Is the English Proficiency Level Always Reflected in Placement Tests?

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Abstract

In today's globalized world, the importance of language learning is paramount due to factors such as international travel, work opportunities, and cultural exchange. Accurately assessing language proficiency and placing learners in appropriate courses is crucial to maximize the benefits of language education. Language placement tests serve this purpose by determining learners' starting points based on their language skills, ensuring they are appropriately challenged and motivated. These tests are widely used in educational institutions and typically cover various language skills like grammar, vocabulary, reading, writing, speaking, and listening. By placing students at the right level, language placement tests enable instructors to tailor lessons to their individual needs, fostering growth and engagement. The integration of reliable placement tests has become indispensable in language education to provide fair assessment, effective instruction, and successful language acquisition. In this article, we present the results of a survey on the reliability of placement tests from the students' perspective. The quantitative and qualitative study with 120 respondents was conducted in the spring semester of 2023 at Vytautas Magnus University. The study aimed to explore whether the participants believed that placement tests accurately gauge their actual language knowledge and skills and if VMU English Placement Test accurately identifies suitable language proficiency levels for students. The study also sought to collect data for recommendations to improve VMU English Placement Test. According to the respondents, VMU English Placement Test efficiently determines the test takers' language proficiency levels. Nevertheless, a definitive answer to the question of whether English placement tests reliably indicate actual English language proficiency remains open, as the responses split evenly into positive and negative viewpoints. The study also revealed that all facets of English language competence, including writing, reading, grammar, and listening, must undergo assessment through placement tests.

1. Introduction

In today's interconnected world, the significance of learning languages cannot be overstated. Unions like the Schengen zone or the European Union make it easier for people not only to travel but to work and live abroad, too, thus the need for languages rises (Dick, 2023). In addition to expanding economic and cultural horizons, language learning opens doors to enhanced educational, professional, and personal opportunities. To fully benefit from language learning, it is critical to accurately assess individuals' language proficiency and place them in courses that are appropriate to their level of proficiency (Bachman and Palmer, 2022). The purpose of language placement tests is to assess learners' language skills, determine their optimal starting points, and ensure they embark on a learning journey that is appropriate to their needs. In this article, the results of quantitative and qualitative study concerning the composition and reliability of placement tests, with a particular focus on VMU English Placement Test, are discussed. It is essential to recognize the importance of placement tests in foreign language acquisition and to learn how to use them effectively and efficiently to reach learners' full potential.

2. Literature Overview

A placement test is a method of evaluating an individual's language proficiency to determine the level at which they should study. In order to accurately determine students' capabilities and avoid unnecessary skill remediation, assessment and placement processes are necessary (Scott-Clayton et al., 2014; Bahr et al., 2019). To ensure accurate placement, fair assessment, and effective language instruction, language placement tests have become a critical tool (Brown, 1989).

The key requirement for placement tests emphasised in academic literature is that learners must be aligned with a class or a group of students of a comparable level and similar educational needs (Green, 2012; Hille and Cho, 2020, Johnson and Riazi, 2017; Al-Adawi and Al-Balushi, 2016 and others). Hille and Cho (2020) state that "accurate placement is expected to optimize teaching and learning because a placement result indicates the level of instruction that a student needs."(p. 453) In other words, placement tests are designed to determine the most suitable starting point for learners based on their language skills, ensuring they are neither overwhelmed by advanced material nor held back by material that is too basic for their abilities. By ensuring that students are appropriately challenged, language placement tests help prevent these issues and boost their motivation and confidence (Hille and Cho, 2020). Accurately placed students are inclined to be motivated in the pursuit of their academic objectives, demonstrating commendable performance and attaining favourable outcomes.

Inaccurate placement, conversely, leads to a plethora of challenges within an educational setting. Inadequate placement of students who are not challenged enough can result in diminished student motivation to actively engage in lectures, complete assignments, or, in more severe cases, discontinue their studies. On the contrary, when students perceive themselves as academically inferior or less proficient than their peers, they may experience feelings of being overshadowed or inhibited from active participation. Consequently, their academic progress becomes impeded. In a study reported by Johnson and Riazi (2017) an obvious correlation between adequate placement and student performance is observed, as "37% of new students did not pass the English courses into which they were placed, making it the most common outcome, and 15% of first-semester students reported being placed in a level too difficult for them" (Johnson and Riazi, 2017, p.100). Johnson and Riazi (2017) also note that misplaced students, especially in large numbers, and classes of mixed abilities "add to the challenges faced by learners and instructors alike" (Johnson and Riazi, 2017, p.86). According to Al-Adawi and Al-Balushi (2016), "teachers tend to pay more attention to the level of the majority of students" (p. 107), suggesting unequal opportunities for misplaced students. Educators tasked with instructing a heterogeneous group of students with varying competences are compelled to adapt their teaching methods to accommodate diverse needs. This adjustment poses the risk of unmet student requirements, failure to achieve programme objectives, and a subsequent decline in motivation among both students and educators.

