

Placement by Proficiency Level: A Case Study*

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1. Introduction

Since its establishment in 1995, the Faculty of Communication Studies, in which the three authors work, has assigned the incoming class of freshmen to English classes based on the results of a placement test. The English teachers in the Faculty of Communication Studies decided to place students according to their English proficiency for several reasons.¹

Before 1995, students were assigned to their required English classes (in the other faculties of the university) rather mechanically, with no regard for their English proficiency. During this period, we noticed that students' proficiency levels ranged from extremely low to rather high. The students in the mixed level classes that we had taught up to that time often expressed dissatisfaction with the level of their classes. Some students seemed to be dissatisfied with repeating what they had already learned in high school, while others found it hard just to keep up. And we constantly struggled with the problem of how to match the content and pace of our lessons to such a wide variety of students. In fact, it was extremely difficult to design lessons that were appropriate for the wide range of students in our classes. In addition, we reasoned that it was unfair to students for their grades (i.e. at the end of the term) to reflect how much English they already knew before the course even started, as opposed to how they performed in their respective classes.

At the same time, students entered the university through various routes (regular entrance exams, recommendations from their high schools, special entrance exams for foreign students and returnees, and the test administered by the National Center for University Entrance Examinations, etc.). This meant that we had no consistent yardstick for assessing and comparing students' English proficiency levels at the beginning of the school year.

In order to overcome these problems, the Faculty of Communication Studies decided to

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¹ In the formative years of the Faculty of Communication Studies, Profs. Tsuguro Nakamura, Taira Uchida, Yoshinori Honda, Valerie Durham, and Akiko Tokuzo were in charge of the English program. Peter Ross joined the department during the 1999 academic year.

institute placement of students in English classes according to their proficiency level, starting in the year the department was established. Since this involved a departure from the approach that had been employed at the university until 1994, and since placement by proficiency level was adopted by the rest of the university starting in 2006, we have decided to present an analysis of the results of our placement program, and of the changes in our students' English proficiency over the past decade.

2. Development of the Test

In the department's first year, we created the first draft of the test, reusing items that had appeared on that year's entrance exams. Since it turned out that these items were too difficult, the next year we replaced them with easier ones that we created especially for this purpose.

For the purpose of this study, we are fortunate to have used exactly the same test form, administered under similar conditions, from 1996 through 2003. As a result, we have about eight years of comparable data. This test was a multiple choice exam, consisting of 60 grammar and vocabulary items, with four answer choices for each item. The examinees were given approximately half an hour to take the test. In most years, the freshmen took the test on their first day at the university in April; i.e. orientation day.

We considered including a wider variety of item types, such as reading and listening comprehension. However, we decided to limit the test to just grammar and vocabulary primarily because we had only a very limited administration period of 30 minutes, thus necessitating a brief test, with few sections. We chose to make the test multiple choice because we were under pressure to grade and sort the students' answer sheets as quickly as possible so that the Student Affairs Division could complete our students' schedules in just a few days. We greatly appreciate the patience and generosity of the staff members who have given much of their time at one of the busiest times of the year to make this placement program possible.

3. Results of the Placement Test

In this section, we will show the results of nine years of placement tests using the same form.² Then, in Appendix I, we will evaluate the sixty items on the placement test, discussing what they are for, and how well the test takers responded to them. Finally, in Appendix II, we

² We greatly thank Hiroshi Otsuka for helping us with data entry.

will rather tentatively describe correlations among some of the items.

The same placement test was given under comparable administrative conditions from 1996 through 2003.³ Below are the average scores on the test over the eight years. The maximum possible score was 60 points.

[Table 1]

Year	Average Score	# of Students
1996	43.3 (72.3%)	156
1997	41.5 (69.2%)	153
1998	40.8 (68%)	166
1999	40.0 (66.7%)	176 (2 absentees)
2000	36.5 (60.8%)	159
2001	35.6 (59.3%)	180
2002	33.5 (55.8%)	189
2003	31.5 (52.5%)	180 (1 absentee).

