

## The Design of a Web-based Placement Test for College-Level Chinese Language Programs (论大学中文项目网上分班考试的设计)

Qian, Zhiying  
(钱之莹)

Florida State University  
(佛罗里达州立大学)  
zqian@fsu.edu

**Abstract:** This study reported on the design of a web-based Chinese placement test at the college level that was capable of automatically grading and making placement decisions. It can be used by the majority of Chinese programs at U.S. universities and consists of 60 multiple-choice questions covering grammar, vocabulary, and reading comprehension. To ensure validity and discriminability, the placement test was tested with 102 Chinese learners at three proficiency levels at a large state university. The results were compared to multiple established measures of L2 proficiency, including a cloze test. The correlation analyses revealed that the placement test scores significantly correlated with the cloze test scores, the final exam scores, and self-assessment, indicating that the placement test was accurate in assessing L2 proficiency and effective at discriminating between adjacent levels of instruction. We recommend that college-level Chinese programs use this placement test or use it as a model in their design of Chinese placement tests.

**摘要:** 本文旨在介绍一种北美大学中文项目的分班考试的设计方法,并且通过一系列的测试来证明用这种方法设计的分班考试具有较高的准确性和区分度。基于网络的分班考试能够让学生远程参加考试,远程提交,提交后自动批改和显示分班结果,其高效性和便捷性有利于学生尽快完成注册,同时又能降低教师的工作量。分班考试的内容为六十个多项选择题,涵盖语法、词汇和阅读理解。为了测试该分班考试的有效性和区分度,初级、中级和高级中文班的共102位学生参加了分班考试和其它一系列在二语习得研究中被证明为有效的测试。研究结果表明,按照这种方法设计出的分班考试与完型填空成绩、期末考试成绩和学生的语言水平自我评估都呈现高度正相关,说明分班考试的准确性高、区分度强。用这种方法设计分班考试简单高效,可供大学中文项目参考。

**Keywords:** Chinese placement test, computerized test, language assessment, proficiency test

**关键词:** 中文分班考试、电脑辅助语言测试、语言水平测试

## 1. Introduction

Placement tests are a type of language assessment that aims to place students with prior knowledge of a foreign language into appropriate levels of courses so that language classes consist of relatively homogenous learners to achieve instructional effectiveness (Brown, 1989). Despite the wide use of placement testing in language institutions and programs, relatively little research has been conducted on the validity and reliability of Chinese placement tests. The present study introduces the construction of an online and computerized Chinese placement test at a large state university to shed some light on how to use modern technology to maximize efficiency, efficacy, automaticity, and practicality in placement testing.

The importance of placement testing cannot be overstated. It differs from other types of language assessment, such as proficiency and achievement tests, in multiple ways. First, the objective of a placement test is to place students into the proper course for their current level of proficiency, and the stakes are relatively low (Read, 2000). Initial placement recommendations can be altered later. In Chinese programs, for instance, students sometimes need to be adjusted to a lower level class due to their lack of training in Chinese characters. Second, unlike other assessment tests, the priorities of placement tests include their ability to be accessed online from anywhere and at any time. For example, at the author's institution, prompt notification of placement decisions before the beginning of a semester is important because the university needs to make decisions on class cancellation based on enrollment figures. Third, placement testing has a major impact on student satisfaction (Brown, 2005).

Existing research shows that a wide range of measures have been used for placement purposes (Bachman & Palmer, 1996; Bernhardt, Rivera, & Kamil, 2004; Chapelle, 2001; Dunkel, 1991; Heilenman, 1991; Lange, Prior, & Sims, 1992; Schwartz, 1985). At the college level, placement tests vary significantly and use a variety of testing methods, such as paper-and-pencil tests, online tests, and oral proficiency interviews. A number of factors other than placement test scores are considered in the placement process, including years of prior language study, length of residence in countries using the target language, and scores on standardized tests, such as the Advanced Placement (AP) Test of the College Board (Wheritt & Clearly, 1990).

The number of studies on placement tests is scarce compared to other types of foreign language assessment tests, and even fewer have been conducted on East Asian languages. A search for Chinese and Japanese placement tests yielded two studies on Chinese placement tests (Li, 2008; Spring, 2008) and one on Japanese placement tests (Eda et al., 2008). Eda et al. (2008) validated the reliability of the items on the Japanese Skills Test (JSKIT) by comparing the JSKIT scores to those on an in-house placement test and the Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) using data from students who enrolled in two summer intensive Japanese programs. The author recommended the use of JSKIT for

evaluating the proficiency of students transferring between language programs. Spring (2008) introduced how to use the existing and externally developed STAMP test to achieve placement purposes. Li (2008) outlined a future plan for making Chinese placement decisions based on students' answers to a language experience questionnaire. Eda (2008) and Spring (2008) offered detailed explanations of the validation procedures of using existing exams as placement tools, but little is known about how to construct an in-house placement test that is tailored to the needs of the students in that program. The present study aims to close this gap by providing an example of creating an online placement test and validating it using a battery of proficiency measures.

There is a contradiction between efficiency and accuracy in placement testing (Wesche et al., 1996). Because most foreign language programs at the college level are scarce in resources in terms of instructors, classrooms, and time, efficiency is a more important factor to take into consideration than accuracy (Bernhardt et al., 2004). A good placement test should be "good enough" rather than accurate in placing students in the right class while using the resources that the institution can afford (Wesche et al., 1996). The present study created a Chinese placement test by striking a balance between efficiency and accuracy.

It has been well-established that computerized placement testing is resource-efficient (Chalhoub-Deville, 2001). The coronavirus pandemic, in particular, underscored the importance of web-based testing to prevent in-person contact. The advantages of web-based placement testing, when compared to in-person tests, include the savings of resources associated with scheduling, proctoring, interviewing, and grading. Validated computerized tests have been shown to be more practical and flexible than the traditional method (Brantmeier, 2006), and they are not constrained by the time and space of group testing (Bernhardt et al., 2004; Brown, 1997). For instance, Bernhardt et al. (2004) conducted an empirical study on incoming and transferring students to Stanford University and reported that web-delivery placement testing provided them with more time to consider students' performance and language learning history, based on which they were able to make better placement decisions.

