process of achieving that goal is slightly dissimilar. The Grade 9 students at the Junior High School are in the process of improving their English so that they would be able to enter into the BC high school curriculum at the Senior High, and then, ostensibly, continue their education at an institution in North America. The students at the Education Training Centre have commenced working through the New Cambridge English Language course to prepare themselves to enter a technical

college (AIT Academy) in Singapore, with further plans of advancing to a post-secondary university in Australia for further education.

At both locations, the majority of new students arrive at the school in September, but a large number of students arrive at various times through the year and all are then placed into various levels deemed appropriate for them by the school recruitment departments or by the school administration. At the Junior High location, the challenge of student placement had been ‘solved’ by not giving the students a placement exam in September, 2003. New arrivals were placed into various levels of English classes by their English marks from previous years, their marks for non-English classes, and physically where there was room in a class. This reasoning has been somewhat justified by the argument from the administration that the students in Grade 9 in the Junior High School need to focus on preparing for the Chinese national ‘zhōng kǎo’ (中考) exam¹ that could determine the rest of the students’ Chinese educational career. As this exam is seen as paramount by the vast majority of students, parents and teachers in China, the Junior High School reasoned that less attention should be paid to English instruction.

This student placement situation at the Training Centre, at the time that this Placement Assessment was administered, was also mired in disorganization. In September, 2003, approximately 85 students were put into the same class level (Level 1 out of 4), without administering a placement test, in an effort, according to the explanation of the school’s ESL Director, “to start all of the students off on the same foot”.

“There were about 85 students that came to the Centre in September. Sixty percent of those did not pass at other Maple Leaf Schools. We knew those students’ marks. The other students had their marks from their other schools. We did not think we needed to test the students.”

Mr. Yang Jie (Director) – Education Training Centre

¹ This is the nationally standardized Chinese proficiency exam that all Chinese students must pass in order to be able to advance from primary to high school.

Students were placed into classes mainly by their marks from outside, and by the students' requests to remain with their comrades. This did not remotely respond to the English needs of the students entering into the language programme. Rather than diligently administer and evaluate results from a placement test to gain a better understanding of the students' abilities, the entire group of new students was placed into the same entry level because of preconceived notions of the level of English that the students possessed at that time. After many discussions among members of the teaching staff and administration regarding students being incapable or far too capable for a class level, the Placement Assessment was given to the students nearly one month after the students were admitted to the institution.²

² To increase the sample size for the test, the Junior High School Grade 9 students received the Placement Assessment as well.

Chapter Two – Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

While there is not a tremendous amount of material relating to controversies vis-à-vis the need for placement testing in a language programme, there were several concerns regarding this study. The construction of an institution-specific placement test for use at DMLIS was a prime consideration as well as using that placement test for verifying the efficacy of the school administration's placement of students in the two separate locations. The test's validity and reliability were not the only concerns, but also the determination of how student placement was actually done at the two locations and what, if any, cultural processes may be at play in the placement deliberations by administration officials.

The first part of the literature review will discuss the reasoning and requirements behind creating a viable placement test. The second part relates to the cultural and societal conditions that are of paramount importance in mainland China.

2.2 Placement Test

It would appear to be incontrovertible common sense that placement tests should be given to potential language learners as a prerequisite to gaining entrance to a particular language programme. While placement tests often serve a secondary function of being a method of diagnosis (Davies, A. et al 1999), seemingly all researchers agree that placement tests have the vital purpose of assessing a learner's language ability so that they may be placed into an appropriate class or group. (Alderson, J., Clapham, C., Wall, D. 1995; Bachman, L., Palmer, A. 1996; Henning, G. 1987; Hughes, A. 1989) This placement can also be varied and need not restrict a learner to one particular classroom. Depending on the language skills, a learner could be placed a higher level reading class but a lower level speaking class based on the results of a reliable test identifying specific language needs. (Alderson et al, 1995) The focal consideration is on 'appropriateness' in that language learners should find themselves in a class that is neither above nor below the level of their language abilities, but at a level that is a fitting challenge. (Brown 1994)

In that regard, as students are placed into appropriate classes, it is highly advantageous for a school and especially the instructor to have knowledge of the abilities of the students in an effort to increase their own effectiveness in the classroom. (Heaton 1988) If the effort to construct a reliable test based on the

institution's curriculum has been made by an institution, then savings in time and energy will follow (Hughes 1989) in that the institution will have tentatively identified the precise areas of the language programme where learners may encounter difficulties. (ibid) Hughes goes on to say that commercially available placement tests may not be viable for every institution, and that it is best to believe at the outset that commercial tests will not work well. While they may not work well in every instance, at DMLIS a commercially available placement test may be the lesser of two evils as no placement test is currently in use at all.

Students, after being organized by one or more grouping criteria, are generally placed into homogeneous classes based on one or more criteria. (Bachman 1990) While this is generally in the form of a placement test, other factors, such as a desire by a schools' administration to follow the cultural model of maintaining a stable social structure, (Yang and Fell-Eisenkraft, 2003) may also be a determinant when placing learners. Adhering to a placement strategy that is not based on a placement test may be particularly imprudent when considering that learners placed at an inappropriate level and pressured to attempt language that is beyond their actual language abilities could lead to the persistence utterances of errors by a learner. (Ellis 1994) These errors, once entrenched in a learner's mind, are not generally susceptible to being 'unlearned' and therefore become fossilized. (Ellis 1985)

2.3 Cultural Influences on Student Placement

Even under the supposition that a language school placement exam should be a fundamental entrance requirement, the improper placement of students into groups or classes in mainland China can result in deleterious consequences for language learners. These consequences can be a reaction to the language pressures that a learner may regularly face, but also may result from cultural influences on a Chinese language learner in an English classroom. Chinese people have long been instructed on the correct Confucian forms of society which direct citizens to repress negative or confrontational emotions or expressions and to maintain a level of moderation. (Samovar, 1998) Confucianism has been stressed in Chinese hierarchal society for thousands of years as a form of maintaining a stable community. (Yang and Fell-Eisenkraft, 2003) Coupled with the concept of an all-knowing teaching authority in the classroom, (Reid, 1995) Chinese language learners may find opposite desires emanating from Chinese society and from a foreign teacher in a communicative

classroom. They may feel pulled between maintaining a non-confrontational societal persona in the classroom, and following the instructor's instructions to attempt the language without fear of failing. These contradictions could lead to impediments in their learning processes. (Brown 1994)