Over time, the average score gradually became lower and lower. Over the course of these eight years, the average dropped almost 12 points, or 20%.

During this period, the compulsory freshman English course in the Faculty of Communication Studies was divided into five classes, each consisting of 30–36 students. Table 2 presents the average scores for each class over the course of these eight years. For

[Table 2]

Year	Class:					(V minus Z)
	V	W	X	Y	Z	
1996	53.6	48.5	43.0	38.7	32.4	(21.2)
1997	50.1	44.6	42.4	38.9	31.2	(18.9)
1998	50.0	45.4	41.1	36.7	30.3	(19.7)
1999	49.4	44.2	40.0	36.5	27.6	(21.8)
2000	47.8	40.7	36.7	33.2	24.1	(23.7)
2001	45.6	40.1	36.1	31.2	24.9	(20.7)
2002	44.4	37.9	33.7	29.1	22.1	(22.3)
2003	43.5	36.6	31.9	26.4	19.1	(24.4)

3 In 2004, we used the same test form again, but because during this year we could not make time for the placement test after the entrance ceremony, we decided to mail the test to the incoming freshmen in March, and asked them to take it at home, and return their results to us. (In 2005, we used a completely new form of the test.)

In the 2004 administration, 213 out of 219 students submitted their results, and the average score was 40.9. This is almost 10 points higher than the previous year. It's easy to imagine why this might be the case. Since students were not forced to finish the test within 30 minutes, they could spend more time on it under more relaxed circumstances. Of course, they also had the option of enlisting a third party's help. We have excluded these results from our study because the test administration conditions were not comparable, and the jump in the results indicates that they are anomalous.

convenience, we order the classes from high to low.⁴ The last column shows the difference in the average score between the highest and lowest classes. This was consistently around 20 points, or 33%.

4. Discussion

Although it is true that the average score decreased, it is important to remember that this test was only a paper and pencil measure of students' grammatical competence. These results say little about the students' reading comprehension, and even less about their listening comprehension.

Certain changes that occurred over the eight-year period of this study should also be taken into consideration. First, the English curriculum administered by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology has evolved significantly since the mid 1990s. The drop in the number of English classes taught in (junior) high schools per week seems to be an obvious explanation for the drop in proficiency scores. In addition, more emphasis has been placed on oral communication over grammar in the junior high/high school English curriculum in recent years. This presumably led to a further drop in the amount of time that junior high and high schools could spend on English grammar. On the other hand, with the gradual decrease in the college age population in Japan and the consequent increased competition to attract students, it is also possible that we are attracting a lower caliber of students.

However, this is only one side of the story. While we do not have numerical data to support it, our impression is that, in general, our students' listening ability has improved over the last decade. Presumably this is a result of the new emphasis on oral communication, and students' increased opportunities to listen to and speak English in their secondary school classes. In addition, the test couldn't ask how the freshmen felt about studying English. Looking back over the decade, it seems that the number of students who like English has increased, while the number who dislike it has decreased.

5. Conclusion

Subjectively, we have found it much easier to teach classes with relatively homogeneous

⁴ We would like to note that these are not the actual class names we used. When assigning classes, we purposely chose to make a non-obvious relationship between the class names and the students' proficiency levels so that it would not be clear to students which class was the highest, and which the lowest. Thus, neither class A nor E consisted of the students with the highest proficiency level or the lowest.

proficiency levels than the classes with widely varying levels that we taught before 1995.⁵ Since all the students in each class are at a similar level, we can aim our lessons at the majority, rather than just one narrow slice at a time. And since the proficiency levels in each class are all similar, it is easy to adjust the content and pace of our lessons both to keep them interesting and to suit the differing needs of students. For instance, a lower level class may need a detailed presentation and much practice on a grammar point such as tag questions, while a higher level class, which has already mastered this point, can move on to a more challenging topic.

