The Importance of Placement Tools in Postsecondary World Language Classes

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Appropriate placement of language learners continues to be challenging for postsecondary world language programs. The Seal of Biliteracy is now available in all of the states for high school students. While the Seal is an admirable program, using it in higher education can be problematic because the proficiency levels needed to attain the Seal vary by state, and not all world language programs participate in the Seal of Biliteracy. The purpose of the present study was to compare cadets' proficiency levels in French, Portuguese, and Spanish at the beginning of their second year of study to their proficiency level as reflected by their Seal of Biliteracy achievement/placement. The researchers assessed language learner proficiency using the Adaptive Listening Tests and the Adaptive Reading Tests developed at Brigham Young University. Results indicate that reporting attainment of the Seal of Biliteracy did not necessarily guarantee results at higher levels of proficiency in all three languages. Use of the Seal of Biliteracy alone for placement purposes is thus not recommended as the best assessment of students' language abilities. The findings have implications for world language programs in higher education as they find new ways to place secondary students in their programs.

Keywords: *World Language, Student Placement, Seal of Biliteracy, Quantitative Research, Military Academy*

INTRODUCTION

Having proficiency in world languages (WLs) is crucial for America's military, diplomatic, business, and national security interests (La Corte & Voisine, 2020). The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) reported several years ago that 90% of businesses surveyed needed employees with skills in languages other than English (ACTFL, 2019). However, "the vast majority of American citizens remain monolingual" (American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2017, p. vii). Unfortunately, there has been a decrease in student enrollment in WL classes. Recently, Lusin et al. (2021) reported that there was a 29.3% decrease in enrollment between 2009 and 2021; however, before this major downturn, "there had been sustained growth" (p. 3). In part, the student enrollment decline can be attributed to the elimination of WL requirements for high school and postsecondary graduation (Lusin, 2012; Maranon, 2024). According to O'Rourke et al. (2016), only seven states require the study of WLs as a prerequisite for high school graduation. Without high school requirements to study a WL to boost course enrollments, it will be challenging for the U.S. to meet the needs voiced by the military and businesses.

In addition to the shortage of students enrolled in WL classes, there has been a shortage of WL teachers for decades (Swanson, 2008, 2010, 2012, 2022), which led to calls to replace WL learning as a requirement for high school graduation in favor of computer programming (Galvin, 2016). The No Child Left Behind Act (2008) and subsequent reauthorizations of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (United States, 1965) have both been cited as a factor of the WL teacher shortage (Swanson, 2008, 2012) because these acts require teachers regardless of content area to be deemed *highly qualified[1]*. The requirement was highly problematic because many WL teachers who were once licensed to teach were no longer qualified in the eyes of the federal government at a time of a national WL teacher shortage (Swanson & Moore, 2006). Additionally, No Child Left Behind prioritized instruction and the allocation of resources to the core areas such as science and mathematics (Rosenbusch, 2005; Rosenbusch & Jensen, 2004), which reduced funding to support and enhance WL teaching and learning for US K-12 students.

In order to thwart the shortage of WL teachers, states began to authorize alternative routes to teaching, which provided "woefully inadequate training and support to their [teacher] candidates" (Walsh & Jacobs, 2007, p. 14). Typically, these individuals have not participated in student teaching or been exposed to classroom management techniques, which leads to feeling unprepared and overwhelmed (Redding & Smith, 2016). Research continues to show that for individuals entering the teaching profession through alternate routes, such as emergency certification, teacher turnover is higher than attrition for teachers who enter the progression via full certification (Darling-Hammond et al., 2001; Guthery & Bailes, 2022; Nguyen et al., 2020; Sawchuck, 2016; Spencer, 2019). Rates of attrition for uncertified teachers range between 30% (Reaching Higher NH, 2024) and 60% (Morrison, 2024) within five years compared to 15% for certified teachers (Reaching Higher NH, 2024). Research shows that teacher attrition, regardless

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[1] A highly qualified teacher "is one who (1) has a bachelor's degree, (2) is fully certified, and (3) has demonstrated subject-matter competency in each of the academic subjects that she or he teaches" (U.S. Department of Education, 2009, p. 11).

of content area, educational level, and teacher certification status costs school districts between $7 billion and $8.5 billion annually (Breakfast Leadership, 2023; Sutcher et al., 2016).