Financial implications are also significant to both students and institutions (Hille and Cho, 2020) when discussing the consequences stemming from inappropriate student placement. Students may incur financial burdens related to academic debts, repeating failed courses, or undertaking supplementary courses, which, in turn, "could delay their academic goals, reduce their motivation, and cause them to drop out" (Llosa and Bunch 2011, p. 29). Likewise, educational institutions are compelled to allocate resources for the recruitment of additional faculty, the design of supplementary courses for underperforming students or even lose some students due to inaccurate placement.

Language placement tests are commonly used in educational institutions, encompassing universities, high schools, language schools, and other learning settings. Language proficiency tests typically cover various language skills, most commonly grammar, vocabulary, reading comprehension, writing, speaking, and listening (Broderick, 2022). A well-designed and properly administered placement test might collect useful data about a future learner and "help the examiner place that student into the current language program" (Amorim 2021, p.68). The underlying principle is to establish a setting for learning wherein learners may perform at their highest level while experiencing a sense of comfort.

It is important that language placement tests are used in language education to assess a student's level of language proficiency with accuracy and to guide them to a suitable course of study. Consequently, language proficiency tests are an essential instrument for assisting students in reaching the right level of understanding and knowledge. Other than helping students learn at the level they are, language placement tests enable educational institutions to optimize learning opportunities for their students (Scott-Clayton, 2012). Students in the same class tend to have similar language abilities, so instructors can easily design activities and lessons tailored to meet the specific needs of students by placing learners at the appropriate language level. As a result, instructors can foster their growth and engagement. Through the integration of reliable language placement tests into language education systems, students have the opportunity to benefit from enhanced learning experiences, advance and facilitate successful language acquisition.

There are many different placement tests available in today's educational environment. These tests can be simple, requiring little preparation, or they can be difficult, demanding many hours to complete and consisting of numerous components. Most of the time, approved organizations administer these exams, and governments or higher education institutions accept the certifications they provide. Some education providers use accredited and well-known language placement tests (e.g. IELTS, DELF, CAE, etc.) while others create their own unique placement tests that are used inside an institution. Some researchers (e.g. Hille and Cho (2020)) express reservations regarding

the effectiveness of commercially available tests. Placement tests composed by educational institutions provide several benefits compared to commercially available tests. They assess students' competences within the unique context of a particular institution. Furthermore, they can be tailored to align with specific curriculum objectives. In contrast, commercial proficiency tests lack association with any particular educational institution, as highlighted by Naqui et al. (2023). Vytautas Magnus University, recognized for its distinctive focus on expanding the students' linguistic competences and for its highly developed system of instructing foreign languages, administers its own English Placement Test, detailed in Section 3.2.

3. Context, Participants and Methodology

3.1 English Language Levels that Students Study at Vytautas Magnus University

Vytautas Magnus University recognizes the importance of language proficiency in today's globalized world and has been known for its emphasis on internationalization and language studies. The university offers various programmes in English, and it actively encourages students to participate in language learning opportunities. It often provides language courses, language exchange programmes, and other resources to help students improve their language skills. According to the Study Regulations of Vytautas Magnus University (2021), all students must achieve either C1 or B2 level of academic English language proficiency in order to successfully complete the university and obtain a bachelor's degree. The B2 level of competence is sufficient for all students who start learning English at the university from level A1. The English language level at which a student starts learning the language at the university, according to section 103 of the Study Regulations (2021), is determined by VMU English Placement Test and the results of the English State Final Examination (further herein ESFE).
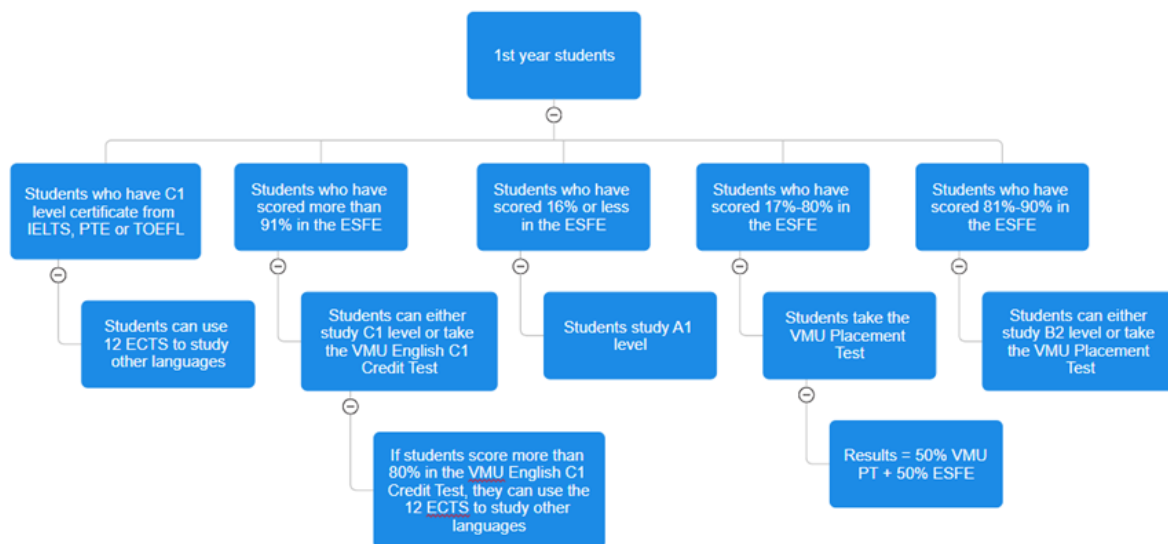