Whether the average proficiency level is low or high, it is easy to teach a class if the students' English proficiency levels are homogeneous. On the other hand, if some students' English proficiency is far higher than others in the class, it is difficult to manage the class. If you focus on those with higher English proficiency, your lesson will be too hard for those at a lower level. If you do the reverse, the students in the former category will get bored. Furthermore, students are much more comfortable speaking up in class when they don't stand out as being much better or worse than those around them. We therefore believe that placing students in classes based on the results of our proficiency test has worked out well for both students and teachers.

⁵ We should stress here that the results of the placement test were just one factor in our formula for placing students in English classes. We also take other factors into consideration, including the ratio between men and women, and the distribution of foreign students across classes.

Appendix I: Item Analysis

In this section, we discuss the sixty items used on the test individually. In each case, we describe the grammatical or vocabulary point the item focuses on. Because the line between grammatical knowledge and vocabulary (that is, lexical knowledge) is not always easy to draw, the dichotomy here is mainly for convenience. Below, grammatical items are those for which one needs to know certain patterns used in English, whereas vocabulary items are those for which one needs to know certain English words or expressions. Some items will be categorized as both. For each item, the percentage of students who chose each answer choice in the 1998 administration of the test will be shown. The underlined percentage indicates the correct answer.

問題 次の(1)～(60)の空所に入れるのに最も適切なものをそれぞれ①～④の中から選び、解答用紙の解答欄の①～④の記号を黒く塗りつぶして答えなさい。

(1) vocabulary: To answer this item, one needs to know what month Christmas comes in, and what the month is called in English.

Christmas comes in ().

① August	② December	③ February	④ May
0.6	<u>97.5</u>	1.9	0

(2) grammar: This item is concerned with subject-verb agreement. The presence of the determiner *those* indicates that the subject here is plural. Hence, the verb must be *are*. Note that the word *fish* may be either singular or plural.

This fish is small, but those fish () large.

① are	② is	③ to be	④ was
<u>82.7</u>	13.2	3.2	1.0

(3) grammar: This item is about the passive form. Typically, passive sentences are expressed by the combination of the auxiliary verb *be* and the past participle form of the verb.

“Is English () in Canada?”
“Yes, it is.”

① speak	② speaking	③ spoke	④ spoken
3.9	9.7	2.0	<u>84.4</u>

(4) grammar: This item is concerned with the future form of a sentence with the auxiliary verb *will*, which must be followed by the bare form of a verb.

Your parents () to hear that you passed the entrance exam.

① will be happy	② will being happily
<u>89.7</u>	2.5
③ will happily	④ will happy
1.3	6.5

(5) vocabulary: This requires one to have some knowledge of verb patterns. The verb *think* may be followed by the objective pronoun *him* and an infinitival clause (*to*-infinitive).

- Everyone in the village () to be an honest man.
- | | |
|-----------------|---------------|
| ① considered he | ② looked him |
| 11.0 | 29.7 |
| ③ regarded him | ④ thought him |
| 34.2 | <u>25.2</u> |

(6) grammar, vocabulary: When behaving like a copula verb, the verb *look* is followed by an adjective, not an adverb. Moreover, the verb must agree with the singular subject, *the girl*.

- The girl talking with Mr. and Mrs. Stone ().
- | | |
|----------------------|--------------------|
| ① look very happily | ② look very happy |
| 3.3 | 16.0 |
| ③ looks very happily | ④ looks very happy |
| 17.2 | <u>63.5</u> |

(7) grammar: The response in the second line of the conversation suggests that the first utterance must be an information-seeking question. To answer this item, one needs to know how to form interrogative sentences in English, including the knowledge that *wh*-phrases, such as *who*, must be preposed.