Not surprisingly, the lowering of professional standards for teachers by offering alternative routes to certification, thereby allowing poorly qualified teachers to enter the profession, can hinder student academic performance. Decades of research continue to show that "fully certified and experienced teachers matter for student achievement" (Cardichon et al., 2020, p. 1). For example, findings from a large-scale study of New York City teachers revealed that student achievement growth in elementary and middle school was most improved by having been taught by a fully certified teacher who graduated from a university-based preservice teacher education program (Boyd et al., 2006). Interestingly, the same study showed that students' achievement was hurt most by having an inexperienced teacher on a temporary license. Other studies have corroborated the aforementioned findings showing that teachers with alternative certification had a negative impact on student performance, particularly at the high school level (Clotfelter et al. 2010; Henry et al., 2014). Teaching is a complex endeavor, and it is clear that "high quality teacher preparation makes a difference in student achievement" (Swanson, 2019, p. 763).

Review of the Literature

Many factors influence how quickly language learners progress along their interlanguage continuum toward proficiency in classes at the tertiary level. Four primary elements are student placement in language classes, teacher performance in the classroom and how it affects student learning, language learner application and dedication to acquiring and using a WL, and prior language learning by students prior to placement in a higher education, here reflected in the attainment or lack thereof of the Seal of Biliteracy. Each of these factors are discussed below.

Placing Postsecondary Students Appropriately in WL Classes

The primary goal of student placement systems is to sort "students into relatively homogeneous language-ability groupings, sometimes within specific skill areas" (Brown, 1989, p. 65). In terms of WL placement, such systems have the goal of assigning language learners in the most appropriate proficiency level. Lord (2022) noted that such a "straightforward goal may lead us to believe that placement is a relatively clear-cut process" (p. 101). Nevertheless, it is rather complex as multiple factors (e.g., K-12 teacher certification and curricula, student background) can play a role in one's placement in college level WL courses. Even though placement constitutes a considerable challenge for many postsecondary WL programs, there is a dearth of research on the topic.

Many placement processes focus on traditionally used indicators of student achievement such as standardized test scores, overall or cumulative grade point average, and even seat time in subject matter courses at the secondary level. The scant research involving subject matter placement at the tertiary level involves primarily the curriculum in math and English, rather than language courses. One common theme in these studies is that subject matter placement at the

tertiary level is complicated at best and often unsatisfactory for several reasons. One consensus is that use of traditional placement methods with its heavy reliance on standardized test results can disadvantage minority groups. This can also underrepresent or understate student capabilities, causing extended time of study for those students that have an additional cost in terms of monetary outlay as well as personal frustration (Bahr, et al., 2019; Denison-Furness et al., 2022; Mechur Karp, 2021).

A few studies have documented some new approaches to placement that show some promising results. These approaches reflect a move toward self-placement of some form or another, incorporating student input based on self-evaluation, academic expectations, and curricular objectives. Said approaches utilize a combination of concrete data in an advisory capacity, extensive communication between students and advisors, and consideration of one's own abilities and goals. Sometimes called merely self-placement, other times directed self-placement, these models empower students to make choices based on factors not previously considered or accepted as important (Denison-Furness et al., 2022; Mechur Karp, 2021). Perhaps the most rewarding outcome of these alternative approaches to placement is the acknowledgement of overall positive results vis-à-vis student grade outcomes in the classes in which they enrolled as a direct result of this approach (Lord, 2022; Mechur Karp, 2021). While there are some caveats with self-directed approaches (e.g., labor-intensity, consumption of time for advisors and students alike), the general results are encouraging and should be considered and further explored.

Given the different methods used to place language learners in appropriate levels of WL instruction, the literature indicates that teacher preparation and teacher effectiveness are directly related to student performance (Cardichon et al., 2020; Darling-Hammond et al., 2001; Darling-Hammond et al., 2005; Darling-Hammond & Wei, 2009; Swanson & Hildebrandt, 2018).