Figure 1. Scheme of how first-year students are placed into English language levels

As Figure 1 depicts, all first-year VMU students can be divided into 5 groups. If students' result at ESFE is 16% or less, students start their studies at level A1 and must reach academic level B2 before they graduate. Students who reached 17 – 80% at ESFE take VMU English Placement Test and after calculating the results of both tests are recommended to choose the appropriate level to start their studies. Students who scored from 81 to 90% from ESFE may choose to start at level B2 without taking VMU English Placement Test or take the latter test and start their studies according to the recommendations of the Institute of Foreign Languages (further herein IFL). Finally, students who achieved 90% and more at ESFE have two options: either study C1 or C1/C2 at VMU or take VMU English C1 Credit Test. If the latter test is passed with the score 80% and more, students do not need to study the English language and, according to the VMU Study Regulations (2013), can opt to use their credits to study other languages. In accordance with academic requirements, students are obligated to make a deliberate selection of credits, falling within the range of 12 to 24 ECTS: "<…> a student must choose no less than 12 ECTS and no more than 24 ECTS: students who start studying English at a level higher than A1 must reach an academic English language level of C1." (the VMU Study Regulations, 2013, p. 7 - 8). If the first-year students provide a certificate of a successfully passed standardized test (TOEFL, IELTS, PTE, etc.) proving their English language proficiency of C1 level, they are not obliged to take a test nor study the English language at VMU. Such students have to

choose and study any other language from 30 languages that are offered at university curriculum. Thus, Vytautas Magnus University's language proficiency requirements, guided by the results of assessments like ESFE and VMU English Placement Test, highlight the institution's dedication to fostering diverse linguistic abilities among students.

3.2 Vytautas Magnus University English Placement Test

Academic literature advocates the incorporation of multiple elements and the assessment of all language skills in placement tests. Notably, Al-Adawi and Al-Balushi (2016) argue for the inclusion of diverse skills and components to accommodate distinct learning preferences, thereby preventing any student from being disadvantaged due to exam components emphasizing their weaker areas and failing to reflect their overall language learning ability. Similarly, Almutairi (2023) contends that the enhancement of the test's validity can be achieved by encompassing all four language skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—in the evaluation process. Vytautas Magnus University English Placement Test (compiled by a team of lecturers of Testing Centre of IFL) checks and assesses four main competences of the language: reading, listening, grammar, and writing. Table 1 provides a comprehensive breakdown of the test, delineating various competences assessed, the quantity of questions allocated to each section, the corresponding difficulty levels, and the recommended time durations for completing each segment.

Table 1. Constituent parts and number of questions of Vytautas Magnus University English Placement Test

Competences	Number of questions	Level of questions	Time to complete, minutes
Reading	10	B2	20
Listening	10	B1-B2	15
Writing and vocabulary	16	A1-B2	3
Grammar	36	A1-B2	17

The reading section evaluates the test-takers' reading comprehension skills with a set of 10 questions. The questions are designed at B2 level, indicating an intermediate to upper-intermediate proficiency in English. Test-takers are allotted 20 minutes to navigate through and respond to the reading comprehension tasks, demonstrating their ability to understand and interpret written information.

The listening part assesses an individual's ability to comprehend spoken English. With 10 questions in total, the difficulty level spans from B1 to B2, accommodating a range of proficiency levels from lower-intermediate to upper-intermediate. The time allocated for this section is 15 minutes (two times of listening to the same track), during which test-takers must carefully listen and enter the answers.