In terms of content, web-based language tests can increase validity and reliability (Chapelle & Douglas, 2006). True-or-false questions and multiple-choice questions can be graded automatically and instantly by the computer with total accuracy, and even open-ended questions with lengthy responses can be scored consistently based on rubrics (Bernstein et al., 2010; Carr & Xi, 2010; Williamson et al., 2004). It is also possible to make a wide variety of questions, including interactive types, to increase the authenticity of testing materials (Chapelle & Douglas, 2006; Huff & Sireci, 2001). These advantages have made web-based tests increasingly popular in making not only low-stakes placement tests but also high-stakes assessment tests, such as TOEFL (Bardovi-Harlig & Shin, 2014; Elder & Randow, 2008). The present study designed an online Chinese placement test to achieve fast delivery, accurate grading, and reduced utilization of time, space, and faculty resources.

Placement tests should be practical, valid, reliable, tailored specifically to the curriculum of individual language programs (Heilenman, 1983), and reflect the purpose

of placement testing (Shohamy, 1998). Ideally, a placement test should reflect students' current level of proficiency and the expected proficiency of the level they are placed in to ensure their success at that level, should be consistent in measuring proficiency, and should not take too much time and resources from the instructors and test-takers (Heilenman, 1983).

Many Chinese language programs at American universities are still using paper-and-pencil placement tests that require students to go to the testing site at a specified time, usually one week before the start of classes. The disadvantages of this conventional approach include: students must arrive on campus earlier than otherwise necessary; they must wait for placement results before registering for courses; instructors must complete a large quantity of grading within a short period of time. Some placement tests include character-writing sections and one-on-one interviews, which are particularly demanding on faculty time. Some institutions rely on comprehensive tests, such as the HSK test, and institutional status (i.e., the course levels a student has completed) to make placement decisions. However, comprehensive tests tend to be cumbersome, and institutional status may be unreliable. As a result, an online Chinese placement test that demands the least amount of faculty time is much needed.

In addition to being valid, reliable, and practical, the placement test introduced in this study is highly accessible and comprehensive. It can be accessed online at any time and any place and covers vocabulary, grammar, and reading comprehension at all instructional levels. It is resource-efficient by not including oral interviews and character-writing sections. Its online implementation allows for automated grading and instant receipt of placement decisions.

The validity of this Chinese placement test was checked against a cloze test, which was a fill-in-the-blanks test that had been found to be reliable in measuring general language proficiency (Eckes & Grotjahn, 2006; Tremblay, 2011) across various languages, including English (Heilenman, 1983), German (Mozgalina & Ryshina-Pankova, 2015), French (Tremblay, 2011), Spanish (Ozete, 1977), Japanese and Russian (Brière et al., 1978). Cloze tests are short, usually taking approximately 20 minutes to complete, easy to create, and easy to administer to participants, and thus have been popular as a measure of L2 proficiency in the fields of second language acquisition and psycholinguistics. Some foreign language programs use cloze tests as placement instruments because of their validity and reliability. For instance, the German program in Mozgalina and Ryshina-Pankova (2015) reported that their C-test, a type of cloze test, yielded more consistent and accurate results than the listening comprehension test, the reading comprehension test, and the language proficiency survey in their placement test, became the primary factor in making placement decisions and was adopted as the placement test. Cloze tests have strong correlations with some comprehensive tests, such as the Modern Language Association Cooperative Foreign Language Tests (MLA,  $r=.90$  in Caulfield & Smith, 1981). The cloze test used in this study was created by using the rational deletion method and the exact scoring method. In the rational deletion method, the blanks are created by the test makers depending on certain criteria. In the exact scoring method, a point is given to each blank only when the answer is completely

correct. In addition, because Chinese uses a logographic writing system that is challenging for L2 learners, 0.5 point was given to each correct answer written in Pinyin.

Besides the cloze test, the validity of the Chinese placement test was verified using self-assessed proficiency in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Self-assessment has been found to be capable of indicating second language abilities in general (AlFallay, 2004; Birckbichler et al., 1993; Falchikov & Boud, 1989; Hargan, 1994; Oscarson, 1997) and has been recommended to be used in place of traditional placement tests (Hargan, 1994; Heilenman, 1991; Schwartz, 1985). In a meta-analysis of 60 empirical studies involving self-assessments, Ross (1998) observed considerably stronger and more stable correlations between students' self-assessed reading skills and their actual reading capability than for other skills between self-assessment and test scores. Self-assessment accuracy was highest for reading skills, followed by listening, and then speaking skills, leading the author to conclude that students were better able to evaluate their receptive skills, such as reading and listening, than their productive skills, such as listening and writing. After reviewing multiple studies on computer-adaptive language testing, Deville and Deville (1999) recommended that educators use self-assessment to determine the starting point for computer-adaptive placement tests. So far, only a few studies have investigated the reliability of self-assessment across all four domains of language skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing. This study will shed some light on the reliability of self-assessment in addition to using it as a validation tool for the placement test.

The current study aims to introduce a college-level online Chinese placement test and the validation procedures to ensure its validity and practicality. Advice specific to the Chinese language, such as how to deal with the two versions of the Chinese writing system, will be provided. It attempts to strike a balance between comprehensiveness and practicality, seeking to minimize the use of university and faculty resources. The placement test is fast, taking approximately 20 minutes for elementary students, 40 minutes for intermediate students, and 60 minutes for advanced students to complete. Such efficiency is especially beneficial to large institutions, where hundreds of incoming students need to be placed and conventional paper-and-pencil placement testing is overwhelming to instructors. The validation process involves a set of correlational analyses with other measures of L2 proficiency. In short, the goal of this research is to introduce a way to design and validate online Chinese placement tests.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1 Participants

Participants were 102 second language learners of Chinese (52 males; mean age: 20.5; range: 16–44) enrolled in the second, fourth, and sixth semesters of Chinese language courses at the University of Colorado Boulder. They have completed one, three, or five semesters of classroom instruction, respectively, or at equivalent proficiency levels. The first, third, and fifth semesters of Chinese language courses were not offered at the time of data collection. The data was collected in the first class of the semester.