Teacher Performance

The question surrounding teacher effectiveness and how to measure it is a challenge (Hildebrandt & Swanson, 2016). Over the years states relied on students' standardized test scores and portfolio assessments (e.g., edTPA) of student achievement as well as encouraging teacher preparation programs to earn and maintain program accreditation. In WL teaching, the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) partnered with the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (now known by its acronym, ACTFL) to offer WL teacher preparation programs national accreditation.

One of the six standards WL teacher preparation programs must meet for ACTFL/CAEP accreditation is Standard 1 Language Proficiency: Interpersonal, Interpretive, and Presentational. According to the guidelines, teacher candidates must possess a high level of proficiency in the language they teach. Additionally, teacher candidates must show prowess in other areas via the remaining five standards such as language acquisition theories, instruction and assessment, linguistics and cultures, and integration of the *World-readiness Standards for Learning Languages* (The National Standards Collaborative Board, 2015). Collectively, the six standards "reflect the

profession's expectations for the specific knowledge, skills, and dispositions that WL teachers should have as they enter our classrooms" (ACTFL, 2025a). However, only slightly more than a quarter of the WL teacher preparation programs are nationally certified (Moss & Gambrell, 2023).

From an instructional perspective, teacher candidates must demonstrate proficiency in standards-based, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approaches—the signature pedagogy in the field advocated for in the 1980s (Miller, 2018) as a response to the limitations of other methods (e.g., audio-lingual, grammar-translation). In an effort to move away from instructional *methods* per se (e.g., grammar-translation), CLT prioritizes developing students' communication and interaction skills by understanding that communication is the expression, interpretation, and negotiation of meaning, and not simply oral expression (Lee & VanPatten, 2003). Second language research has revealed valuable insights into the nature of language learning (e.g., Ellis, 1997, 2008; Krashen, 1982). Of the many understandings, CLT approaches appear to hold the most promise for acquiring a new language (VanPatten, 2017).

CLT is guided by multiple postulations such as (1) learning a second language can be facilitated through using the target language for communication purposes, (2) such communication should be both meaningful and authentic, (3) a tremendous emphasis should be placed on language use rather than language knowledge, (4) learner risk-taking and autonomy should be encouraged, and (5) fluency and appropriacy in the use of the second language should take precedence over structural correctness (Swanson et al., 2022). Unlike a pedagogical method, CLT includes a number of different techniques and does not follow a structured set of procedures that teachers should follow. While CLT has been promoted for approximately 40 years (Brumfit & Johnson, 1979; Widdowson, 1978), Duquette (1995) reported that CLT approaches were not being used in elementary and secondary classrooms. Several decades later, Troyan et al. (2023) found that veteran WL teachers working as external reviewers of WL teacher candidate edTPA portfolios— a nationally-available subject-specific pre-service teacher portfolio—incorrectly evaluated recent preservice teacher candidates' portfolios on Rubric 8, Subject-Specific Pedagogy. The researchers reported that "the candidates' level of expertise may have exceeded those of the raters" (p. 672), which suggests teachers who were not trained to teach from a communicative stance are teaching *about* the target language instead of teaching students to *acquire* the target language (Krashen, 1981).

To that end, as secondary students matriculate in institutions of higher education and enroll in WL classes either as a requirement or an elective class option, postsecondary instructors find themselves teaching students with a wide range of target language abilities. Subsequently, instructors are charged with developing curricula that challenge language learners and promoting language acquisition that is not boring those who are more advanced and not overwhelming students who lack basic skills.

Student Performance

Much like the complexity surrounding teacher effectiveness and how to measure it, evaluating student proficiency in the target language can be challenging. In order to place students in WL classes, WL program coordinators in postsecondary education have relied on results from program-specific placement tests, test scores from College Board (e.g., Advanced Placement Spanish), and, most recently, from students reporting that they earned the Seal of Biliteracy (Seal of Biliteracy, 2024).

Historically, Carroll (1967) began to examine postsecondary student proficiency outcomes (*N*= 2,782) of WL majors in French, German, Italian, Russian, and Spanish by using the Modern Language Association test, which was aligned to the government's Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) scale, which predated the *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines* (2012) by decades. He reported an average attainment of an ILR rating of 2+, which correlates to an ACTFL Advanced-Mid or Advanced-High proficiency rating. Additionally, he found that several demographic factors contributed to higher levels of proficiency such as heritage language background, study abroad, and elementary school WL study. However, there were no differences between males and females.