Attempts at reforming the methodology of English language teaching in China are currently underway (英语课程标准, 2001) and have recently been the focus of the Educational Bureau of China adapting the instruction of English in the Chinese classroom towards a more communicative approach. The communicative approach has enjoyed mass appeal worldwide in recent decades, (Brown, J.D., 1995) however, it focuses on the concept of language as "...a form of social behaviour..." (Littlewood, 1981) and on a desire to "...stimulate learners to a high degree of communicative involvement." (ibid) In comparing Socratic and Confucian influences on discourse in the classroom, Scollon (1999) found definite differences in the classroom in the roles played by the teacher and students. This was found to be the expectations by Western instructors for interactive communication often led to a downward communicative spiral into silence by students. In a communicative class, silence is not golden.

The difference in expectation may lead to obstacles in communication in a language classroom, such as silence or shyness. This can be seen as a direct result of feeling a sense of shame. Shame has been noted as a separate emotional state for Chinese people (Jin) and not feeling shame, or saving face, is a high priority. (Samovar, 1998) Saving face has been suggested as being a continual point of concern for Asian peoples and essential for continued social discourse, even in a person's native language. (Kramsch, 1998) It has been suggested by Yang and Fell-Eisenkraft (2003) that in an effort to save face in the classroom, Chinese students may resort to classroom behaviour that would serve to eliminate the possibility of being ridiculed and thereby losing face, but as a result would produce silent students. This silence is reinforced in the students by Eastern traditions that emphasize that wisdom is developed from quiet contemplation. (Samovar, 1998)

Another cultural influence that may be placing strictures on Chinese language learners in mainland China is the concept of the 'dān wèi' or work unit. This work unit is the tightly controlled group to which almost every urban citizen in China was assigned in the 1950s (Internet 6), and had leaders who were responsible for taking care of the group members and all of their needs. (Xin 2003) With the citizens

receiving all of their health, education and work benefits from the ‘dān wèi’, they became extremely dependent on the ‘dān wèi’ and this group became more than a mere workplace for the assigned members; it became their identity. (Internet 7) Members were rarely allowed to leave their unit, and employment in the ‘dān wèi’ was essentially life-long. (ibid) This social internment outlines the necessity for the proper placement of language learners into classes in mainland China. As a group-identity of the ‘dān wèi’ may be based on the long history of political and economic institutions of China, (ibid) it remains possible that this method of maintaining control by the administration extend into the classroom. As Chinese learners identify with their classroom ‘dān wèi’, they may feel a need to contribute to the group; however, if it is not possible to contribute to the group as a result of feelings of shame due to an inability to produce language, the result may again be silence in the classroom.

Chapter Three – Procedures

3.1 Pilot Testing

In an effort to eliminate any of the major problems in the placement test before the major trial began, the placement test was put through a short pilot testing period, in order to “iron out the main problems before the major trials”. (Alderson et al 1995: 74) In this timeframe of pre-testing, copies of the placement test were given to staff members at the Dalian Maple Leaf locations and also to a class of 13 students who were only two weeks away from the completion of their studies in the Education Training Centre. The individuals involved in the pilot testing were asked to complete the questions in a semi-formal testing atmosphere with opportunities to discuss problems with the test creator at the time that they were discovered.

During the pilot testing, several points were brought up by both groups involved that were used to hone the various test items. While the instructors seemed to focus mainly on the structure and the clarity of the instructions and questions, the group of students yielded the most useful information from the viewpoint of a second language learner. Instances of answer duplication, confusing instructions, and use of colloquial English were identified. Due to their experience with second language learning and test-taking, they suggested changes to a number of questions that referred to phrases in colloquial English that future test takers probably wouldn't be familiar with, that the words being tested in the reading section be emphasised with bold type, and that the street names listed on the map in the listening section be written in both upper and lower case.³ They suggested the use of bold and underlined words in the reading section to allow the test takers to easily identify the words in the questions. They also suggested a re-evaluation of the length of time needed to complete the test (expanding it to a maximum of 90 minutes from 60).

3.2 Test administration

The Placement Assessment was conducted at two separate locations of DMLIS on consecutive days, in October, 2003. Three hundred and fifty students in total wrote the assessment with 58 students completing it at the Training Centre and 292 students completing it at the Grade 9 level at the Junior High School. In an effort

³ Interestingly, in subsequent lessons and discussions with students at Dalian Maple Leaf, it was found that Chinese students in general can be puzzled by text written entirely in capital letters.

to get a more accurate measurement of their English ability at that time, the students were not told that they would be writing a test beforehand, to limit the amount of prior study that may have occurred. Also, at the time of the test, every effort was made to alleviate any stress about the test by referring to it as an assessment or an exercise. They were placed into their own classrooms to maintain familiar surroundings, and were supervised by their own classroom teacher in an effort to reduce test anxiety.

The students at both locations were not allowed any access to dictionaries or outside assistance, but were told to do their best with completing the test questions.⁴ They were allowed a total of 90 minutes to write the test although there weren't any reports of any student needing the entire allotted time. At the outset, the students were told that they would have a minute to look at the different sections to familiarize themselves with the content and then the invigilator asked them to look at the first test page and that the test was to begin. The invigilators were expressly told to not volunteer any helpful information and to not respond to questions from the students asking for assistance with anything other than to benevolently say that they were to read the instructions on the test.⁵ As well, the students were explicitly told to not write their name on the assessment paper and were instead identified by student number to reduce the chance of marker error as a result of bias.