- “() the best baseball pitcher in the world?”
 “I think Nomo is.”
- | | |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| ① Do you think who is | ② Who do you think is |
| 32.2 | <u>55.3</u> |
| ③ Who is you think | ④ Who you think is |
| 9.2 | 3.2 |

(8) grammar, vocabulary: Here, one needs to distinguish *sleep*, *sleeper*, *sleeping* and *sleepy* in terms of their syntactic categories. Out of the four, only the adjective *sleepy* may be preceded by the degree word *very*.

- I stayed up late last night, so I'm very () now.
- | | | | |
|---------|-----------|------------|-------------|
| ① sleep | ② sleeper | ③ sleeping | ④ sleepy |
| 2.6 | 2.3 | 21.1 | <u>74.0</u> |

(9) grammar, vocabulary: This is about the transitivity of verbs. The verb *visit* is transitive and takes an object.

- “Have you ever () Italy?”
 “No. I'd like to some day, though.”
- | | | | |
|--------|--------|----------|-------------|
| ① been | ② gone | ③ travel | ④ visited |
| 59.7 | 11.7 | 1.4 | <u>27.2</u> |

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(10) grammar: This is about the tense of the sentence. Since the sentence contains the phrase *two years ago*, it must be in the past tense.

My great-grandfather () two years ago, at the age of 95.
① dead ② died ③ has died ④ is dead
10.8 50.6 33.4 5.2

(11) vocabulary: To choose the correct answer, one must know the form *should + have + p.p.* (past participle) and its meaning.

Didn't you watch *Beverly Hills 90210* last night? You () it.
It was really interesting.
① must not see ② needn't have seen
4.6 3.3
③ ought see ④ should have seen
8.7 83.4

(12) grammar: This concerns the passive form, which is in an interrogative sentence here. Cf. (3).

Were these cherry trees ()?
① are planted by your grandfather 20.2
② did your grandfather plant 1.6
③ planted by your grandfather 75.6
④ planted your grandfather 2.6

(13) grammar: Words like *anything* and *something* are special in that they must be followed, not preceded, by an adjective.

Is there () in the refrigerator?
① anything cold drink ② anything cold to drink
8.3 75.3
③ cold anything to drink ④ cold thing to drink
14.1 2.3

(14) grammar: Since the auxiliary verb of the sentence is *has*, not *have*, the subject must be singular. Cf. (13).

() has happened today.
① New anything ② New no thing
14.6 2.3
③ No new things ④ Nothing new
23.6 59.5

(15) grammar: The time of day is preceded by the preposition *at* in English.

Let's start () 4:05.
① at ② from ③ in ④ on
76.3 5.6 5.3 12.7

(16) vocabulary: The comparative form may be modified by the intensifier *much*.

Tom is () taller than Bill.
 ① as ② more ③ much ④ very
 4.1 34.4 52.2 9.3

(17) vocabulary: To answer this item, one needs to know the word *later* and its meaning.

I'm sorry I'm very busy now. Can you call me back ()?
 ① late ② lately ③ later ④ latest
 10.0 13.2 75.8 1.0

(18) grammar: When two entities are compared using the pattern *as ... as*, a degree expression may precede the first *as*.

Jack has () as I have.
 ① as twice many books ② twice as many books
 9.1 66.6
 ③ twice books as many ④ twice many as books
 23.0 1.3

(19) grammar: This concerns a relative clause. Since the blank refers to the gap found in the object position after the preposition *about*, the corresponding relative must be *which*.

That is the library () I told you about the other day.
 ① in which ② what ③ where ④ which
 10.7 9.3 35.1 44.8

(20) grammar: This also concerns a relative clause. Cf. (19). Since there is no antecedent, the correct choice is *what*.

This is () I have long wanted to see.
 ① that ② thing ③ what ④ which
 24.0 7.1 61.1 7.8

(21) grammar: This again concerns a relative clause. Cf. (19) and (20). The non-restrictive relative clause must have a relative pronoun in it.