There were 37 participants in the second-semester class, 42 in the fourth-semester class, and 23 in the sixth-semester class. Additional demographic information is provided in Table 1. One participant did not complete the cloze test, and 14 did not have final exam scores from the previous semester because they did not take any Chinese courses that semester. Nine participants began learning Chinese before age 10 (4, 4, and 1 in the 2nd-, 4th-, and 6th-semester courses, respectively). Their proficiency levels were comparable to those of their peers in the same classes, and they were included in the data analysis.

## 2.2 Materials and Design

**The Placement Test.** The placement test was constructed based on the three years of Chinese language classes at the University of Colorado Boulder. The placement test was designed to place students into six levels of Chinese language classes. It consisted of 60 multiple-choice questions in total, and the design was such that there were 10 multiple choice questions targeting each of the six levels—Introductory Chinese 1 and 2, Intermediate Chinese 1 and 2, and Advanced Chinese 1 and 2. The first five semesters used the textbook *Integrated Chinese* (Liu & Yao, 2009), covering eight chapters per semester and completing the four volumes of *Integrated Chinese* in five semesters. The textbook for the 6th semester was *Chinese Odyssey (Volume 5)* (Wang, 2008). These six local levels of proficiency were roughly equivalent to the novice-mid, novice-high, intermediate-low, intermediate-mid, intermediate-high, and advanced-low levels of proficiency on the ACTFL scale. In other Chinese language programs, the test questions should be based on the materials used to teach each level of Chinese at that institution.

Simplified Chinese characters are used in mainland China and Singapore and traditional Chinese characters in other places such as Taiwan and Hong Kong. Chinese placement tests should be able to place students who have learned a writing system different from the one currently taught in the program. The approach implemented by this placement test was to place students who had learned a different writing system one level lower than their proficiency level to give them one semester to catch up on the writing system.

Eight of the ten questions at each course level tested vocabulary and grammar, while the other two questions addressed reading comprehension. All questions were short, with grammar and vocabulary questions ranging from 10 to 41 characters and reading comprehension questions ranging from two to five lines. All questions were multiple-choice with four selections, allowing for automated grading and rapid score calculation once implemented into the course management system. The questions got progressively harder, and participants were instructed to answer all questions. There were 60 questions in total, and the highest possible score was 60. No participant has seen the test items before. Two versions of the placement test, with simplified characters and traditional characters, were developed, and participants were free to choose one of the two versions. Examples (1), (2), and (3) below illustrate test items targeting grammar, vocabulary, and reading comprehension, respectively. English translations are provided here but not on the actual test.

- (1) 你想喝茶还是喝咖啡\_\_\_\_\_?  
 A. 吗                      B. 吧                      C. 呢                      D. X  
 Would you like to have tea or coffee \_\_\_\_\_?  
 A. Question particle “ma”  
 B. Suggestion particle “ba”  
 C. “Ne” particle for softening the tone  
 D. No words are needed
- (2) 父母\_\_\_\_\_我每天晚上十一点以前一定要回家。  
 A. 规定                      B. 制定                      C. 实行                      D. 实施  
 My parents \_\_\_\_\_ I before eleven pm every night must go home.  
 A. set a rule                      B. make (plans)                      C. implement                      D. carry out
- (3) 明明长得高高的，眼睛又大又圆，是个很帅的男孩子。他喜欢跟朋友一起聊天、看电视、打球。他不喜欢做功课，也不喜欢学习。下面哪个是对的?  
 A. 明明是个好学生。  
 B. 明明的眼睛不大。  
 C. 明明常常在家看书。  
 D. 明明爱跟朋友一起聊天。

Mingming is tall. He has big, round eyes and is very handsome. He likes chatting, watching TV, and playing balls with his friends. He does not like homework. He does not like studying, either. Which of the following is true?

- A. Mingming is a good student.  
 B. Mingming does not have big eyes.  
 C. Mingming often stays at home and reads books.  
 D. Mingming likes chatting with his friends.

**The Language Background Information Form.** Prior to the placement test and the cloze test, all participants completed a language background information form, in which they provided information about their age, gender, native language, age of acquisition, length of classroom instruction, length of time spent in Chinese-speaking countries, daily percentage use of Chinese and the native language, and self-rated proficiency in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The demographic information was used to determine which factors contributed to L2 proficiency but was not considered for the decision-making process in the placement test. Self-assessment questions asked participants to rate their abilities on a scale of 1 (very bad) to 7 (very good). Participants completed the questionnaire in approximately five minutes.

**The Cloze Test.** The cloze test was a fill-in-the-blanks test, in which participants filled in 40 blanks in a 425-character passage. The passage was adapted from a story in the textbook *Encounters: A Cognitive Approach to Advanced Chinese* (Liu & Li, 2010). Participants could write characters for full points or Pinyin for half points. The cloze test was available in two versions: traditional characters and simplified characters.

Participants could select the version in which they were more proficient at reading. Prior to its usage by second language learners, the cloze test was administered to five native speakers. All native speakers finished it within 5 to 10 minutes and with complete accuracy. An answer bank was developed, and all participants' answers were compared to the answer bank in the grading process. In addition to the Language Background Information and the Cloze Test, participants' final exam scores from the previous semester were also used to check the validity of the placement test.