The invigilators were asked to play the tape for the Listening section only once pausing the recording between each of the test items. Each of the three parts of the Listening section was recorded twice on the accompanying tape so that there would not be any need to rewind the tape to search for the beginning of a required part. At the beginning of each part, the invigilators were asked to give the students a minute to read through the instructions, familiarize themselves with the content of the test item and then prepare themselves for the beginning of the listening. Each of the 15 different classes had their own tape and tape-player for the assessment and conducted the listening portion at the beginning of the Placement Assessment.

After the Listening section had been completed, the students were asked to turn to the test sections that followed and complete them to the best of their ability within the remaining time. After the test was completed, the students were also asked

⁴ It is not the nature of Chinese students to guess at test items that they don't know and they had not been given the instruction to guess if they had become stuck.

⁵ The instructions for the test were in English only.

to complete a short questionnaire.⁶ The questionnaire that accompanied the Placement Assessment contained three rating-scale type questions to gauge how they felt they had performed on the assessment and what they felt had been the easiest and conversely most difficult sections of the test. They were also asked to give their opinion about the difficulty of their current English textbook, as well as whether or not they felt that they should be working from an upper or lower level textbook. Although all of the students were instructed to complete the questionnaire after they had completed writing the assessment, approximately 9% of the students failed to express any opinions.

3.3 Test Marking

The placement tests were initially marked, over a three day period, immediately after the test was written. Then, they were placed into storage in a secure, locked area. Approximately one month later, the placement tests were retrieved from storage and again, over another three day period of time, the placement tests were remarked. The preliminary marks were not placed on the paper but were recorded on a separate sheet to eliminate any undue influence to the marker. The secondary marking included recording marks on a separate paper without reference to the first set of marks and also a transposition of the order in which the placement tests were first marked.

After the secondary marking was completed, the results were placed into Pearson's product moment correlation⁷ and it was found that the preliminary and secondary marks corresponded to a variance of 0.87. With the exception of two tests that had a miscalculation in the addition of marks that resulted in an approximate 5% variance in the raw score, there were no major differences in marking or in the calculation of the students' marks. With regards to the objective questions on the placement test, the remarking was relatively straightforward and was a verification that the "...examiners ha[d] applied the marking key or mark scheme properly and that their arithmetic is accurate." (Alderson et al 1995: 128)

⁶ See Appendix 4

⁷ See Appendix 10 for formula and explanation.

Chapter Four – Statistical and Non-Statistical Analysis

4.1 Test Results

To determine whether the placement test was working properly or not, statistical analysis of the results was undertaken to measure the traditional calculations of the facility value and the item discrimination (ibid:80). Respectively, these two calculations measure the difficulty of an item and how the results of a test item compare to the test as a whole. The facility value was obtained through a straight forward calculation of dividing the number of test-takers who gave the correct answer to a test item by the total number of test-takers to arrive at a percentile. As more test-takers arrived at the correct answer, the easier the test item would appear to have been. The item discrimination value was obtained by computing the point-biserial correlation of the test items in the objective test item sections: listening, vocabulary, grammar and reading. While Alderson et al (1995:85) suggest that the biserial correlation “...should be used if the pretest sample is likely to be of a different level of language proficiency from the final test population...” it was later declared that this correlation is now rarely used, and that the point biserial correlation be used as another means of determining how well a test discriminates. (Davies et al 1999:146)

4.2 Facility Value

Results with regards to the facility value would indicate that there is a wide range of values through the objective test sections. Considering that a higher percentile value would indicate a potentially easier test item, and a lower percentile would indicate a difficult test item, the ideal facility value should be around 50%. With the Placement Assessment, 33% of the test items scored a facility value of more than 70%, and of those, three-quarters of them were in the listening and vocabulary sections of the placement test.⁸ This would seem to indicate in a rough way that the test items in the Listening and Vocabulary sections of the placement test, unfortunately, were too easy according to the Facility Values and didn't cover a wider range of items with more difficulty.

Sixty-four percent of the listening section contained facility values of more than 70%. In Section 1.3, the average value was 89% among the five test items and

⁸ See Appendix 5 for chart details of Facility Value broken down per test item.

would strongly indicate that the exercise was far too easy to provide an accurate measure of the students' English abilities. Although the quality of the recording cannot be ruled out as a determining factor, this was most probably due to a wide variance in the number of phonemes tested in the paired items. The one item with the lowest value (72.96%) contained only one phonemic minimal pair as a difference to listen for between the two given examples.

Section 1.1 was an anomaly in that it contained two of the highest values (1.1.a – 85.35%; 1.1.c – 86.48%) and three of the lowest values (1.1.b – 20.85%; 1.1.d – 23.36%; 1.1.e – 27.89%) recorded. One of the low values (1.1.b) could be explained by the reasoning that the picture that the Chinese students were looking at as the correct choice was a pictorial example of children striking a Mexican piñata and the cultural aspect may have been unknown to them. The extremely high values in the first and third item could be explained by the fact that the words being tested (pen; cake) are very commonly used words in Chinese English class and may have been subconsciously expected by the test takers. Regardless of the reasoning behind the results for this portion of the listening section, the results of the facility value would indicate that, regrettably, this portion didn't provide any real accurate measure of the test takers abilities.

One other item that stood out as an item to be changed in future versions of this placement test is one of the verb tense items in the grammar section: (3.1.i). This item, which was to be testing the future perfect verb tense, was singled out by the pilot testing group as a very difficult item but it was retained as an experiment to determine how many of the test takers would correctly answer. Of the 350 test takers, four correctly answered the item giving it a facility value of 1.41%. Interestingly, only three of the test takers with the correct responses were in the upper third of the test scores, which is where all of the correct responses would have been expected.

With regards to the facility value results, the overall average for the test was 61.22%, while the average for the grammar and reading sections, which had less extreme variations between high and low results, was 53.67%. This would appear to indicate that, bearing in mind that exceptions found in the Listening and Vocabulary Sections would need to be improved or eliminated, the Placement Assessment functioned as anticipated.