Mr. Williams, () grandson is a friend of mine, is a famous writer.
 ① and ② his ③ that ④ whose
 4.3 19.3 6.5 69.9

(22) grammar: One must be familiar with *it* used as a dummy element. In this case, this pronoun corresponds to the following infinitival clause (*to*-infinitive).

I found () impossible not to tell the truth.

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- | | | | |
|-------|-------------|------|--------|
| ① but | ② it | ③ so | ④ very |
| 4.6 | <u>79.6</u> | 11.3 | 4.5 |

(23) grammar, vocabulary: This concerns the causative use of *make*, where the verb expressing a caused event is in the bare form.

- The teacher couldn't make the students () the meaning of the poem.
- | | |
|--------------|-----------------|
| ① understand | ② understanding |
| <u>22.2</u> | 9.2 |
| ③ understood | ④ to understand |
| 53.6 | 15.0 |

(24) grammar: One must know the semantic differences among the bare form of a verb, the present participle, the past participle and the past form.

- One day she received a letter () in Greek.
- | | | | |
|---------|-----------|-------------|---------|
| ① write | ② writing | ③ written | ④ wrote |
| 1.4 | 4.6 | <u>85.1</u> | 8.8 |

(25) vocabulary: The verb *enjoy* is followed by a gerund, but not by an infinitive. One must also know the difference between *lay* and *lie*.

- In Europe, they enjoy () in the sun.
- | | | | |
|----------|-------------|----------|----------|
| ① laying | ② lying | ③ to lay | ④ to lie |
| 36.1 | <u>56.8</u> | 4.4 | 2.8 |

(26) grammar: The word *without* is a preposition and is followed by a gerund.

- Cathy left the room without () goodbye.
- | | | | |
|--------|-------|-------------|----------|
| ① said | ② say | ③ saying | ④ to say |
| 2.3 | 8.7 | <u>76.3</u> | 12.7 |

(27) vocabulary: When a noun refers to an instrument, it is usually preceded by the preposition *with*.

- The boy tried to cut a branch off the tree () a knife.
- | | | | |
|------|-------|------|-----------|
| ① by | ② for | ③ on | ④ with |
| 18.8 | 4.2 | 4.0 | <u>73</u> |

(28) vocabulary: In a comparative sentence, the difference between the two entities may be expressed by a phrase starting with *by*.

- Sheila is older than Cindy () three years.
- | | | | |
|-------------|-------|------|--------|
| ① by | ② for | ③ in | ④ with |
| <u>44.3</u> | 46.3 | 7.2 | 2.2 |

(29) vocabulary: The verb *hope* takes a finite clause as its complement.

- I hope you () a good weekend.

- | | | | |
|--------------|----------|-----------|-------------|
| ① for having | ② having | ③ to have | ④ will have |
| 13.4 | 21.8 | 35.2 | <u>29.7</u> |

(30) vocabulary: The sequence *her daughter had arrived* is a tensed clause. Thus, it must be preceded by the complementizer *that*.

- | | | | |
|--|------|-------------|-------|
| I told Mary () her daughter had arrived. | | | |
| ① about | ② of | ③ that | ④ who |
| 21.2 | 9.7 | <u>66.4</u> | 2.8 |

(31) grammar: Here the subject and the object of the sentence refer to the same individual, and the subject is singular and feminine.

- | | | | |
|---|-----------|--------|--------------|
| One of the women made () ill because of lack of exercise. | | | |
| ① <u>herself</u> | ② himself | ③ them | ④ themselves |
| 83.0 | 1.6 | 3.8 | 11.6 |

(32) grammar: This concerns the passive form. Cf. (2). The phrase *the English* denotes a set of people and is treated as plural.

- | | | | |
|---|--------|--------|-------|
| The English () often said to be a practical people. | | | |
| ① are | ② more | ③ very | ④ was |
| <u>38.0</u> | 18.0 | 6.7 | 37.3 |

(33) vocabulary: This requires familiarity with the sequence *think NP AP* and the expletive *it*. Cf. (5) and (22).