The writing and vocabulary section encompasses 16 questions that focus on both writing skills and vocabulary knowledge. The questions cover a broad spectrum of proficiency levels, from A1 to B2, accommodating individuals with varying levels of English proficiency. Test-takers are expected to complete this section within a concise timeframe of 3 minutes, underscoring the need for quick and accurate responses in both written expression and lexical understanding.

The grammar section is the most extensive, comprising 36 questions that span proficiency levels from A1 to B2. This section evaluates a test-takers' grasp of English grammar rules and structures. With a recommended time of 17 minutes, participants must demonstrate their proficiency in applying grammatical principles accurately and efficiently.

Having analysed all the constituent parts of the test, we can state that Vytautas Magnus University English Placement Test employs a well-structured approach to assess various language competences. The distribution of questions across reading, listening, writing, and grammar allows for a comprehensive evaluation of test-takers' overall English language proficiency, catering to individuals with diverse skill sets and proficiency levels. The specified time allocations emphasize the importance of efficiency and accuracy in responding to the varied challenges presented in each section of the test.

3.3 Empirical Research Methodology

3.3.1 Aims and Methodology

In this study, the main objective was to learn the opinions of students about English language placement tests and to examine Vytautas Magnus University English Placement Test from the students' perspective. The research was conducted with two aims. First, we sought to learn if according to the respondents, placement tests reflect the real

knowledge and competences of the test takers. Second, based on the received research data, we aimed to provide recommendations for the university's English placement test.

Given the research the objective, an empirical study was conducted to explore students' opinion on language learning and placement tests, particularly focusing on different parts for competencies and their necessity in determining students' language levels.

In order to investigate the opinions about the reflectiveness of language placement tests and whether these types of tests show the real language skills, a quantitative and qualitative study method was applied. The research was conducted through a questionnaire distributed and published online in the VMU Moodle with the aim of reaching a larger number of respondents.

3.3.2 Research Instrument - Questionnaire

An online questionnaire was chosen as the main instrument for the research. The questionnaire was composed according to the set aims. Demographic questions were also included in the survey, as students' attitudes and opinions about language placement tests may differ according to age or year of study.

The questionnaire consisted of 25 closed, open-ended and multiple-choice questions based on the methodology proposed by Hughes et al. (2016) on measuring opinions and demographics. In closed questions, the respondents had to choose one or more answers, and in open-ended questions, they had the option to write several words for the answer. Quantitative and qualitative approaches for data processing were employed in the analytical stage of the research. The questions of the survey are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Survey categories and questions

Questions category	Survey questions
Basic information	Was English mandatory at school?
	If English was mandatory, when did you start learning English?
	Did you attend free English consultations at school?
	Did you attend private English consultations with a tutor?
	Did you take English Placement Test when you entered VMU?
	Which English level was recommended for you to study at VMU?
	Did you register to the recommended level?
	If no, which level did you register to?
Targeted questions about placement tests	Did you take English State Final Examination?
	If you took English State Final Examination, what was your score?
	Have you taken IELTS?
	If you have taken IELTS, what was your score?
	Have you taken TOEFL?
	If you have taken TOEFL, what was your score?
	Have you taken PTE?
	If you have taken PTE, what was your score?
	Have you taken any other English standardised test?
Students' opinion about placement tests	Which part of VMU English placement test was the most difficult for you?
	Why do you think so?
	Do you think English placement tests should include grammar questions?
	Why do you think so?
	Are English placement tests a good indicator of real English proficiency?
Demographic questions	What is your age?
	Your year of studies at university?
	What is your faculty of study?

The questions in the survey can be divided into four main categories: basic information, targeted questions about placement tests, students' opinion about placement tests and demographic questions. Fink (2003) suggests that questions should be formulated to understand the respondents' backgrounds. Therefore, in the basic information

questions, the respondents provided information in order to gain an understanding of how long the respondents learnt the English language before deciding to test their knowledge. The questions were formulated to understand their perspectives, experiences, and contextual influences on their responses, as such information is crucial. The aim of the second category was to find out whether the respondents took any of the listed standardized tests (ESFE, IELTS, TOEFL, PTE, and the VMU Placement Test). The questions were asked to get information about the received score, when the test was taken, etc. The students' opinions on placement tests in general were captured in the third category. This included the subjective experiences and perceptions of the respondents. According to Aaker (2012), respondents must be able to express their opinion freely – to have effective, relevant, and fair results. This meant that the respondents could choose a few answers and provide their opinion. Aaker (2012) suggests using open-ended questions, where respondents can put in the answer in their own words and express their opinion. Finally, the demographic questions were asked to better know the respondents. As the opinions formed regarding placement tests may depend on the demographics of the sample (Hughes et al., 2016), the demographic questions were designed to gather general information about that sample.