Since Carroll's (1967) study of postsecondary WL majors at graduation, program administrators, students and administrators alike have been challenged to establish reasonable expectations due to a dearth of research on WL learner proficiency. For example, Isbell et al. (2018) reported that four semesters of WL study at the university level yielded an oral proficiency outcome of Intermediate-Low to Intermediate-Mid in Chinese, French, Russian and Spanish. Isbell et al. (2018) examined postsecondary student oral proficiency. Results indicated a range of outcomes for WL learners across different institutions, in different levels of courses, and with different backgrounds. The researchers reported that study abroad programs had a positive impact on student proficiency in the areas of listening, reading, and speaking.

With respect to WL learner proficiency examined in the receptive skills (i.e., listening and reading), Tschirner (2016) identified average outcomes of WL students after two, three, four, five and six semesters of study of more than 6,000 language learners. Of the subjects who took both the ACTFL Reading Proficiency Test and the ACTFL Listening Proficiency Test in Spanish (*N*=1,769), second semester learners were found to reach Intermediate-Low in reading and just below Novice-High in listening, while fourth-semester learners reached Intermediate-Mid in reading and almost Intermediate-Low in listening. Swanson et al. (2022) reported similar results for second year language learners of Spanish for listening, and the authors recommended that "there is a strong need to set benchmarks for language proficiency" (p. 2) in order to understand what can be attained after specific sequences of WL study. Clearly, setting proficiency benchmarks can inform individual language learner proficiency and program success as well as determine what program innovations are leading to higher levels of student proficiency. Contrarily, if such targets are not determined and confirmed via valid and reliable assessments, programs may find themselves without a common mission and vision for their language learners. Without such a

vision, the appropriate placement of language learners transitioning from secondary to postsecondary WL programs becomes very challenging.

Reiterating the notion that teacher preparation and effectiveness are directly related to student performance, the researchers believe it is important to investigate if the Seal of Biliteracy can be used as a tool to place students in WL classes at the tertiary level.

Seal of Biliteracy

Reasonable expectations of WL proficiency for language learners to reach after a specific learning sequence of study has challenged the field for decades (Swanson et al. 2022). Since the 1960s, educational stakeholders (e.g., instructors, program directors) have grappled to establish reasonable proficiency benchmarks after various sequences of study (e.g., first year, second year) (Carroll, 1967). However, an initiative started in 2011 in California, and now in all 50 states, holds promise to help postsecondary programs know the level of proficiency students have achieved. Designed to represent an attainment of bilingualism and biliteracy for future employers and universities (ACTFL, 2015), the Seal of Biliteracy is an award adhered to high school diplomas by a state department of education or local district to recognize students who have attained proficiency in English and in one or more other WLs (ACTFL, 2015).

School districts and states determine which WL proficiency assessments (e.g., ACTFL Assessment of Performance toward Proficiency in Languages, Standards-based Measurement of Proficiency, STAMP4S) are acceptable. Proficiency levels for attainment of the Seal of Biliteracy vary widely by state. For example, in Illinois, recipients of the Seal of Biliteracy must demonstrate Intermediate-High proficiency (Illinois Council on the Teaching of Foreign Language, n.d.) based on the ACTFL Proficiency Scale (Language Testing International, n.d.) while South Carolina offers students three tiers of the Seal of Biliteracy based on WL proficiency ranging from Intermediate-Mid (bronze) to Advanced-Low (gold) (South Carolina Department of Education, 2019).

Among the manifold reasons for having a Seal of Biliteracy program is that it can serve to encourage students to study languages, certify attainment of biliteracy skills, recognize the value of language diversity, and prepare students with 21st century skills that will benefit them in the labor market and the global society. With respect to studying WL in higher education, the Seal of Biliteracy can "provide universities with a method to recognize and give credit to applicants for attainment of high-level skills in multiple languages" (Seal of Biliteracy, 2024, p. 1).