4.3 Reliability

A concern for any test writer is the consistency of the results for the test that was written. Reliability is an essential component of a good and valid test. If a test is to be seen as a valid testing instrument, “a test must first be reliable as a measuring instrument.” (Heaton 1998: 162) If a test is given to two identical groups of candidates under the same internal and external conditions, would the test results be the same? Would students who wrote a particular test one day, get the same results (assuming that there was no change in their ability) if they were given the same test to write the following day? How reliable and consistent would the results for that given test be? These questions not only concern themselves with how a student would perform on one test from day to day but also on the internal consistency of results from within the one test. How consistent are the results for the test candidates over the scope of a test? Do the results show that the candidates are expressing the same level of ability throughout the test, or are the test results erratic and not consistent?

4.4 Item Discrimination

The Placement Assessment consisted of five separate sections, and of these – Listening, Vocabulary, Grammar, Reading and Writing – the first four sections could be considered objective test items in that essentially there were only right or wrong answers. In an effort to determine the reliability of the test, the results for the test items would need to be analyzed to determine how each of the items discriminate, or “how well it distinguishes between students at different levels of ability.” (Alderson et al 1995: 288) If a test item is working well, it would logically mean that more of the candidates with high scores taking a test would get a question right than candidates with lower scores.

To determine how accurate the Placement Assessment was, it is essential to determine the reliability. One method of determining the reliability of a test is through classic test theory and by analyzing the test results to find how each of the items discriminate, or “how well it distinguishes between students at different levels of ability.” (ibid) Within the Placement Assessment that was administered, the test-retest method was not practical due to the length of time that would have passed between writing and re-writing may have biased the results, and, as well, the inter-rater reliability check for bias did not necessarily apply as there was only one marker. In an effort to measure the reliability of the placement test and the test items in the test,

a point biserial correlation calculation (PBC)⁹ was conducted to determine how well the test items discriminated between the various test-takers.

A “point biserial correlation is used to measure item discrimination by relating (binary) item responses and total test scores...” (Davies et al 1999: 146) and by recording consistently high values with regards to item discrimination, a test can be seen as reliable. In the objective sections of the placement test, correct answers were given a score of 1 and incorrect answers were given a score of 0. These were totalled to provide whole-test means for each test taker and the standard deviation needed to do the calculation.¹⁰

The listening and vocabulary sections had the lowest percentage of values over 0.25 indicating, as was found with the facility value, that these sections were the least reliable. Section 1.1 in the listening section provided little useful information in terms of an accurate measurement of the test takers’ abilities. The results seem to be at odds in that the results for the items with the highest facility value (1.1.a – 85.35%; 1.1.c – 86.48%) had acceptable, if not high, scores for reliability. In fact, test item 1.1.a had the highest PBC result of 0.67, which could be one anomaly in the group. The other result of note was also the anomalous test item from the grammar section, 3.1.i. This item received a score of -0.03 and was the only negative result in the bank of 85 test items.

Another consideration involved with determining whether the test marks are reliable includes verifying that the examiners have been applying a marking scheme in a consistent manner and that the marks given to the students who took part in the Placement Assessment are reliable. In order to do that, the examiners need to be monitored for their own level of reliability with the way that they have assessed the answers on the test papers. With regard to this Placement Assessment, testing for inter-rater reliability became a less viable option in the marking stage in that there was one marker for all of the exams. While it would have been a preferable option to have more than one marker to assess the placement tests, several factors eliminated that. The tests needed to be marked as quickly as possible to help determine placement for students into an appropriate level and the schedules of acceptable instructors capable of fulfilling the duties of an examiner did not permit others to take part in a marking

⁹ See Appendix 6.

¹⁰ “Point-biserial correlation coefficients of 0.25 and above are considered to be acceptable...” (Davies et al 1999: 146) and this minimum coefficient was used as a cut-off for reliability.

committee or taking part in double-marking and reliability testing of themselves. As there was one examiner marking each of the placement tests, an effort to monitor the intra-rater reliability to ascertain that the examiner had given "...the same set of scripts...the same marks on two different occasions." (Alderson et al 1995: 129)

Non-statistical Analysis

4.5 Student Reaction

The candidates were asked to complete a short questionnaire immediately after they had finished the Placement Assessment in an effort to gauge their own statement about where they have been placed in the educational system of DMLIS and to give a self-evaluation on how they felt they had performed on the Placement Assessment. They were also asked which section of the assessment was the easiest for them and which section was the most difficult. These last two questions were asked in an effort to collect a non-empirical viewpoint towards the test sections and the test items within. The questions on the questionnaire were written in Chinese as well as English to provide more time to the student to spend on self-reflection rather than having them attempting to determine what the question might mean.

The results provided by the students were noteworthy. The students' self-evaluation appeared to be quite telling in that they seemed to show discontent with how they had been placed in their English class with regards to the texts that they were using. The students were asked about which level of English textbook that they were using and then which textbook that they thought they should be using. The students who were using a text higher than a Level 1 (beginner) textbook appeared to be discontented. Only 24% of the students with a textbook higher than Level 1 thought that they should be using that level book or above. 76% of the students answering the questionnaire thought that the book that they were using was too difficult and that they should be using a lower level English textbook.

Another interesting point on the questionnaire was what the students perceived to be their quality of work on the assessment. They were asked to give their opinion of how well they performed in the assessment on a scale from 1 to 10, with 1 rated as 'Poor' and 10 rated as 'Excellent'. Of the students who answered the questions, there

was one test writer with an extremely optimistic view of his / her performance.¹¹ Most of the responses seemed to be somewhat more realistic ranging from 1 to 8 with the average being 3.39 out of 10, or in the Needs Improvement category of the scale. This would appear to indicate that the English language ability self-esteem of the students, as well as the opinion of where they are in the school system, needs improvement. This information becomes even more significant later in this paper.