3.3.3 Research Sample

The target audience of the research were Bachelor's degree VMU students who were studying English at any level in the spring semester 2023. This target audience was chosen because Master's degree students are not required to study any languages. Moreover, Bachelor's degree students are more likely to remember the VMU Placement Test, as they took it more recently and may not have forgotten the competences assessed as well as the structure of the test, comparing to the Master's degree students, who took the Placement Test five or six years ago.

There were 5087 Bachelor's degree students at VMU during the 2022-2023 academic year (VMU, 2023). During the spring semester, there were 1590 students enrolled in different English language courses. These students were asked to fill out the questionnaire. The level of research confidence is chosen to be 95%, with a sampling error of 5% (Osborne and Costello, 2019). The research sample was calculated by using the Paniotto formula provided by Kibuacha (2021):

$$\mathbf{n} = 1/(\Delta 2 + 1/N) = 310$$

n – number of cases or sample size; Δ – allowable error or margin of error; N – population size

In order to draw representative conclusions, it is necessary to survey 310 1st and 2nd year students, who have taken the VMU and/or any other accredited English Language Placement test. As mentioned above, the survey was distributed amongst students through their lecturers in the VMU Moodle.

The respondents had two weeks to complete the survey, which was available to the respondents via Moodle platform. There were 120 students who answered to the questionnaire, from which almost 65% were 1st year students and almost 25% were 2nd year students, while the remaining 10% consisted of 3rd and 4th year students. It is important to mention that half of the sample were students from the Education Academy (18.3%), Faculty of Law (16.7%), and the Faculty of Political Sciences and Diplomacy (15.8%), although students from all 13 VMU faculties responded to the survey. We should also note that 76.3% of the respondents were ages between 17 and 20, which allows to believe that most of the students were in the 1st and 2nd years of their studies. It is noteworthy that we were not able to collect 310 respondents; however, we were able to collect relevant and representative responses from 1st and 2nd year VMU students.

3.3.4 Research Limitations

Quantitative research helps to evaluate and analyse target users' opinion about the service, but it is characterized by certain limitations that may affect the representativeness of the research. The following section highlights the main limitations which, according to Bryman (2016) and Creswell (2017), affect the accuracy and conclusions of the research being conducted:

- The selection of respondents. Since the research was conducted by interviewing all students that studied the English language at any level, the selection of participants was not limited. Unfortunately, students are generally reluctant to fill in questionnaires due to intense study programmes or lack of motivation. Nevertheless, we tried to emphasize to the respondents that the survey was aimed at improving the language placement process rather than evaluating individual performance.

- The sample is too small. According to Bryman (2016), a small number of respondents can limit the analysis of the results and the drawing of conclusions.

- The design of research questions. Although we tried to formulate the questions as clearly as possible, the respondents may not have understood the questions. For this reason, during the analysis of the research results, the questions that had been answered inappropriately were deleted and not analysed further.

- Inaccurate data of the respondents. There are a few reasons why students might provide inaccurate answers in the survey about their placement test experiences. One possibility is the desire to present themselves in a positive light, known as social desirability bias, or students might not have a clear understanding of the survey's purpose or believe that their feedback will not make a difference. This perception of futility can lead to apathy or indifference, resulting in rushed or inaccurate responses.

After discussing and considering the limitations of the study, it is easier to make representative and correct data analysis from the obtained results.

4. Results and Discussion

Almost all the respondents (98.2%) indicated that the English language was a mandatory subject at their secondary and high schools. Consequently, the majority of the students (87.5%) took English State Final Examination, while a comparable percentage of 84.9% took VMU English Placement Test created by the team of lecturers of IFL. All English language placement tests taken by the respondents are provided in Table 3.