**Table 1 Demographic Information and Test Scores**

	All participants	First-year class	Second-year class	Third-year class
Number of participants	102	37	42	23
Age	20.5	20.5	20.1	21.3
Age of acquisition	15.7	17.3	14.1	16.1
Length of classroom instruction (months)	35.6	16.8	44.8	49.0
Length of living in Chinese-speaking countries (months)	8.9	3.1	11.1	14.5
Daily percentage use of Chinese (%)	8.1	6.8	6.6	12.9
Daily percentage use of native languages (%)	91.3	93.2	93.4	84.5
Self-reported proficiency in listening (<=7)	4.4	4.3	4.4	4.5
Self-reported proficiency in speaking (<=7)	4.2	3.9	4.4	4.2
Self-reported proficiency in reading (<=7)	4.3	4.1	4.2	4.7
Self-reported proficiency in writing (<=7)	3.7	3.6	3.6	3.9
Placement test (<=60)	24.6 (8-58)	17.2 (8-29)	23.7 (12-43)	38.2 (19-58)
Cloze test (<=40)	5.8 (0-35)	1.6 (0-7)	5.1 (0-27)	13.9 (2-35)
Final exam of the previous semester (<=100)	81.3	75.2	85.5	83.1

\*Ranges are shown in parentheses.

### 2.3 Procedure

All students (n=102) enrolled in the Chinese language program took the placement test in paper-and-pencil format on the first day of class. They first filled out the Language Background Information Form and then complete the placement test and the cloze test. On average, it took first-year students 20 minutes, second-year students 40 minutes, and third-year students 60 minutes for the placement test. It took all participants approximately 20 minutes for the cloze test and 5 minutes for the Language Background Information Form.



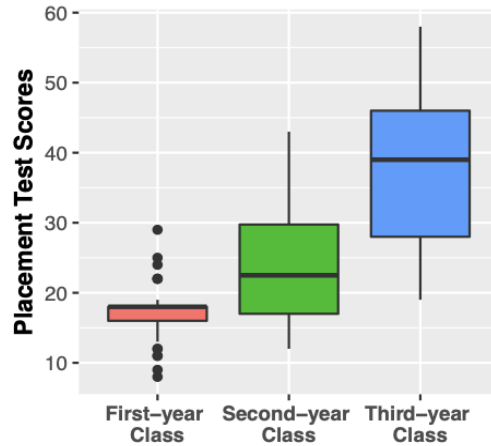
### 3. Results

Demographic information and scores of the placement test, the cloze test, and the final exam of the previous semester are summarized in Table 1.

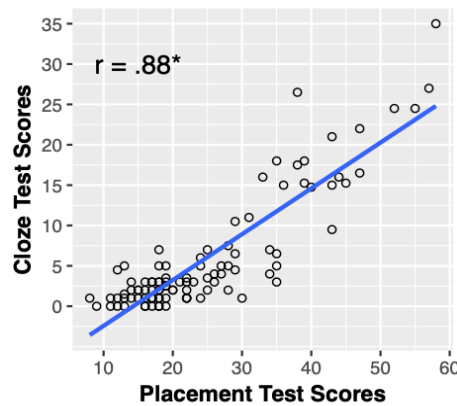
To verify the validity and reliability of the placement test, ANOVAs and correlational analyses were conducted on the placement test scores and a battery of other measures of proficiency. As seen in Figure 1, the one-way ANOVA on the placement test scores yielded a significant main effect of class levels ( $F(2,99)=47.55, p<.0001$ ; first-year mean=17.2; second-year mean=23.7; third-year mean=38.2). Subsequent ad-hoc tests revealed that all three levels of classes were significantly different from one another after adjusting the  $p$ -value for the number of statistical tests conducted. Second-year participants scored significantly higher than first-year participants ( $F(1,77)=18.52, p<.00001$ ) and third-year participants scored significantly higher than second-year participants ( $F(1,63)=33.22, p<.00001$ ), indicating that the placement test was effective in discriminating between adjacent levels of proficiency, which was precisely the purpose of placement testing.

Correlation analyses between the placement test scores and the final exam scores of the immediate previous semesters (first semester, third semester, and fifth semester) showed strong correlations across all three levels of classes (first-year:  $r=.62, p<.001$ ; second-year:  $r=.56, p<.001$ ; third-year:  $r=.51, p<.05$ ).

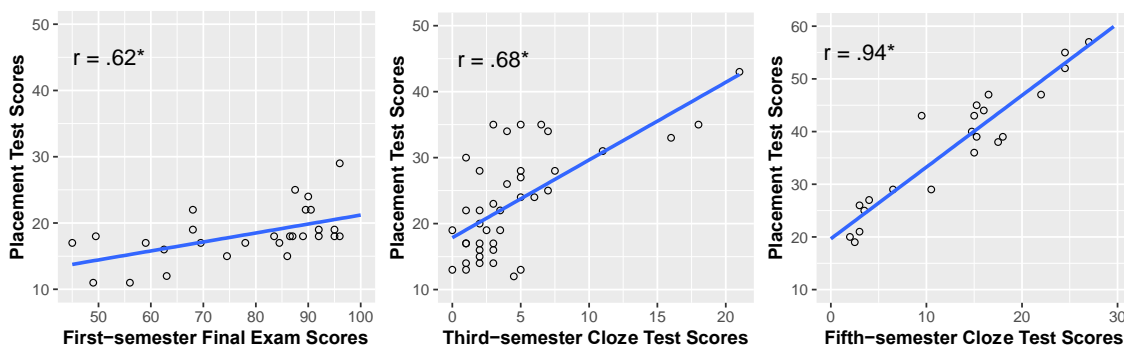
Further analysis of the placement test scores and the cloze test scores revealed a strong and statistically significant correlation between them ( $r=.88, p<.0001$ ), as shown in Figure 2. Given that it has been well-established that cloze tests are accurate and reliable in measuring native and non-native language proficiency across a number of languages (see Tremblay, 2011, for an overview), this result indicated that the placement test was also effective in measuring language proficiency. At each class level, the placement test scores were significantly and strongly correlated with the cloze test scores at the second-year ( $r=.68, p<.00001$ ) and third-year ( $r=.94, p<.00001$ ) levels, and moderately but significantly correlated with the cloze test scores at the first-year level ( $r=.39, p<.05$ ). Correlation coefficients were highest for third-year students ( $r=.94$ ), followed by second-year students ( $r=.68$ ) and first-year students ( $r=.39$ ). The final exams for the three instructional levels targeted the knowledge learned in one semester, while the cloze test targeted cumulative knowledge. Thus, for first-year students, the final exam was a better indicator of proficiency than the cloze test, and for second- and third-year students, the cloze test was a better measure than the cloze test. As shown in Figure 3, the correlations between the placement test and the better indicator of proficiency at each of the three instructional levels were .62, .68, and .94, respectively, indicating medium effect sizes at the first- and second-year levels and a big effect size at the third-year level. Taken together, these results attested to the validity of the placement test at all three levels, particularly at the advanced level.