4.6 Teacher Reaction

During interviews with the teaching staff at the two DMLIS school locations, comments were made regarding the Placement Assessment and the results that came from it. At the outset, the instructors indicated that the results from the assessment were inline with the results that they had expected from the students. While this was not an empirical measurement, the instructors' opinions of the students' adjusted percentile scores appeared to indicate that the students had performed to their teachers' expectations. To try to lend a statistical measurement to the instructors' feelings, the results of the Placement Assessment were compared to the results the students at the Junior High School received from a term achievement exam written two days after they had written the Placement Assessment. From the comparison of these results, it was found that the students scored on average 2% higher in the Placement Assessment than they had done on their achievement exam.¹²

In a different vein, the teachers said that the students had reported that they had a higher opinion of this Placement Assessment because the test was composed of several different test items¹³, the overall form of the test was easier to follow than the tests that they were used to and that there were no problems with the layout of the test, no spelling mistakes or challenges with reference to the use of inappropriate distracters. This nod toward the face validity of this Placement Assessment (which is stressed in importance by Alderson et al (1995: 173)) also came from the teachers who stated that while the standardized Chinese English tests are easier to mark in general, due to easily graded multiple-choice answer sheets, they consisted of

¹¹ This candidate rated his performance as a '10', although that person's adjusted percentile score on the Placement Assessment was 54%.

¹² Although this measurement is akin to comparing apples and oranges, it does lend credence to the opinions of the teachers of their students' performances.

¹³ Traditional, standardized governmental English tests in China regularly contain a rather seemingly endless array of multiple choice questions to test students.

essentially a small number of different test items and sometimes puzzling instructions, unlike the administered Placement Assessment.

Chapter Five – Placement Testing in China (Importance and Realities)

5.1 Lack of Placement Testing at DMLIS

There are serious misgivings for the lack of placement testing by the different locations of DMLIS. Without having a reliably accurate measure of what a student is capable of, the school locations had no concept of whether or not the “...student will find a level or class to be neither too easy nor too difficult but to be appropriately challenging.” (Brown 1994:259) It was found at the Training Centre that students in the same class, working from the same English text, had more than 65 percentile points differentiation between them from higher to lower results after writing the Placement Assessment. In the Junior High School, the students were separated by a slightly lower difference of 57 percentile points. Having students who scored from 84% to 18% on the Placement Assessment placed in the same class attempting to cover the same classroom material could potentially affect the desire to learn in the students.

5.2 Motivation

Motivation, or “...goal-directed behaviour...” (Armstrong 2001: 156) has been determined to be, in study after study, a key element in learning. (Brown 1994: 152) In a language programme, it can be thought of as composed of three components: what a student is attempting to accomplish, how much effort a student will expend in attempting the task and how long that students will continue to try. Those components are influenced by the origin of the motivation. If self-motivation emerges from the student himself (intrinsically) researchers say that long-term retention in a students increases. (ibid: 156) While extrinsic motivation can be a powerful, short-term motivator for a student, it can be addictive and has been shown that suddenly taking away extrinsic motivation may lead to students losing the desire to learn or continue their studies. (ibid: 157)

As intrinsic motivation is a more powerful force than motivation from outside sources, attempting to identify factors of self-motivation in students becomes a concern for a language instructor. Self-motivated students may possess a larger desire to learn, and may have a better sense of how to set and achieve goals of acquiring language than extrinsically motivated students, even in the face of slight ambiguity or

uncertainty in the classroom, as “...we seek out a *reasonable* challenge.”¹⁴ (ibid: 156) It is when the challenge becomes more than reasonable that a student may find that motivation from any source is less than helpful and they may fall into a feeling of learned helplessness.

Williams and Burden (1997: 130) write that learned helplessness is a style of motivation that describes “...people who see failure as essentially due to a lack of ability, and who feel that they have no control over their actions.” This style of motivation is very applicable to lower level language students who are placed into a class that is far too advanced. By noticing that they may have a lesser ability than the other students in the class, they may feel that they lessons happen around them and they have no control over their outcome. If students were to feel that they had no control over their actions, or what happened to them, those students may find that they lose all sense of motivation, are unable to determine the difference between suitable and unsuitable responses, become depressed and possibly “...lose all motivation to try to succeed.” (ibid: 128)

With this information regarding student motivation, it would seem to be common sense to assume that placement tests be mandatory for students when they begin a new language course. It would appear to most, if not all, educators that to enrol a student into a language programme (or any other scholastic endeavour) without understanding the language abilities a student retains at the time of enrolment can be seen as irresponsible on the part of a school. Placing a student in an inappropriate class may have profound effects on that student even to the extent of causing him or her to lose all sense of motivation and to abandon all hope of success. Unfortunately, according to the self-assessment questionnaire given to the students at the two school locations at the time of the placement assessment, an average scoring of 3.39 out of 10 could suggest that the students are beginning to feel that they are losing control of their outcomes.

5.3 Importance of a Reliable Placement Test in China

With that in mind, it is difficult to completely understand why the Junior High School and the Training Centre of DMLIS chose not to learn more about their students by implementing a placement test. As it was mentioned earlier, the Junior

¹⁴ Emphasis added.

High School and the Education Training Centre neglected to administer a placement test to new students for various reasons, and students at both locations were placed into their English classes by less diagnostic methods. Whether based on financial or administrative rationales or for the simple fact that a placement test didn't exist to be used, testing of new students did not occur.

After the analysis of the Placement Assessment, while it could be said that there is room for improvement in the Listening and Vocabulary sections, on the whole, the Placement Assessment showed itself to be a reasonably reliable instrument with which to assess the language abilities of students at DMLIS. After it was administered, there was a very strong indication that the students actually possessed varying degrees of language ability.¹⁵ In fact, at the Education Training Centre, one student was transferred from the Beginner Level 1 to the Advanced Level 4 after the results of the Placement Assessment were known. However, with the exception of this one student, and regardless of the results of the test scores, all of the other students at both schools remained placed in their original classes.

“It’s the way we’ve always been following. It’s the way the public schools have always been following.”