Table 3. Percentage of students taken English language placement tests

TEST	Percentage of students taken the test
IELTS	4.20%
TOEFL	0.80%
DUOLINGO	0.80%
ENGLISH CAMBRIDGE EXAM	0.80%
PTE	0%
VYTAUTAS MAGNUS UNIVERSITY ENGLISH PLACEMENT TEST	84.90%
ENGLISH STATE FINAL EXAMINATION	87.50%

After taking VMU English Placement Test, more than half of the respondents (59.5%) were recommended to study English at B1 level. Together with the ones recommended for B2 level (19%), they make up the majority of the respondents – 88.5 %. This result is in alignment with Order No V-390 (May 6, 2014) of the Minister of Education and Science of the Republic of Lithuania whose provisions regarding state final examinations of foreign languages are aimed at B1 and B2 language proficiency levels. The distribution of the respondents among the recommended English language levels is provided in Figure 2.
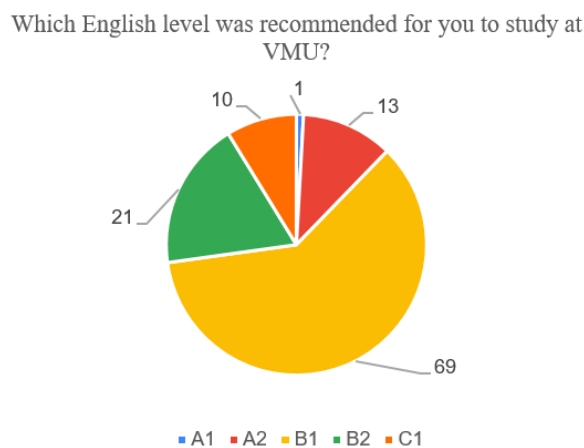

Figure 2. Recommended level of study at VMU

As almost all the respondents registered to the recommended level (94 %) (Figure 3), we can presume that the respondents believed to have been assigned to language level matching their competences. Such a high percentage

corresponds with the findings of Al-Adawi and Al-Balushi (2016) who indicated that a significant majority of the respondents concurred that they had been appropriately assigned to their respective proficiency levels.

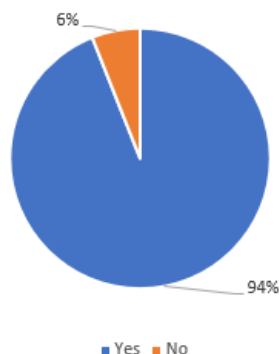Did you register to the recommended level?

Figure 3. Percentage of students who registered to the recommended or another level

As illustrated in Figure 3, 6% of the respondents of the present study indicated that they chose a different than recommended English language level. 60% of the latter studied at a higher level, while 40% decided to polish their English language skills and signed up for lower-level courses (see Figure 4). While a substantial number of affirmative responses permits the inference that the test results align with the test takers' perceptions of their English language proficiency, we must acknowledge the tentative nature of this conclusion due to one of the study's constraints—a limited sample size. More responses would allow drawing a more reliable conclusion regarding the extent to which VMU Placement Test accurately mirrors actual language proficiency or, more precisely, individuals' beliefs about their language competence.

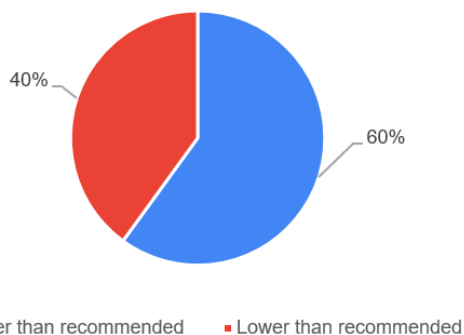Did you register to a higher or lower English language level than recommended?

Figure 4. Students' choices to register at other than the recommended level

Unfortunately, the question of whether English placement tests serve as a reliable indicator of real English proficiency lacks a definitive answer. The respondents were divided in their answers: 35% of all the respondents answered that English placement tests are a good indicator of real English proficiency; however, the same number of respondents (35%) answered that they are not; and 28 % responded that they do not know (see Figure 5). It is imperative to highlight some inconsistencies within the responses. Notably, only 35% of the participants affirmed that placement tests reflect real language proficiency. Paradoxically, a significantly higher percentage, specifically 94%, acknowledged enrolling in the English language course recommended by the placement test thereby accepting placement test results. One respondent replied that there are many placement tests, and the reliability depends on the test. This answer points to another limitation of this research – we asked a generalized question about all placement tests without any focus on specific tests, while our respondents had taken various placement tests.
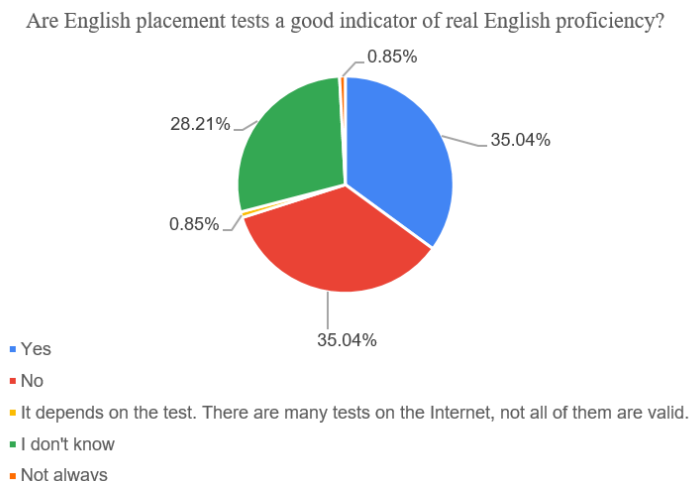
Are English placement tests a good indicator of real English proficiency?