**Figure 1** The placement test scores for the first-year, second-year, and third-year Chinese classes



**Figure 2** Correlation between placement test scores and cloze test scores for all participants



**Figure 3** Correlations between the placement test and the final exam for the first-year students and between the placement test and the cloze test for the second- and third-year students

Further correlation analyses performed on all participants' data and between the placement test and other measures of proficiency revealed statistically significant correlations between the placement test and self-reported proficiency in listening ( $r=.21$ ,  $p<.05$ ), speaking ( $r=.20$ ,  $p<.05$ ), reading ( $r=.20$ ,  $p<.05$ ), and the composite self-reported proficiency scores computed by adding self-reported listening, speaking, reading, and writing scores ( $r=.21$ ,  $p<.05$ ). When correlation analyses were conducted at the class levels, the correlation effects were most pronounced at the second-year level, where placement test scores were significantly correlated with the composite self-reported proficiency ( $r=.37$ ,  $p<.05$ ), self-reported reading proficiency ( $r=.33$ ,  $p<.05$ ), and marginally significantly correlated with self-reported writing proficiency ( $r=.26$ ,  $p=.10$ ). Placement test scores were correlated with self-reported proficiency in listening ( $r=.49$ ,  $p<.05$ ) at the third-year level. At the first-year level, self-reported proficiency did not significantly correlate with placement test scores, probably because students with just one semester of Chinese language instruction were not yet good at estimating their proficiency. These results showed that L2 learners were able to evaluate their proficiency to some extent, but self-assessments were less accurate than objective measures, such as the placement test and the cloze test.

Additional correlation analyses revealed that the placement test was significantly and negatively correlated with age of acquisition ( $r=-.19$ ,  $p=.05$ ), indicating that an earlier start to learning Chinese was associated with higher proficiency. The placement test was positively correlated with the length of classroom instruction ( $r=.43$ ,  $p<.00001$ ) and the length of residence in Chinese-speaking countries ( $r=.26$ ,  $p<.01$ ), suggesting that more classroom instruction and more time in places where the target language was spoken resulted in increased proficiency. Finally, the placement test showed a positive correlation with the daily percentage use of Chinese ( $r=.28$ ,  $p<.01$ ) and a negative correlation with the daily percentage use of the participants' native languages ( $r=-.36$ ,  $p<.001$ ). To summarize, the placement test successfully distinguished between participants with varying levels of proficiency and was correlated with other measures of proficiency, including the age of acquisition, length of classroom instruction, cloze test, final exam scores, and self-reported proficiency in listening, speaking, and reading, thereby attesting to the discriminatory ability, validity, and reliability of the placement test.

#### 4. Cut-off Points and Online Implementation of the Placement Test

The statistical analysis demonstrated that the placement test was valid and capable of discriminating between various levels of proficiency. The next step was to establish the cut-off points for the six levels. Tables 2 and 3 show the 25%, 50%, 75%, and 80% percentile scores for the three classes, as well as the placement decisions for the six levels. The cut-off lines were established based on the performance of the current students to ensure that incoming students would have equivalent proficiency to those in the classes into which they would be placed. To this end, the cut-off line was set at 80% quantile. This approach of deciding cut-off points based on the performance of current students has been employed in previous studies, such as Long et al. (2018), when prior test scores or students' proficiency levels were available for reference. A relatively high quantile point

(80%) was selected for two considerations: 1) students participating in this placement test did not have exposure to Chinese over the winter break that was immediately before the placement test; and 2) incoming students would not feel overwhelmed in the new class. As seen in Table 2, students who have completed three semesters scored 14 points higher than those who have completed one semester, and students who have completed five semesters were also 14 points better than those who have completed three semesters. As a result, the cut-off point for each level was precisely 7 points higher than the preceding level, as shown in Table 3. Additionally, Table 3 illustrates that if a student's placement test version (simplified vs. traditional characters) differed from the characters taught in the Chinese program, the student would be placed one level lower to allow for additional time to catch up on the writing system. Very few previous studies on placement testing have reported the algorithms and rationales for determining cut-off points. The present study developed the algorithm by taking into account the proficiency levels of current students.

**Table 2 Percentage Quantiles of the Placement Test Scores for the Three Levels**

Class Level	25% quantile	50% quantile	75% quantile	80% quantile
Students who have completed one semester of Chinese instruction	16	18	18	19
Students who have completed three semesters of Chinese instruction	17	23	30	33
Students who have completed five semesters of Chinese instruction	28	39	46	47

**Table 3 Cut-off Points for the Six Levels of Chinese Classes**

Placement Decisions	Range
First semester	0-18
Second semester	19-25
Third semester	26-32
Fourth semester	33-39
Fifth semester	40-46
Sixth semester	47-53

After the discriminatory ability of the placement test was confirmed, it was entered into the Canvas course management system, allowing students to access it remotely at any time, from any place, get automatic grading, and receive an immediate notification of their placement results. Two versions of the placement test, with traditional characters and with simplified characters, are available on Canvas. For instance, since traditional characters were taught in all levels of Chinese classes at the University of Colorado Boulder, the placement test instruction screen clearly states, "For this exam, you will need to decide to take the exam in Traditional Chinese or Simplified Chinese. If you take the exam in Simplified Chinese, you will automatically be placed one level lower. " Students are prompted to choose one of the two versions following this instruction.