- | | | | |
|--|-----------------|--|--|
| The boy thought it good () silent. | | | |
| ① he to remain | ② him to remain | | |
| 1.9 | 33.3 | | |
| ③ remained | ④ to remain | | |
| 18.6 | <u>46.2</u> | | |

(34) vocabulary: This is about the possessive form *yours*.

- | | | | |
|-----------------------------|--------|-------------|------------|
| Is this pen ()? | | | |
| ① you | ② your | ③ yours | ④ yourself |
| 0.1 | 2.5 | <u>95.8</u> | 1.6 |

(35) grammar: When a noun is preceded by the determiner *those*, it must refer to more than one entity. Cf. (2).

- | | | | |
|---|-------|-------------|--------|
| I want some apples. Give me those big (). | | | |
| ① apple | ② one | ③ ones | ④ some |
| 2.2 | 36.4 | <u>55.5</u> | 5.8 |

(36) grammar: This concerns the passive form. Cf. (3) and (12). The word *since* here is synonymous with *because*, and precedes a tensed clause.

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This letter has a lot of mistakes since it () in haste.

① being written ② was written

13.1 74.6

③ writing ④ written

3.2 9.1

(37) vocabulary: The noun *information* is uncountable. To answer this question, one must be familiar with the degree word *enough*, which may be followed by an infinitival clause.

The police didn't have () to catch the man.

① enough information ② informations so as

52.3 18.5

③ so many informations ④ too many informations

8.9 20.3

(38) vocabulary: This requires one to know the expression *cannot + have + past participle*. Cf. (11).

He is a very kind man. He () have done such a cruel thing.

① cannot ② may ③ must ④ should

64.6 7.1 17.6 10.6

(39) vocabulary: The verb *remind* takes an object and a PP headed by *of*.

These pictures () me of my school days.

① realize ② remember ③ remind ④ make

2.5 18.0 75.6 3.9

(40) vocabulary: Though both *disappointed* and *disappointing* may be preceded by *very*, their meanings are quite different, in fact opposite, with respect to causality.

She is very () to know that you can't come to her birthday party.

① disappoint ② disappointed

8.9 67.2

③ disappointing ④ disappointment

9.6 14.3

(41) vocabulary: NPs following adjectives like *stupid* can be marked by *of*.

It was stupid () you to believe his story.

① of ② that ③ to ④ when

68.7 21.4 7.3 2.6

(42) grammar: Verbs are modified by adverbial expressions. Here *heavily* modifies the verb *rain*. The adverb is displaced with *how* to the initial position of the exclamative sentence.

We've had nothing but rain this month. How () it rains!

- | | | | |
|----------|-----------|-------------|---------|
| ① hardly | ② heavier | ③ heavily | ④ heavy |
| 19.9 | 4.4 | <u>32.1</u> | 43.6 |

(43) grammar: The sentence makes a comparison. The word *than* here is a relative.

- Mary gives her son more money () is necessary.
- | | | | |
|------|-------------|--------|--------|
| ① as | ② than | ③ that | ④ what |
| 14.7 | <u>31.3</u> | 26.0 | 28.0 |

(44) grammar: Here the non-restrictive relative marker, *which*, refers to the preceding infinitival clause.

- My boss told me to finish the job in two days, () I found impossible.
- | | | | |
|------|----------|--------|-------------|
| ① it | ② though | ③ when | ④ which |
| 4.1 | 34.4 | 18.8 | <u>42.8</u> |

(45) grammar: The two clauses are combined by *as soon as*. The superordinate clause must have a subject and a tensed verb.

- As soon as the boy saw me, () away.
- | | | | |
|-------------|-----------|------------|----------|
| ① he ran | ② running | ③ then ran | ④ to run |
| <u>49.1</u> | 38.0 | 5.4 | 7.5 |

(46) vocabulary: One must be familiar with the idiom *no sooner ... than*. If one notices the word *sooner* is a comparative form, the word *than* is expected. Cf. (43).