Mr. Wu Jin Bao – Dean of English, Dalian Maple Leaf Junior
High School

At the Junior High School, the method of placing students into English classes consisted of listing all of the students in order according to their final test marks compiled from the students’ Chinese, Math, Chemistry, Physics and English test scores for a subtotal out of 620 marks. The students are then ranked from highest to lowest and placed into class according to their rank.¹⁶ The students’ non-English courses influenced the English class level that they were placed into, and the classes thought to be composed of the better students by the students and parents (e.g. Class 1), had the same average percentile on the Placement Assessment as the class assumed to be composed of weaker students¹⁷ (e.g. Class 12). This method of placement was considered to be “...easy for administration to judge the teachers’

¹⁵ See Appendix 7 for Line Chart showing Discrimination Index for the top and bottom thirds of the test sample.

¹⁶ See Appendix 8 for a table outlining the placement method.

¹⁷ See Appendix 9 for Chart of Average Percentile for Junior High School.

work after monthly tests.” (Mr. Wu Jin Bao) Mr. Wu also stated that results from the classes would be posted after each month, increasing inter-class pressure and competition and teachers with classes that consistently performed poorly may receive criticism or verbal warnings, a financial penalty or, in the extreme, termination. Rather than the focus being placed on determining whether or not the students were motivated to perform to the best of their abilities, the teachers faced the anxiety of being continually assessed by the school leaders based on the students’ performances.

5.4 Why is this of such great importance for DMLIS?

The importance of proper placement testing for enrolling students in a language programme in China is not to be underestimated, regardless of the reasoning for an absence of testing at DMLIS. While proper placement may be crucial in all language situations due to the theories of learned helplessness and motivation, Chinese students especially may find themselves at a distinct disadvantage if they are placed into a class that is inappropriate to their language ability. This disadvantage may come from various sources, but all of these sources maintain a common thread: Chinese culture.

Several aspects of Chinese culture may work against language acquisition in an improperly placed student to ensure that he is unable to find his way out of a disadvantageous position. These conditions include silence in the classroom, a sense of shame, and the relatively recent concept of a ‘dān wèi’(单位). A sense of shame and silence in the classroom can be traced back more than 2,000 years to the teachings of one of the most influential thinkers in Chinese history, Kǒng Zǐ (孔子) (550 BC? – 479 BC). The ‘dān wèi’ became a driving force in China immediately following the Communist Revolution in 1949.

5.5 Kǒng Zǐ and Silence in the Classroom

The teachings of the sixth century BC philosopher Kǒng Zǐ, better known in the Western world as Confucius, have endured and have been observed in China for centuries. His philosophical insights included suggestions on living a contented and

meaningful life¹⁸ and his educational theories formed the basis for a traditional method of teaching to adhere to for all of the Chinese instructors who came after him. A high regard for education for all (“...except women, and so-called “humble-men”, or commoners...” (Internet 2)), reverence for the infallibility of textbooks and rote-memorization of the Chinese literature classics were the cornerstones of the Confucian ideal.

From that foundation, a state of affairs that seems to surround classrooms with Chinese students is silence. It is almost an anecdotal certainty that EFL instructors with Chinese students in their classes will bring forth stories of the seemingly mute qualities of their students. Silence in the classroom could be thought of as a direct line of thought from Kǒng Zǐ and Confucianism, which stressed rote-memorization of the classics of Chinese literature and then giving an explanation that conformed to a standardized interpretation. This was seen as a highly prized skill and was “aimed at nurturing benevolence and achieving social stability.” (ibid)

This social stability found its roots in obedience to authority, where people were taught to obey their direct superior, from commoner to homeowner, or military officer to the Emperor. It was Kǒng Zǐ’s belief that stability in the state came from its citizens’ unswerving obedience to authority and in a grass roots fashion, to filial piety, where members of a family followed a strict hierarchal structure of subordination to an authority figure. Centuries of hierarchal conditioning has produced the condition of the unchallengeable authority at home and, by extension, an unchallengeable leader in the classroom, the English instructor. The elder teacher is seen as the supreme, all-knowing authority in the classroom and is not to be questioned. This stems from the Confucian precept that “[a] youth, when at home, should be filial, and, abroad, respectful to his elders. When he has time and opportunity...he should employ them in *polite studies*.¹⁹” (Internet 3)

Maintaining the unquestionable authority of the teacher in the classroom means that the teacher has the role of the ‘giver of knowledge’ and if only the students listen to the teacher well, will they absorb the information. As the traditional focus in the English classroom in China is on the explanation of English grammar rules and the expansion of vocabulary, this teacher-centred construct brings about an attitude of

¹⁸ The concept of the ‘zhōng yōng’ (中庸) or Golden Mean called on all people to walk a path of moderation in life that stayed away from the excesses of too little or too much.

¹⁹ Emphasis added.

silence in the class among the students. Since “...the teacher should be all-knowing has not only made language learners afraid to speak up...” it also implies that “...raising many questions would mean disturbing the class and showing disrespect for the teacher.” (Internet 2) This situation may be exacerbated by a tendency for a Chinese teacher to, more often than not, rely on the Chinese language as an explanatory device for a generally very grammar oriented textbook when teaching a foreign language in the classroom.

“In middle school, the teacher use Chinese. Don’t English. Students just listen. They don’t want teacher to know they can’t understand.”

Tracy (student) – Dalian Maple Leaf Junior High School

“[In middle school,] never speak Russian. Everyday study [Russian] grammar. Russian a lot of grammar.”

Joy (student) - Education Training Centre

Even though the reforms to a traditional teacher-centred methodology are being instituted,²⁰ and there is more of a focus being placed on the communicative nature of language, problems still influence the teaching style of the classroom. One problem is that the format of standardized governmental English exams has remained static and they are still very grammar oriented. In Communicative Language Teacher Training classes at the Education Training Centre, the vast majority of Chinese English teachers polled stated that their largest concern in teaching is the tremendous amount of focus that is paid to exam results by students, parents and school leaders. This all-encompassing interest in students’ marks combined with a shortness of time to produce results and a very lengthy and detailed grammar textbook, means that these instructors feel that they have no alternative but to follow the traditional Chinese teacher-centred method.