When implemented into Canvas, the instruction screen also includes the following information: 1) a description of the placement test, in which students are informed that there are 60 questions and they have one chance but unlimited time to take the exam; 2) a warning that the use of external resources is discouraged because it will result in incorrect placement decisions; and 3) the placement decision table (Table 3). Students are allowed unlimited time so that in the event of internet disruption, they can log in again to continue the exam. However, they have only one attempt, which means after clicking the submission button, they cannot take the placement test again. Before submission, students are allowed to change their answers to previous questions. Such a design is consistent across all foreign language placement tests. The placement decision table details the ranges of scores and their corresponding classes. For instance, students scoring 0–18 are placed in Elementary Chinese I (first-semester), 19–25 into Elementary Chinese II (second-semester), etc. Students scoring 54 and above are told to see the Chinese Program Coordinator for advice because their proficiency is beyond all the language courses offered at the institution. Students receive their placement test scores and placement decisions shortly after their submission and are automatically given permission to register for the course that they are placed in. This online placement test is also linked to the school system, from which university undergraduate advisors are able to see the placement test results and advise students accordingly. This online and automatic placement system has proved to be successful because of its efficiency, efficacy, convenience, and practicality.

#### **4. Discussion and Conclusion**

This study introduced a way to design a computerized and web-based Chinese placement test and tested it for validity, reliability, and discriminability. We intended to contribute to the field of Chinese language instruction by introducing the procedures for constructing test items and evaluating the validity of the placement test.

The placement test was in a simple format of 60 multiple-choice questions, allowing for automated grading and instant calculation of placement decisions. There were no open-ended questions, such as translation, composition, or interview. It took elementary learners approximately 20 minutes, intermediate learners 40 minutes, and advanced learners 60 minutes to complete. The validity of the placement test was tested with 102 Chinese-learning students enrolled in three levels of Chinese courses (elementary, intermediate, and advanced) prior to its online implementation. Validation was conducted using correlation analyses with other measures of proficiency that were commonly used in the field of second language acquisition. Results showed that scores of the placement test were significantly correlated with those of the cloze test, the final exam of the previous semester, age of acquisition, length of classroom instruction, daily use of Chinese, daily use of native languages (negative correlation), and self-reported proficiency in listening, speaking, and reading, indicating that the placement test was valid and accurate in assessing L2 Chinese proficiency. More importantly, the placement test successfully distinguished participants with adjacent levels of proficiency, which was precisely the purpose of placement testing.

To strike a balance between efficiency and comprehensiveness, this placement test assessed students' ability to recognize characters but not their ability to write them. The Chinese writing system is logographic, with 2000–3000 commonly used characters. Acquiring the ability to write characters involves a great deal of practice and route memory. Character-writing is an integral part of the Chinese language learning process. However, it was determined that assessment of the character-writing skill should be excluded to allow for automated grading by the course management system, as the grading of character-writing would necessarily require faculty work, rendering instant and automated grading impossible. Students would be unable to receive placement decisions quickly enough to register for courses, making it difficult for the Chinese program and the university to evaluate class enrollments and make administrative decisions accordingly.

Any discussion of Chinese placement tests must include a discussion of how to test students' ability to read and write Chinese characters. Chinese characters are notoriously challenging for second language learners. There is a growing trend among Chinese programs at American colleges to transition away from requiring students to write characters and toward character recognition or e-writing in order to alleviate their onerous workloads, such as the Chinese programs at University of Rhode Island (He, 2022), University of California Davis (personal communication), University of Colorado Boulder (Qian & Li, in press), Florida State University (Qian, 2022), University of British Columbia (personal communication), and George Washington University (Zhang, 2021). This placement test was designed to meet this new trend by excluding the assessment of character-writing ability. Other institutions that require the ability to write characters are recommended to test students' writing abilities early in the semester and change placement decisions if necessary.

This placement test had high content validity since all test items addressed the linguistic information that students were expected to acquire at each instructional level. Placement tests constructed in this manner accurately represent course objectives and program curricula. They can serve not only the purpose of placement testing but also as indicators for teachers when making instructional decisions (Green & Weir, 2004).

There is certainly room for improvement. The use of a computer-adaptive approach that allows test-takers to stop answering questions once they reach a difficulty level beyond their current capability will be more efficient and less frustrating, especially for lower-level test-takers. Language background information, including the instructional levels a test-taker has completed, can be used to estimate the starting point of the computer-adaptive test. With the advancement of modern technology, we recommend that language program directors and instructors combine this design with an algorithm to create computer-adaptive placement tests.

To conclude, the present study introduced a way to construct computerized and web-based Chinese placement tests at the college level and verified its validity and reliability using other measures of proficiency, with the goal of providing an example to Chinese language programs on how to design, construct, and validate placement tests and determine cut-off points for each instructional level. Language instructors and program

directors constantly face the challenge of placing a large number of incoming students into the appropriate classes within a short period of time. This study outlined the procedures required to develop a computerized and online placement test that is simple, flexible, and practical, as well as allows for automated grading and immediate notification of placement decisions.