- The party had no sooner started () it began to rain.
- | | | | |
|----------|--------|-------------|--------|
| ① before | ② just | ③ than | ④ when |
| 17.3 | 15.0 | <u>53.5</u> | 14.1 |

(47) grammar: The word *after* may be followed either by a tensed clause, an NP, or a gerund.

- After () the paper, I listened to music and relaxed.
- | | | | |
|-----------|--------|---------|-------------|
| ① to type | ② type | ③ typed | ④ typing |
| 4.7 | 7.0 | 28.9 | <u>59.4</u> |

(48) grammar: In the subordinate clause beginning with *when*, the pronoun *you* is the subject and must be followed by a (tensed) verb.

- You should take great care when you () your friends.
- | | | | |
|----------|-------------|------------|-------------|
| ① choice | ② choose | ③ choosing | ④ to choose |
| 25.3 | <u>61.2</u> | 9.6 | 3.9 |

(49) grammar: Because the subject of *know* is not realized, the verb must be in a nontensed form. The word *not* must precede the verb.

- () what to do, the girl began to cry.
- | | |
|---------------|------------|
| ① Didn't know | ② Not know |
|---------------|------------|

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21.1 6.3
③ Not knowing ④ To know not
68.5 4.1

(50) grammar: A tensed clause is required after *so that*.

I walked very quietly so that () wake up the sleeping baby.
① as not to ② I might not ③ not to ④ will not
18.9 42.0 32.4 6.6

(51) grammar: This type of construction, “Imperative, *and S*,” conveys a conditional meaning.

Hurry up, () you will be in time for the last train.
① and ② or ③ so ④ then
56.7 28.9 10.5 3.9

(52) grammar: This is a subjunctive sentence referring to a past situation. The antecedent clause must be in the past perfect tense.

() your advice, I would have succeeded.
① Did I take ② If I did take
1.9 5.9
③ If I had taken ④ If I took
80.8 11.4

(53) grammar: Here the semantic subject of the infinitive *to do* is *the man*, and the possessive pronoun in the infinitive clause must agree with it.

The man promised the women to do () best in the tennis tournament.
① her ② his ③ their ④ your
12.1 68 11.7 8.1

(54) grammar: This item is about the tense of the sentence. Because of the presence of *a month before*, the embedded clause must be in the past perfect tense.

She told me that she () to Japan a month before.
① came ② coming ③ had come ④ would come
20.6 6.0 59.7 13.7

(55) vocabulary: The sentence is an abbreviated version of “Anyone (who is) interested in this job can apply.”

Anyone () in this job can apply.
① interest ② interested ③ interesting ④ interests
7.7 62.4 16.6 13.3

(56) vocabulary: This item is about parts of speech. The word in question is preceded by the determiner *a*, and thus must be a singular noun.

We had a frank () about the matter.

- | | | | |
|-----------|-------------|--------------|---------------|
| ① discuss | ② discussed | ③ discussion | ④ discussions |
| 7.9 | 26.1 | <u>58.6</u> | 7.5 |

(57) grammar: In *there* constructions like this, the main verb (*seem*) agrees with the noun phrase following the second verb (in this case, *be*). (In other words, the subject is at the end, rather than at the beginning of the sentence.) Hence, the main verb (*seem*) agrees with the plural NP *a lot of oranges*.

There () to be a lot of oranges in your bag.

- | | | | |
|------|-------------|-----------|---------|
| ① is | ② seem | ③ seeming | ④ seems |
| 9.8 | <u>27.8</u> | 2.8 | 59.6 |

(58) grammar: This is another type of *there* construction. The expression *a long time ago* indicates that the sentence must be in the past tense.

A long time ago, there () an honest farmer in this village.