Given the importance placed on proficiency by the Seal of Biliteracy, one outcome has been noted as a change in methods of instruction and assessment. With increased emphasis on student learning being assessed by levels of proficiency reached, teaching strategies have adapted accordingly. As a result, student enrollment and retention in language classes have also increased as students are actually learning the language by using it rather than by just learning about it (Davin et al., 2018). Although positive outcomes do appear occasionally, the Seal of Biliteracy does not appear to be a panacea for student placement in language classes at the tertiary level. Because of the wide variety of requirements, implementation, and execution of the

Seal of Biliteracy across all 50 states, it does not have just one meaning or significance. Thus, while laudatory, the Seal of Biliteracy is not necessarily a viable (e.g., reliable and valid) measure of a student's language proficiency (Davin et al., 2022).

Nevertheless, advancing the notion that knowing students' level of WL proficiency upon matriculation into an institution of higher education may be helpful to accelerate student proficiency in the target language(s) by placing language learners at the correct level of WL learning, the following research questions guided the present study:

1. What was the level of proficiency in reading and in listening at the beginning of the academic year for second year language learners of French, Portuguese, and Spanish at a U.S. military institution?
2. For participants in the aforementioned three languages, is there a difference in level of proficiency for those who earned the Seal of Biliteracy and those who did not?

METHODS

Study Context

The United States Air Force Academy is a unique institution of higher education as it is a four-year military academy that prepares the next generation of Air Force officers. Cadets must take two semesters of the same language or validate the credit as part of the Academy's core curriculum. Cadets take first-year WL classes five days per week instead of a typical Monday-Wednesday-Friday or Tuesday-Thursday collegiate offering. WL classes at the second-year level and above meet every other day during the semester. Unlike civilian institutions, the cadets must participate in military and physical training activities daily and are evaluated on performance in three areas (academic, military, physical) each semester. Professors and instructors created Roadmaps to Proficiency and set proficiency benchmarks for cadets to attain at the end of each academic year for each level of instruction of the eight languages taught (Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Japanese, Portuguese, Russian, and Spanish).

Upon completion of the first year of language study for French, Portuguese, and Spanish, cadets are expected to reach between Novice-High and Intermediate-Low. At the end of the second year of study, cadets are expected to reach between Intermediate-Low and Intermediate-Mid. Upon completion of their third year of study, cadets are expected to reach between Intermediate-Mid and Intermediate-High. In order to receive a minor in the language, cadets take a total of five classes above the first-year requirement. At the end of the minor, the proficiency benchmark is set in a band from Intermediate-High to Advanced-Low. To determine their proficiency level, cadets take the Adaptive Listening Test (ALT) and the Adaptive Reading Test (ART). Additionally, they are encouraged to take the Defense Language Proficiency Test (DLPT). If they reach a rating of 2 in either modality of the DLPT (reading or listening), they can take the Oral Proficiency Interview, which gives them a rating for speaking—the gold standard in language acquisition.

With respect to the present study, the benchmark proficiency level for first-year cadets at the end of the academic year in French, Portuguese, and Spanish is a band between Novice-High and Intermediate-Low.

Instruments

The ALT and the ART are valid and reliable proficiency assessments (Clifford & Cox, 2013; Cox & Clifford, 2014) aligned with the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines (ACTFL, 2012, 2024). These two assessments measure general language proficiency instead of what is learned in a WL class (ACTFL, 2025b). Both tests assess one's level of proficiency between the Novice-Low and Advanced-Low level. Each test item consists of either an authentic reading text or audio passage and one multiple-choice question with one correct answer associated with the text or passage. Each test can take up to 90 minutes and is adaptive. That is, the number of test items to which individual test takers respond will vary, depending on performance. Test items are taken from a pool of test items at specific proficiency levels that assess a broad range of topics including everyday life, current events, education, among others. As students begin to fail at a certain proficiency level, the test concludes (Center for Language Studies, n.d.).

Upon completion of a test, a floor rating (the level at which the test taker has demonstrated sustained performance) and a ceiling rating (the level at which the test taker has demonstrated patterns of breakdown) are computed and assigned as test takers receive separate ratings for reading and listening. Results from the ALT and ART can be helpful for a multitude of purposes such as the placement of higher education students in an appropriate course, measuring proficiency at certain points of the curricula, and informing program evaluation (Center for Language Studies, n.d.).