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## Appendix

## 中文分班考试 (Chinese Placement Test)

1. 我是中国人, 她\_\_\_\_\_是中国人。  
A. 都                      B. 也                      C. 很                      D. 还
2. 你想喝茶还是喝咖啡\_\_\_\_\_?  
A. 吗                      B. 吧                      C. 了                      D. ×
3. 我今天不\_\_\_\_\_去你家, 因为我要开会。  
A. 会                      B. 是                      C. 能                      D. 很
4. \_\_\_\_\_你明天有空, 我就去看你。  
A. 要是                      B. 就是                      C. 但是                      D. 不是
5. 你平常很早来, 今天\_\_\_\_\_这么晚才来?  
A. 那么                      B. 多么                      C. 怎么                      D. 什么
6. 中文书我上星期\_\_\_\_\_买了。  
A. 因为                      B. 已经                      C. 所以                      D. 以后
7. 除了电脑课\_\_\_\_\_, 我还上英文课。  
A. 以外                      B. 以上                      C. 以前                      D. 以往
8. 我去他家的时候, 他\_\_\_\_\_吃晚饭。  
A. 要在                      B. 现在                      C. 正在                      D. 有在
9. 你先坐公车, \_\_\_\_\_坐地铁。  
A. 可是                      B. 虽然                      C. 也是                      D. 然后
10. 他的中文跟我的\_\_\_\_\_好。  
A. 非常                      B. 这么                      C. 一样                      D. 大家
11. 这个唱歌很难听\_\_\_\_\_男孩子是我男朋友。  
A. 的                      B. 得                      C. 地                      D. 德
12. 她太可爱了, \_\_\_\_\_哭的时候都很可爱。  
A. 就                      B. 和                      C. 要                      D. 连
13. 机场\_\_\_\_\_我家很近, 开车只要三分钟。  
A. 在                      B. 离                      C. 是                      D. 对
14. 请\_\_\_\_\_我的书拿上来好吗?  
A. 被                      B. 用                      C. 把                      D. 得
15. 我前天喝鱼汤, 昨天\_\_\_\_\_喝鱼汤。  
A. 在                      B. 又                      C. 再                      D. 却
16. 这些礼物, 我一个\_\_\_\_\_不想收。  
A. 多                      B. 都                      C. 是                      D. 却
17. 因为今天要考试, 所以我早上六点半就起床了。起床以后我一边复习中文一边吃早饭。我复习了生词、语法、发音和课文。下面那个是对的?  
A. 我明天要考试。                      B. 我没时间吃早饭。  
C. 我很早就起床了。                      D. 我练习了写作。

18. 我请我的同学王小英跟我一起练习中文。她的中文说得太好了，汉字也写得不错。我十点开始考试，考完试后，我给姐姐打电话，可是她不在。下面哪个是对的？
- A. 我的中文比王小英好。                      B. 王小英汉字写得不错。  
C. 我十点给姐姐打电话。                      D. 姐姐帮我复习中文。
19. 小雪家离学校很远。每天她要先开车到公共汽车站，再坐公共汽车到学校。每天都要花四十分钟左右。下个学期，小雪要搬到别的地方住。下面哪个是对的？
- A. 小雪每天要坐地铁。                      B. 小雪不会开车。  
C. 下个学期小雪要搬家。                      D. 小雪家离学校不太远。
20. 明明长得高高的，眼睛又大又圆，是个很帅的男孩子。他喜欢跟朋友一起聊天、看电视、打球。他不喜欢做功课，也不喜欢学习。下面哪个是对的？
- A. 明明是个好学生。                      B. 明明的眼睛不大。  
C. 明明常常在家看书。                      D. 明明爱跟朋友一起聊天。
21. 王朋找房子\_\_\_\_\_一个多月了，可是还没有找到合适的。
- A. 找                      B. 还有                      C. 找了                      D. 了
22. 他的宿舍房间太小，连电脑都\_\_\_\_\_。
- A. 放下                      B. 不放下                      C. 放不                      D. 放不下
23. 养宠物太麻烦了，我\_\_\_\_\_宠物都不养。
- A. 无论                      B. 什么                      C. 很多                      D. 多的
24. \_\_\_\_\_的机票便宜，就买哪家的。
- A. 他家                      B. 这家                      C. 那家                      D. 哪家
25. 北京的好饭馆多得\_\_\_\_\_。
- A. 不得了                      B. 极了                      C. 非常                      D. 十分
26. 张天明\_\_\_\_\_美国出生长大\_\_\_\_\_。
- A. 是…X                      B. 是…的                      C. X…的                      D. 在…X
27. 服务员，菜要清淡一点，别太咸，\_\_\_\_\_油，别放味精。
- A. 放                      B. 多放                      C. 少放                      D. 放少
28. 天明从家里带来的衣服\_\_\_\_\_样子还是颜色都不太好。
- A. 虽然                      B. 不是                      C. 无论                      D. 可是
29. 有的中国菜好吃\_\_\_\_\_，可是太油了。
- A. 好吃                      B. 是好吃                      C. 不好吃                      D. 吗
30. 下个学期我肯定要选中文课，\_\_\_\_\_另外两门课选什么，我还没想好。
- A. 像                      B. 要么                      C. 要是                      D. 至于
31. 他想搬到姐姐家住，这样可以把房租跟饭钱\_\_\_\_\_。
- A. 省出来                      B. 省下来                      C. 省回来                      D. 省过来
32. 在兴趣\_\_\_\_\_，丽莎跟天明不太一样。
- A. 里                      B. 上                      C. 外                      D. 下
33. 柯林只要一玩电脑，就\_\_\_\_\_功课的事忘得一干二净。
- A. 做                      B. 被                      C. 把                      D. 吧

34. 很多中国孩子一生\_\_\_\_\_, 父母就开始给他们存教育费。  
A. 起来 B. 下来 C. 下去 D. 过来
35. 中国西边是高原, \_\_\_\_\_东边是平原和大海。  
A. 而 B. 而是 C. 还 D. 还是
36. 南京一边是\_\_\_\_\_高楼, 一边是传统的建筑。  
A. 一栋 B. 一座 C. 一栋栋 D. 一种种
37. 北京是中国的首都, 也是中国的政治和文化中心。那里有很多名胜古迹。六月去北京的人很多, 不过那时的机票有点贵。下面哪个是对的?  
A. 北京是中国的经济中心。  
B. 北京的名胜古迹吸引了很多游客。  
C. 每年五月去北京的人最多。  
D. 去北京的机票什么时候都很贵。
38. 买衣服只考虑便宜当然不好, 但是也不必非买名牌的衣服不可。很多名牌的衣服虽然贵, 但是质量和款式并不好。再说穿衣服不是给别人看的, 所以舒服最重要。下面哪个是对的?  
A. 买衣服价钱最重要。 B. 买衣服牌子最重要。  
C. 名牌衣服质量一定好。 D. 衣服舒服不舒服最重要。
39. 有的人觉得金融专业又轻松, 以后赚钱又多。可是金融专业整天跟钱和数字打交道, 真没意思。文学专业虽然又轻松又有意思, 可是以后赚钱不多。所以越来越多的人选工程和电脑, 又有意思又好找工作。下面哪个是对的?  
A. 文学专业又没意思, 又不好找工作。 B. 工程专业又有意思又好找工作。  
C. 电脑专业很轻松。 D. 金融专业很有意思。
40. 找男朋友女朋友的标准很多, 有的人觉得人好不好, 还有性格开朗不开朗最重要。有的人觉得男女朋友在兴趣爱好上一样最重要。其实唯一的标准就是要找到对的那个人。下面哪个是对的?  
A. 找女朋友性格最重要。 B. 找女朋友为人最重要。  
C. 找女朋友兴趣一致最重要。 D. 找到对的那个人才是最重要的。
41. 丽江美丽的风景\_\_\_\_\_我留下了深刻的印象。  
A. 跟 B. 给 C. 为 D. 对
42. 中国人说早餐要吃好, 午餐要吃饱, 晚饭要吃少。美国医生也这么说。\_\_\_\_\_这个说法是有道理的。  
A. 可见 B. 听出来 C. 听到 D. 看出来
43. 职业球员的薪水是\_\_\_\_\_市场决定的。  
A. 被 B. 由 C. 用 D. 为
44. 环境保护应该从小地方做\_\_\_\_\_。  
A. 上 B. 下 C. 起 D. 来