Figure 5. Students' opinions about placement tests as indicators of language proficiency

We also sought to ascertain the specific components of VMU Placement Test that were the most challenging to its takers. The research data revealed that reading (30% of the respondents) and grammar (29%) were the most difficult tasks, followed by listening tasks which were indicated by 17% of the respondents. In the pursuit of identifying potential test-related challenges and understanding the reasons for difficulties in specific test areas, the respondents were asked to explain their responses in more detail through an open-ended question, providing insight into their perspectives. The answers were summarised and coded by keywords provided in Table 4.

Table 4. Issues related to the VMU Placement Test according to its takers.

Language proficiency issues	Test composition issues	Extralinguistic issues
Insufficient lexicon	Inability to understand the recording	Inability to decide
Can't remember grammar rules	Poor quality audio	Concentration issues
Inability to apply grammar rules	Insufficient time	Stress
Spelling mistakes	Too much information	Didn't know what to expect
Poor learning experience	Testing nuances to trick students	Pride
Tricky grammar rules	Confusingly structured structures	Headache

The answers were generalized into three groups: issues related to the language proficiency of the test takers, issues related to the composition of the test, and extralinguistic issues attributed to taking the test. The answers revealed that most respondents had problems with grammar perhaps due to their complicated learning experience. The responses provided by the students pertaining to deficient grammar proficiency and insufficient vocabulary align consistently with their responses regarding the most challenging components, namely, grammar and reading, within VMU Placement Test.

Almutairi (2023) posits that improving test reliability entails providing clear instructions, minimizing variability in response options, and maintaining consistency in test components. The findings of the present research also provide certain implications concerning the test's quality and validity, with the respondents frequently expressing concerns related to audio quality, question formulation, and allotted time for test completion.

According to Johnson and Riazi (2017), "time constraints are likely to impact examinees' ability to demonstrate skills assessed by the instrument" (p.93). Similarly to the responses in the present research, a substantial number of students, constituting more than 22 % of the participants in Johnson and Riazi's study, conveyed inadequacy in the allotted time for the placement test (2017, p.93). In their qualitative analysis of English placement test in China, Fan and Jin (2020) also underscore the significance of time constraints as a pivotal factor influencing the outcomes of testing processes.

As aptly noted by Fan and Jin (2020), "language testing is and has always been a social practice" (p. 386) and "it is meaningful to explore the social and contextual factors that shape different aspects of language testing practice" (p. 387). Hence, test takers' psychological and/or physical conditions, including stress, inability to concentrate and

others, play an important role. These factors were also frequently mentioned by the respondents (Table 4). Al-Adawi and Al-Balushi (2016) propose considering diverse contextual testing elements, including lighting, spatial dimensions of the room, furniture arrangement, and other important factors, in the evaluation of test outcomes. In light of the responses obtained in the current study and the findings from other scholars (Johnson and Riazi, 2017; Fan and Jin, 2020; Al-Adawi and Al-Balushi, 2016), it is important to re-evaluate contextual elements associated with the administration of VMU Placement Test.

Even though grammar and its rules feature in quite a lot of responses as one of the reasons why VMU Placement Test was challenging, more than half of all the respondents (53.04%) still think that grammar should be included in English placement tests (see Figure 6). 1 respondent suggested integrating grammar into other creative tasks.
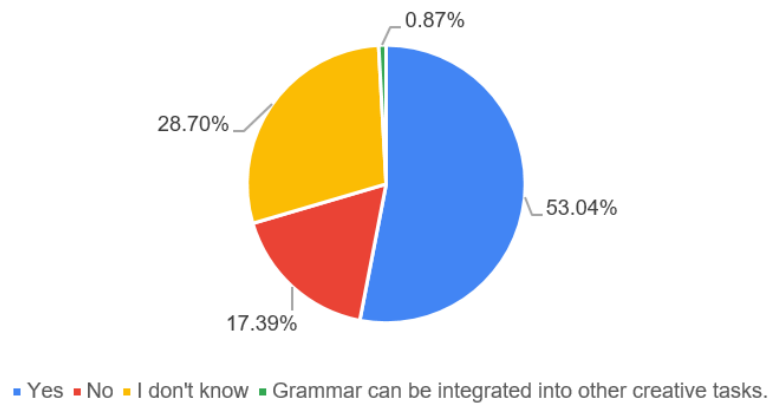