Procedures

Following Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for human subjects testing, participants in second year French, Portuguese, and Spanish were administered the ART and the ALT in the respective languages during the first week of instruction in early August 2024 in their respective classrooms. At the end of the first day of class, participants were asked to fill out a participant demographic sheet online using *Google Forms*. The following two days, the participants took both the ALT and ART. Per IRB guidelines in order to avoid bias, instructors in the three languages proctored each other's classes. Personnel from the department's language lab also helped proctor the two tests. Results from the two APPT assessments were merged with the participant demographic information into a single spreadsheet using *Microsoft Access*. The spreadsheet was imported into *SPSS 18* for data analysis.

Participants

One hundred thirteen individuals in second-year French (*n*=44), Portuguese (*n*=16), and Spanish (*n*=53) participated in the present study. Second-year students were chosen since that is when

students start a WL minor. Of the 113 students who participated, only 95 participants took both the ALT and ART due scheduling conflicts; their proficiency data are reported here. Some participants (*n*=14) voluntarily chose not to fill out the demographic survey, which was permitted by IRB guidelines for participation in a study. With respect to the 99 individuals who completed the demographic survey, the mean age of participants was 19.11 years. Thirty-nine percent self-reported as female (*n*=44) where 49% self-reported as males (*n*=55). The majority of the participants identified as being either Caucasian (68%) or Latinx (9%). The remainder self-reported as African American (4%), Asian (3%), or multiracial (4%). Eighty-six participants reported not being a heritage learner of the WL they were studying. When asked about their previous WL classes, 73% reported *learning* about the language (Krashen, 1982). That is, they were taught in English about the grammar and rarely used the target language in class. Twelve percent reported that they were *acquiring* the target language by both teachers and students using the target language in the classroom (Krashen, 1982). The remaining 15% reported a mixture of learning the language and trying to acquire the target language. All of the participants were placed in second-year WL courses due to their performance on the departmental placement exams.

When asked about when they had stopped taking classes in the language they were now studying, 10% reported that they stopped immediately after their freshman year of high school. Eighteen percent reported having stopped immediately after their sophomore year. Twenty-three percent and 37% had stopped immediately after their junior and senior year respectively. Of the 99 participants that filled out the demographic survey, 17% reported having earned the Seal of Biliteracy from their high school. The standards for receiving a Seal of Biliteracy varies from state to state, and none of the participants could report the criteria for earning the seal. No participants reported having dual enrollment (college) credit for Spanish.

FINDINGS

The researchers collected baseline-testing data on cadets studying second-year French, Portuguese, and Spanish at the United States Air Force Academy in the fall of 2024 according to results of departmental placement testing. It is important to keep in mind that the proficiency benchmark before the participants tested was a band between Novice-High and Intermediate-Low.

With respect to the first research question about the level of proficiency in reading and in listening for language learners of French, Portuguese, and Spanish at the start of the second year of language learning, the researchers analyzed the proficiency data using frequencies for each of the ACTFL sublevels (e.g., Novice-High, Intermediate-Low). Table 1 shows that participant ratings in the three languages for listening proficiency (*N*=95) ranged between Novice-Low and Intermediate-High. Closer examination shows that 53% (*n*=50) of the participants in the three languages received proficiency ratings between Novice-High and Intermediate-Low for listening, meeting the benchmark for the end of the first year of study. Twenty-six percent of the participants (*n*=25) were below the benchmark with ratings in the Novice-Low and Novice-Mid

sublevels on the ACTFL scale. However, 21% of the participants (*n*=20), in Spanish, exceeded the benchmark range and were in the Intermediate-Mid and Intermediate-High sublevels.