²⁰ Reforms can be found in the English Course Standard – Experimental Version by the People’s Republic of China Educational Bureau 2001 Published by Beijing Normal University Press
全日制义务教育普通高级中学《英语课程标准》(实验稿), 中华人民共和国教育部制订, 北京
大学出版社

Having the students in the class acting as passive participants and following a teacher-centred approach to teaching English, develops a silent student who may not want to show their lack of understanding to the class or interrupt the teacher during their English lesson. One saving grace for those students who may not comprehend the spoken English in class is the reliance on Chinese explanations by the Chinese instructor. This is not the case in the classes conducted by Western instructors at the locations of DMLIS. Without having a Chinese explanation available from the teacher, and having the Western instructor focussing on a more student-centred, task based approach, misplaced students found that their one refuge from a lack of comprehension was to attempt to fade away into silence.

“Jack was not motivated to take English. He should have been in Level 1 but he was in Level 3. I don’t know how he got to Level 3. If you didn’t talk to him, he would sit in silence in class all day. Jack shouldn’t have been in that class.”

Jim Kelly (instructor) – Education Training Centre

However, while silence stems from the Confucian ideal of obedience to authority and the teacher is the fount of all knowledge, silence may only be a symptom of a more prevalent cultural reality in China.

“Don’t speak English in class. I’m shy. If I mistake again, many students laugh for me.”

Tony (student) – Dalian Maple Leaf Junior High School

“If I have a little don’t know, I don’t answer. I not want students laugh at me.”

Rebecca (student) – Education Training Centre

5.6 Shame

Language learning in China may be influenced by cultural aspects of the Chinese personality that are quite divergent from a western viewpoint. One of these includes what is commonly called ‘losing face’ or feeling a sense of shame. A sense of shame in Chinese society also originated from a Confucian principle that stressed

shame as a separate emotion, as well as an ability to change to a more socially and morally acceptable behaviour. (Internet 4) The emotion of shame seems to expand past an individual emotion as the concept of shame in China extends beyond the individual and broadens into a group responsibility. When a member of a group, hypothetically a class in a school, attains a goal, the honour of the achievement is shared by the group. On the other hand, "...when people fail, they do not simply lose their own face, but they shame all those around them." (ibid: 7)

"In middle school, many students can't understand. Teacher told me next don't mistake. [If I make a mistake] sometimes I feel a little hate [from the teacher]."

Eleven (student) – Education Training Centre

As a sense of shame is a profoundly affecting emotion for Chinese people, and therefore also for students placed into a classroom. Students consigned to a class with other students who are studying English at a much different level could act out in several ways. In an effort to mask a feeling of shame by those students who 'fail' in a classroom in front of their peers and teacher, they may express themselves by becoming a disciplinary problem or even by giving themselves over to reactions of shame with feelings of disgrace, embarrassment or a lack in the sense of appropriate self-evaluation. (ibid: 50 (Fig. 1)) By accepting those feelings, students, who find that the lessons are incomprehensible, may do their best to fade into the background of the class.

It would appear that instructors at Dalian Maple Leaf International School share some of these sentiments and have put into words some of their worries that reflect this concept concerning misplaced students in an inappropriate class. At the Junior High School, misplaced students, combined with large class sizes, create difficulties regardless of the level of English language ability that a student possesses.

"The lower students need the help but with the class sizes as they are, the lower students don't get the help they need, so they get frustrated and act up. They become hard to manage (talk or sleep) and want to give up. This problem is doubled by the high level

students wanting time with the teacher to work on their listening, learning at their own level and pace.”

Mr. Parviz Parma (instructor) – Junior High School ESL

This situation is similar at the Education Training Centre except that the students express their frustrations more through truancy than through classroom misbehaviour. Faced with the prospect of the inability to perform in class, students may feel a sense of shame for their ‘failure’, therefore shaming the group as a whole. This may lead to having the student act out in class, or ‘play hooky’ and be absent from class as a result. This truancy may lead to a downward spiral as the student falls further behind in classroom activities losing any opportunity to alleviate the feelings of failure. One instructor estimated 15% of her class was absent from her English classes on a regular basis and another suggested that truancy was producing a Hellerian Catch-22 effect in one of the regular truants in his class.

“I think he is away because he is weak, and he is weak because he is away.”

Zheng Ying (instructor) – Education Training Centre

5.7 ‘Dān wèi’

Other problems may arise for students in China because of poor classroom placement, and these problems may have manifested themselves at the two investigated locations of Dalian Maple Leaf. These troubles can also be traced to a societal structure that is in place in China. The problems that have surfaced are due mainly to the relatively new custom of the ‘dān wèi’, or work unit that became a prevalent and dominant cultural force during the 1950s. After the Communist Revolution of 1949, Chinese citizens were required to belong to a ‘dān wèi’, a self-contained group or cell of workers that lived, worked and played together. Once a citizen was linked with a ‘dān wèi’, it was virtually impossible to leave it. Each citizen was required to register for a ‘hùkǒu’, or residency permit. The residency permits were then safeguarded by a controlling member of the Communist Party, who could restrict the actions of the citizens in the ‘dān wèi’, effectively reinforcing the Confucian ideal of obedience to a superior authoritarian.