- | | | | |
|--------|-------------|---------|----------|
| ① live | ② lived | ③ lives | ④ living |
| 3.8 | <u>75.4</u> | 12.0 | 8.9 |

(59) grammar: The verb in the matrix sentence must agree with the head of the subject noun phrase, *child*, not *parents*.

A child who loves his or her parents () happy.

- | | | | |
|-------|---------|-------------|---------|
| ① are | ② being | ③ is | ④ to be |
| 11.0 | 15.0 | <u>48.8</u> | 25.2 |

(60) vocabulary: This item is about parts of speech.

It was () that she lied on purpose.

- | | | | |
|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| ① ascertain | ② certain | ③ certainly | ④ certainty |
| 4.4 | <u>43.4</u> | 45.9 | 6.3 |

Appendix II: Item Difficulty over Time

Students' responses to some items remained about the same over the five-year period for which we still have answer sheets: 1998 through 2002. (We do not have detailed data prior to 1998, or for 1999 and 2003.) For instance, during each of these years, about 98% of the students answered item (1) correctly:

item (1)

1998: 98.2%

2000: 96.8%

2001: 97.2%

2002: 97.9%

- (1) Christmas comes in ().
① August ② December ③ February ④ May

And on average, only 25.3% of the students answered item (5) correctly over the same five-year period.

item (5)

1998: 27.9%

2000: 27.8%

2001: 25.0%

2002: 20.6%

- (5) Everyone in the village () to be an honest man.
① considered he ② looked him
③ regarded him ④ thought him

On the other hand, some items which were relatively easy in 1998 became more difficult in later years. For instance, in 1998, 75.2% of the testees responded to (51) correctly, while only 50.0% and 44.4% answered it correctly in 2001 and 2002, respectively.

- (51) Hurry up, () you will be in time for the last train.
① and ② or ③ so ④ then

1998: 75.2%

2000: 57.6%

2001: 50.0%

2002: 44.4%

Other such items are (28), (41), (45), (46) and (59).

- (28) Sheila is older than Cindy () three years.
① by ② for ③ in ④ with

1998: 58.8%
 2000: 43.0%
 2001: 40.0%
 2002: 36.5%

- (41) It was stupid () you to believe his story.
 ① of ② that ③ to ④ when

1998: 84.2%
 2000: 69.6%
 2001: 65.6%
 2002: 55.6%

- (45) As soon as the boy saw me, () away.
 ① he ran ② running ③ then ran ④ to run

1998: 64.2%
 2000: 50.6%
 2001: 40.6%
 2002: 41.8%

- (46) The party had no sooner started () it began to rain.
 ① before ② just ③ than ④ when

1998: 70.9%
 2000: 57.0%
 2001: 45.0%
 2002: 41.8%

- (59) A child who loves his or her parents () happy.
 ① are ② being ③ is ④ to be

1998: 60.0%
 2000: 50.6%
 2001: 37.2%
 2002: 41.8%

Some of these items – (51), (28) and (46) – require familiarity with idiomatic expressions. (It should be noted that students might know how to express the same ideas in simpler forms. For example, a more usual way to express (28) would be “Sheila is three years older than Cindy.”)

On the other hand, other items concern more general knowledge about English grammar. For example, item (59) concerns subject-verb agreement. Although the correct answer is ③, it is easy to imagine that students might have been tempted by answer choice ① since the very last word in the matrix subject *a child who loves his or her parents* is plural. It is much harder to imagine that they might find answer choices ② and ④ attractive since these two choices do not lead to anything resembling a complete sentence. Unfortunately, it turns out that ② and ④ were both

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chosen more often than ①. Here is how students responded to this item in 1998 and in 2002:

1998 ① 9.7% ② 8.5% ③ 60% ④ 20.6%

2002 ① 10.6% ② 15.3% ③ 41.8% ④ 25.9%

A combined total of 29.1% of the students chose ② or ④ in 1998, while 41.2% did the same in 2002. These answer patterns suggest that the number of students who didn't have a clear idea of the structure of this sentence increased over this period.