Table 1

Participant Proficiency Ratings for Listening at the Beginning of Second-Year Study

	French	Portuguese	Spanish
No Measured Ability	0	0	0
Novice-Low	5	0	0
Novice-Mid	11	8	1
Novice-High	17	7	8
Intermediate-Low	4	1	13
Intermediate-Mid	0	0	12
Intermediate-High	0	0	8
Advanced-Low	0	0	0
Advanced-Mid	0	0	0
Advanced-High	0	0	0
Total	37	16	42

With respect to reading proficiency, Table 2 shows that participant ratings in the three languages (*N*=95) ranged between Novice-Low and Advanced-Mid. Five of the participants did not receive a proficiency rating, which could be explained as they did not want to take the test seriously and moved through the readings as quickly as possible so this adaptive test concluded before a rating could be assigned. Nevertheless, 43% (*n*=16), 88% (*n*=14), and 57% (*n*=24) in French, Portuguese, and Spanish, respectively, received ratings between Novice-High and Intermediate-Low for reading, meeting the benchmark for the end of the first year of study. Of those who received a proficiency rating, 22% of the total participants (*n*=21) were below the benchmark with ratings in the Novice-Low and Novice-Mid sublevels on the ACTFL scale. Twelve percent of the total participants (*n*=11) in the three languages exceeded the benchmark range, receiving proficiency ratings from Intermediate-Mid and Advanced-Mid in reading.

Table 2

Participant Proficiency Ratings in Reading at the Beginning of Second-Year Study

	French	Portuguese	Spanish
No Measured Ability	4	0	1
Novice-Low	9	0	2
Novice-Mid	3	1	6
Novice-High	12	11	14
Intermediate-Low	4	3	10
Intermediate-Mid	2	0	2
Intermediate-High	2	1	6
Advanced-Low	1	0	0
Advanced-Mid	0	0	1
Advanced-High	0	0	0
Total	37	16	42

Turning to the second research question regarding if there was a difference in level of proficiency for those who earned the Seal of Biliteracy and those who did not in the three languages, the researchers calculated frequencies for listening and reading. Table 3 shows for listening proficiency that for those participants who reported knowing that they had either received or not received the Seal of Biliteracy in French, the listening proficiency ratings ranged between Novice-Low and Intermediate-Low. While the number of participants who reported not receiving the Seal of Biliteracy was higher than those who reported having earned the Seal of Biliteracy, the proficiency ratings were not higher for those who received it. With respect to Portuguese, more participants reported not having received the Seal of Biliteracy. The two participants who reported receiving the Seal of Biliteracy had a listening proficiency rating of Novice-High while five of the 13 participants without the Seal of Biliteracy received a proficiency rating at the same sublevel and one sublevel higher (Intermediate-Low). Eight participants received a rating one sublevel lower (Novice-Mid) than those who had reported earning the Seal of Biliteracy.

Turing to the participants in Spanish with respect to listening proficiency, the nine participants reporting having earned the Seal of Biliteracy had proficiency ratings in the three Intermediate sublevels. Of those participants who reported not receiving the Seal of Biliteracy (*n*=26), eight had received a proficiency rating below those with the Seal of Biliteracy and having a proficiency rating in the Novice-Mid and Novice-High categories.

Table 3

Comparison of Participant Proficiency Ratings for Listening with Respect to having Earned the Seal of Biliteracy

	French		Portuguese		Spanish	
	Earned Seal	Did not Receive Seal	Earned Seal	Did not Receive Seal	Earned Seal	Did not Receive Seal
No Measured Ability	0	0	0	0	0	0
Novice-Low	1	4	0	0	0	0
Novice-Mid	1	8	0	8	0	1
Novice-High	3	11	2	4	0	7
Intermediate-Low	1	3	0	1	2	7
Intermediate-Mid	0	0	0	0	3	8
Intermediate-High	0	0	0	0	4	3
Advanced-Low	0	0	0	0	0	0
Advanced-Mid	0	0	0	0	0	0
Advanced-High	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	6	26	2	13	9	26

