

**Kirkwood Community College**  
**CASTLE Case Study**  
**Spanish Placement Test**

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**Course: All levels of Spanish (Elementary I, Elementary II, Intermediate I, Intermediate II)**

**Background:**

As the number of students entering the foreign language program at Kirkwood increase the more obvious it becomes that we need a better system to place those new students. Up to now placing students has been the job of college advisers, both staff and faculty members. Due to a number of reasons sometimes those advisers lack the knowledge or expertise to correctly place students in the most correct level. Other times students do self-placement which on many occasions result in poor choices. We as instructors have seen the results of poorly placed students. On one hand we have observed students that register in a language level that is too easy for them and end up doing poorly because the class isn't challenging enough for them and it becomes boring. On the other hand some students attempt to skip levels in order to save time and/or money. Many of these students also do poorly and often fail the course. The problem is magnified because our program consists of a sequence of four levels. From this fact it follows that if a student is unsuccessful in one of the levels, he/she will continue to fail or will struggle in the next levels as well.

**1. What are the important classroom teaching/learning issues in this case?**

We want to find out the student's real proficiency level in order to place them in the appropriate level. We assume that this will improve their chances for success.

**2. What teaching/learning strategies might be helpful?**

We are creating a Placement Test using Questionmark's Perception online authoring program ([www.questionmark.com](http://www.questionmark.com)) that accurately measures the proficiency of entering students in the areas of listening and reading comprehension, vocabulary, grammar and culture. Perception has the capability to play audio files for the listening comprehension portion of the test.

The question items will adhere to the Proficiency Guidelines of the American Council of Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL). This is a national organization in charge of

regulating standards for the teaching of foreign languages. We also have kept in mind the General Assessment Guidelines of Kirkwood Community College.

The Placement Test will be given to entering students at the beginning of the semester or whenever necessary.

### **3. What learning theories might support or inform these teaching/learning strategies?**

Our main purpose in doing this project is to improve the chances of student success when learning Spanish at Kirkwood. Therefore, there is no doubt that the learning theories that best support our efforts are the cognitive theories, including learning strategies and metacognition, the ability to create and use schemata and the importance of background knowledge.

The aptitude-Treatment Interaction (ATI) suggests “that optimal learning results when the instruction is exactly matched to the aptitudes of the learner” (e.g., Gardner, Guilford, Sternberg; Snow, 1989).

When students enter our foreign language program at Kirkwood, they come from a variety of backgrounds regarding level and quality of preparation. Some students lack any knowledge, others have some but they misjudge their own abilities and place themselves in a level that is too advanced. Some who have had more language preparation could register in a lower level due to, either poor judgment or the pursuit of a good easy grade. In all cases optimal learning will be thwarted because existing aptitudes will not be matched to the instruction.

Our experience as instructors is that when a student joins a level too high for his/her ability, this student could find himself in the same situation as referenced in Cross and Steadman’s *Classroom Research: Implementing the Scholarship of Teaching*, “The Leslies” Chapter 2. The student will be incapable of understanding the “language” that is expected at this level. ” (and by “language” I am not referring to the foreign one but rather to the terminology necessary for effective classroom instruction). Other cognitive learning theories maintain that in such cases the student will be incapable of making connections with previous knowledge and of using schemata to organize the new language.

Then when a student is in a class that is below his/her level of ability, the social and/or affective atmosphere of the whole classroom could suffer a great deal. In many instances students who don’t possess the same ability as the more advanced student feel threatened and become easily frustrated by their inability to produce as much. Besides creating an atmosphere of frustration for all involved, the presence of this type of student has other negative aspects as well.

Still, the main point here is that optimal learning results can not be achieved when the instruction, for any reason, is not matched to the ability of the learner.

Other learning theories that support our project are:

- a) The Acquired Cognition Theory is pertinent here because it maintains that students learn by making inferences from already existing knowledge (Anderson).
- b) Subsumption Theory (D. Ausubel) Because it deals with how individuals learn large amounts of meaningful material from verbal-textual presentations in a school setting. If students cannot comprehend the material, they cannot learn.
- c) Multiple Intelligences (H. Gardner) Because it suggests that there are a number of distinct forms of intelligence that each individual possesses in varying degrees. Among these intelligences, linguistic intelligence is an important one.

#### **4. What questions or hypotheses does this case raise that might be further investigated in a classroom research project?**

We assume that students who have been misplaced begin their language study with a handicap that hinders their success not only in that course but also in the following ones of the sequence.

We hypothesize that if students are correctly placed, they will achieve higher levels of success during their language learning.

We also want to see if an online placement test will be an effective placement instrument.

#### **5. What classroom assessment data could be collected to test out these questions or hypotheses?**

The test will be a computerized instrument and students will be able to see their scores immediately after finishing it. Because of pre-established cut-scores, students will be able to see a message indicating the correct level they need to register for.

After we pilot the test, and after a few tryouts, we will analyze how the Placement Test is working and, if necessary, we will make changes in order to make it more appropriate for our purposes. We will analyze question statistical data, difficulty and correlation, automatically generated by the Perception program.

By analyzing the data we hope to find out whether or not students are placed more accurately and whether this more correct placement has an impact on students learning.

### **References**

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