45. 孔子是中国历史上最有名的教育家。他到现在\_\_\_\_\_中国教育还有很大的影响。  
A. 跟 B. 给 C. 为 D. 对
46. 在秦朝的基础上, 统一的汉朝在政治、经济各个\_\_\_\_\_都有很大的发展。  
A. 地方 B. 基础 C. 方面 D. 朝代
47. 小王, 这个推销热水器的工作不过是个实习的工作\_\_\_\_\_, 不用太紧张。  
A. 起来 B. 多了 C. 过来 D. 而已
48. 要是你去北京\_\_\_\_\_, 一定要去\_\_\_\_\_故宫博物院。  
A. 游览...游览 B. 参观...参观 C. 游览...参观 D. 参观...游览
49. 到了美国就该入乡随俗, \_\_\_\_\_美国人的饮食习惯吃饭。  
A. 按照 B. 随着 C. 跟着 D. 用着
50. 中国教育系统评量学生的方式以考试为\_\_\_\_\_。  
A. 重要 B. 起 C. 主 D. 开始
51. 农历五月初五是端午节。据说人们那天吃粽子\_\_\_\_\_纪念楚国诗人屈原。  
A. 对 B. 为了 C. 给 D. 是为了
52. 四月五号那天正值春天, 百花的清香与绿草的明亮给人清凉明快的感觉, 因此人们把那天\_\_\_\_\_清明节。  
A. 是 B. 成为 C. 当作 D. 称为
53. 中国人喜欢静态的休闲活动, 而从事动态活动的人\_\_\_\_\_比较少。  
A. 并 B. 却 C. 可是 D. 不过
54. 孩子学东西, 一定要有兴趣, 这样他们才会\_\_\_\_\_。你千万不要\_\_\_\_\_。  
A. 杯弓蛇影...怀才不遇 B. 乐在其中...赶鸭子上架  
C. 画饼充饥...望梅止渴 D. 乐此不疲...专心致志
55. 父母\_\_\_\_\_我每天晚上十一点以前一定要回家。  
A. 规定 B. 制定 C. 实行 D. 实施
56. \_\_\_\_\_西医看不到, 不妨试试中医。  
A. 虽然 B. 固然 C. 果然 D. 既然
57. 过去, 中国人重男轻女。1950 年以后, 中国政府非常重视提高妇女的社会地位。从那时起, 中国人人有工作, 男女收入也差不多, 妇女的地位大大提高了, 无论在工作单位还是在家里, 中国可以算是男女平等了。下面哪个是对的?  
A. 1950 年以后, 中国开始重男轻女。 B. 1950 年以后中国基本实现男女平等。  
C. 1950 年以后, 女性的地位比男性高。 D. 政府不想改善男女不平等的问题。
58. 可是改革开放以后男性和女性的社会地位又有了改变。企业的薪水是由市场决定的, 因为企业毕竟是要挣钱的, 谁能帮助企业多挣钱, 谁的薪水就高。由于女人要生孩子要照顾家庭, 在工作上有很多限制, 因此即使女性在学校里的成绩好, 企业也喜欢用男性。下面哪个是对的?  
A. 改革开放以后, 人们的薪水是由政府决定的。  
B. 改革开放对男性和女性的地位没有影响。  
C. 改革开放有益于提高女性的地位。  
D. 女性地位的高低跟收入有关系。

59. 小美是欧洲人，她快要去北京实习了。听说北京空气污染很严重，中国又没有言论自由，什么都要审查，我不懂她为什么选择去北京。后来一谈才知道，说白了都是为了钱。现在欧洲经济发展停滞了，失业率上升。要是去美国工作，她跟美国人相比并没什么特别，可是到了中国，她的工作机会就会比一般的中国人多得多。据调查，64%的外国人到了中国后存款增加了。下面哪个是对的？
- A. 小美支持中国的言论审查制度。 B. 外国人在中国工作利大于弊。  
C. 中国人近年来存款有了大幅增长。 D. 很多外国人在中国工作是出于好奇。
60. Jimmy Choo 就是周仰杰。他家境贫穷，从小就跟着父亲做鞋子。那个时代鞋匠是社会地位很低的行业。然而他不自暴自弃。后来，伦敦时装学院因为他的一张鞋子的设计稿录取了他。为了交学费，他一边上学一边在餐馆打工，直到三十五岁才毕业。经过长时间的刻苦努力，他的鞋终于被媒体发现，来找他做鞋子的名人也越来越多，其中包括戴安娜王妃。周仰杰今年六十四岁了，他每天早上七点起床，一直工作到半夜。他说他爱做鞋，一点也不觉得疲惫。下面哪一个词语不能用来形容周仰杰？
- A. 出身低微 B. 乐此不疲 C. 怀才不遇 D. 行行出状元