Figure 6. Students' opinions about grammar in English placement tests

The most common explanation why grammar should be in placement tests was related to its importance, to it being the milestone of learning any language. It was also indicated that grammar is essential for future studies, as students later need to write academic texts in English. There were more expedient answers explaining that any test should check all language skills, thus grammar as well. According to some respondents, grammar serves as an indicator of one's proficiency in English, thus representing a viable means of assessing students' language competence. Some respondents answered that by determining the problematic cases in students' grammar, English language courses could be adjusted so that students can benefit the most and are better prepared for their studies and future careers. A similar idea is expressed in Bernhardt et al. (2004) stating that educational programmes need comprehensive insights into a student's grammatical proficiency within a given language. One respondent indicated that he/she finds grammar more interesting than reading or listening.

The opponents of grammar in placement tests pointed out that grammar is too difficult, or they do not like grammar. According to some respondents, the inclusion of grammar tasks into the test would make it more difficult. Some of the responses are provided in Table 5.

Table 5. The respondents' positive and negative attitudes towards grammar tasks in placement tests (the language is not corrected)

Grammar is pretty bit indicator of English language.
Personally, I find it more interesting than the reading/listening
Because it is a great way to decide someone's english level.
Grammar is important because you'll probably have to write various articles that will have to have English sections in them.
If you want to learn english properly you have to understand grammar rules.
It shows how well you know English
It is better for education
I don't like grammar
It is too hard
Because grammar is important.

Llosa and Bunch (2011) characterize the assessed competence as a "test construct", deeming it indispensable in the interpretation of test outcomes. They further elaborate that the linguistic aspects evaluated should correspond to those incorporated in educational programmes. Evidently, grammar alone cannot serve as the exclusive test construct, as there are doubts that placement tests based on grammar can provide sufficient information on which to base diagnostic mediation or sequencing of instructional materials (Green and Weir, 2004). Given the significance of grammar within language courses and considering the responses to open-ended questions along with the prevalence of affirmative responses (53.04%), a tentative conclusion can be drawn affirming the importance of grammar tasks as a fundamental test construct for evaluating language competence, thereby advocating for their retention in placement tests.

5. Conclusions

1. VMU English Placement Test effectively determines appropriate language levels for students, as more than half of the respondents were recommended to study English at the B1 level, in line with educational guidelines of the Minister of Education and Science of the Republic of Lithuania (Order No V-390, May 6, 2014). Furthermore, a predominant majority of the respondents, comprising 94 %, accepted the test result and enrolled in the recommended English level. Undoubtedly, a greater number of responses would enable the formulation of a more reliable conclusion whether VMU Placement Test effectively gauges language users' English language proficiency.

2. The question of whether English placement tests are reliable indicators of real English proficiency remains inconclusive. The respondents' opinions were divided, with equal percentages of students considering the tests to be a good indicator, not a good indicator, or being unsure. This indicates the complexity and subjectivity of assessing language proficiency through placement tests. Further research focusing on specific tests and exploring the perspectives of test takers would be valuable in determining the reliability and validity of placement tests in assessing English proficiency.

3. The respondents found the reading and grammar sections of VMU Placement Test challenging, indicating struggles with grammar rules and concerns about the quality and validity of the test. Improvements in these areas are needed for a more accurate assessment of language proficiency. Given that respondents emphasized contextual factors, such as the formulation of tasks and time constraints, during the administration of the placement test, it is imperative for the test administrators to undertake a thorough review of these aspects.

4. It is noteworthy that the majority of the respondents, constituting 53.04%, advocate for the inclusion of grammar tasks in placement tests. Considering the insights gathered from open-ended questions, coupled with the prevalence of affirmative responses, and taking into account the important role of grammar in language courses, a conclusion can be drawn affirming the critical role of grammar tasks as a test construct for evaluating language proficiency. This supports the argument for maintaining the inclusion of grammar tasks in placement tests.

6. Implications for Further Study

The findings of the current study carry certain implications for further research. In the pursuit of enhancing the efficacy of VMU Placement Test, it would be beneficial to investigate which components of the test should be improved. A comparative analysis encompassing the results of VMU Placement Test, the academic progress of designated students, and their self-perceptions of language proficiency presents another avenue for exploration. Furthermore, an examination of the participants' perspectives on the modality of placement tests, specifically comparing face-to-face and online formats, merits attention, given the current online administration of VMU Placement Test. A correlated theme would be investigating students' attitudes towards dishonest practices during placement tests and the ensuing ramifications thereof.

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