The work unit wielded enormous control over the lives of their members, essentially having the power to grant housing, determine the right to travel and even grant permission for members to marry or divorce. As a further consequence, since the members of a ‘dān wèi’ were unable to move freely, they would grow close attachments with the other members of the group. This would also mean that the group would become reliant on each other for support and help. While market reforms and governmental restructuring due to China’s entrance into the WTO has made the ‘dān wèi’ less powerful, the system remains in place in society and in culture. (Internet 5)

This societal structure can be found in the classrooms of Dalian Maple Leaf School and in particular the students of the Junior High. Once admitted to the school, the students would find themselves effectively locked into an English class ‘dān wèi’ set up by the administration of the school and would remain with that group for the three-year duration of their studies in the school, regardless of any changes in their English ability. Davies et al state that “[a]s it is relatively easy to rectify mistakes made on the basis of test results, eg students placed wrongly, issues of reliability and validity may be considered less crucial in the development or choosing of a placement test...” (1999: 145) It may be relatively easy to move students who have been placed wrongly, but this is not the case when it comes to Chinese students with a newly adopted work unit. When students were questioned about their feelings if they were moved to another class due to performance in their own class, most students reluctantly entertained the possibility, but felt that staying with their comrades to be more important and preferred to remain in their own group.

“I feel a little happy, but I don’t want to left my friends. We are very well.”

Linda (student) – Dalian Maple Leaf Junior High School

In the case of the Junior High students, if students are erroneously placed into an inappropriate English class level due to the absence of a placement test, the mistake isn’t rectified. There isn’t an organized system in place to shift students to a more or less advanced English class based on their classroom performance. Even if a system was introduced to move the students to a more appropriate English class,

Chinese staff members stated that the movement would most likely be met with resistance from the staff and students alike due to the desire to maintain a stable group.

This situation presents itself in a different manner at the Training Centre. There, the students maintain a larger amount of control on their own movements within the school classes. Some students have declined to move up to a higher level group in the odd instance of student movement, preferring to stay with their ‘dān wèi’. Others influenced their placement into classes far beyond their English abilities because they entered into the Training Centre with a group of compatriots from another location of Dalian Maple Leaf School, or from other institutions.

“I didn’t want leave my friends. I like my class. I not know anyone in the other class.”

Tina (student) – Education Training Centre

Remaining with the ‘dān wèi’ was a paramount consideration for the students, and also for the administrations, even though it may not have been in the best interests of the students, particularly the ones with lower level English skills. During interviews with the students at both locations of DMLIS, more than 60% of the students questioned stated that they would rather stay with their class than to move up or down a level, even if it meant that they felt the class material was too easy or too difficult. Allowing the students to be in control of class movement can be extremely detrimental, beyond the concept of learned helplessness, especially for students with a lower competence in English. Forcing lower level students to continually speak English at a level too advanced for them, or conversely having a lack of learning opportunities for language learners has been implicated in the persistence of language mistakes in learners and may do more harm than good for those students. There have been studies that indicate that “[p]ersistent pressure to communicate ideas that require the use of language that exceeds the learner’s linguistic competence leads to fossilization.” (Ellis 1994: 354)

Chapter Six – Conclusion

6.1 Possible Improvements

It would seem that the lack of placement testing at DMLIS demonstrates a lack in the “...efficiency in administration and marking [which] is often a key consideration in the development of placement procedures.” (Davies et al 1999: 145) While there are procedures followed at both locations, these place students according to the results of non-English classes or to the wishes of the students. While these may be easier and less time-consuming approaches to student placement, they are not the most effective or helpful for the student. In an effort to increase the likelihood of having better attitudes toward motivation in students at DMLIS the following suggestions will be put forth.

6.1a Institute Placement Testing

The first suggestion would be to institute a placement test that reflects the content of the teaching programme to better understand the language needs of the students enrolled at DMLIS. The Placement Assessment that was given to the students for the purposes of this paper would be stepping off point for the school. Of course, modifications would need to be considered for the sections with a lower capacity to discriminate between students, but tests should never remain static and should constantly evolve to reflect the curriculum being taught. While requests from students and the marks from non-English classes should not be totally ignored, the principle method of placing students into the English classes should be centred on their English placement test results.

6.1b Institute Procedures for Student Movement

To better assist those students who may be struggling in a class, procedures should be put into place that serve to identify students who have been misplaced and move them from an inappropriate level. This should not be based on the review of one exam at one particular point in the school calendar, but should be dependent upon various criteria: test results, class participation, teacher observation, student self-assessment, among others. There should also be a consensus among the teaching staff and administration, so that a knee-jerk reaction by administrative staff over the results of one exam doesn't serve to upset the student body and teaching staff by moving a

student. Regular staff meetings to discuss the movement of students would serve to maintain an atmosphere of cooperation and openness.

6.1c Institute Less Inter-Class Competition

In an effort to lessen the effects of a ‘dān wèi’ mentality, and to lessen a feeling of shame that a student may feel by being moved to another class, inter-class competitions focussing on academic results should be lessened. Changing the numbering system for the classes could be a starting point attempting to eliminate any stigma attached to being in a class with a higher number. Identifying the classes by animal names could be one method. Stressing the betterment of the students’ own abilities rather than the performances in inter-class challenges may help to motivate students with lesser English expertise.

6.1d Institute a Policy of Student-centred Teaching

A move away from a teacher-centred approach to instruction and fewer adherences to the Confucian model of the teacher as all-knowledgeable and controlling could have several benefits. Using communicative teaching approaches would allow the students to maintain more of a control over their learning outcomes and may aid in reducing learned helplessness in the classroom. Also, having the students involved in communicating in the target language and having them involved in task-based learning would help the instructors to identify students who may have been placed wrongly into an English class and serve to help better identify their language needs.

Placement testing is intended to assist in placing students into the most appropriate classes by helping a school and its’ staff to assess a student’s language needs. Proper student placement will help the student to feel that they have control over their education and their outcomes. It will also aid the language instructor in better understanding the students in the class, and can bring the most effective and instructive lessons to the class. Placement testing is crucial for newly enrolled students; unfortunately, when testing is not completed, for reasons determined by a language school, and students find themselves placed into classes that are convenient for the schools’ administration, it can bring about a lack of desire to learn or even the

decision to give up. It must be an alarming experience to be placed into an inappropriate upper level language class and feel that everyone around you has knowledge and abilities that you don't possess and those circumstances cannot be changed; especially so if your culture necessitates remaining in that class.

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