With respect to reading proficiency to examine differences in levels of reading proficiency for those who earned the Seal of Biliteracy and those who did not in the three languages, Table 4 shows somewhat similar findings when compared to the listening proficiency data. For French, the participants had a wide range of proficiency ratings from Novice-Low to Advanced-Mid. For those who reported not having earned the Seal of Biliteracy, the proficiency ratings were clustered from No Measured Ability to the Intermediate-Mid sublevel, with half (n= 13) at the benchmark for the end of the first year of language learning (Novice-High to Intermediate-Low). While the majority of those who had reported earning the Seal of Biliteracy were in the Novice levels (n=4, 67%), two individuals (33%) had ratings at the Intermediate-High and Advanced-Low levels. In Portuguese, all of the individuals who reported not having the Seal of Biliteracy ranged between the Novice-Mid and Intermediate-Low sublevels. Only one of the participants who reported having earned the Seal of Biliteracy had a higher reading proficiency rating, Intermediate-High. For Spanish, five of the participants (19%) reporting not having the Seal of Biliteracy were below the aforementioned benchmark. The remainder of that group achieved a rating in reading at the benchmark levels or above. Four of the nine participants (44%) who reported earning the Seal of Biliteracy achieved a proficiency rating of Intermediate-High.

Table 4

Comparison of Participant Proficiency Ratings for Reading with Respect to having Earned the Seal of Biliteracy

	French		Portuguese		Spanish	
	Earned Seal	Did not Receive Seal	Earned Seal	Did not Receive Seal	Earned Seal	Did not Receive Seal
No Measured Ability	0	3	0	0	0	1
Novice-Low	2	6	0	0	0	1
Novice-Mid	1	2	0	1	0	4
Novice-High	1	9	1	9	4	8
Intermediate-Low	0	4	0	3	1	8
Intermediate-Mid	0	2	0	0	0	2
Intermediate-High	1	0	1	0	4	1
Advanced-Low	1	0	0	0	0	0
Advanced-Mid	0	0	0	0	0	1
Advanced-High	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	6	26	2	13	9	26

Viewing findings collectively, fewer participants reported having the Seal of Biliteracy, and the majority of the participants who reported having the Seal of Biliteracy did not have higher proficiency ratings in either modality than those who reported not having the Seal of Biliteracy.

DISCUSSION

The Department of Defense continues to place a premium on language and culture enabled military personnel (United States Air Force, 2024); this study provides important findings with relation to the importance of proper language placement of students and, secondarily, the use of the Seal of Biliteracy as an appropriate tool for such placement in WL classes. As previously stated, the main objective of student placement systems is to group students by similar language ability, aiming to assign learners to the most appropriate proficiency level in WL courses. While this seems straightforward, the process is complex due to various factors such as K-12 teacher certification, curricula, and student backgrounds. Despite being a challenge for postsecondary WL programs, there is limited research on the topic (Hudson & Clark, 2008; Lord, 2022). Traditionally, placement is based on standardized test scores, grade point average, and previous coursework, particularly in math and English. These methods are often inadequate and can disadvantage minority students, leading to longer study times, increased costs, and frustration (Bahr et al., 2019; Denison-Furness et al., 2022; Mechur Karp, 2021).

Recent studies suggest promising alternative approaches to placement, such as self-placement, where students assess their own abilities and goals with guidance from advisors. These methods incorporate student input and offer a more personalized process, potentially leading to better

outcomes in terms of student grades. Though labor-intensive and time-consuming, the positive results from these approaches warrant further exploration (Denison-Furness et al., 2022; Lord, 2022; Mechur Karp, 2021). Regardless of the difficulties of optimal execution of the process, placement of students in appropriate levels of language study is key to developing their proficiency and enabling them to achieve the highest levels of proficiency possible given their particular educational circumstances.

Clearly, setting reasonable expectations for WL proficiency after specific study sequences has been a challenge for decades (Lord, 2022; Swanson et al., 2022). Since the 1960s, educators have tried to establish clear proficiency benchmarks, but consistency has been difficult to achieve. However, the Seal of Biliteracy, an initiative started in 2011 and now adopted across all 50 U.S. states, aims to address this. The Seal of Biliteracy recognizes students who have achieved proficiency in both English and one or more WLs by placing an award on their high school diplomas. Each state or school district determines which WL proficiency assessments are acceptable for awarding the Seal of Biliteracy, and the required proficiency levels vary. As noted earlier, Illinois requires students to demonstrate Intermediate-High proficiency, while South Carolina offers three tiers of proficiency ranging from Intermediate-Mid to Advanced-Low (South Carolina Department of Education, 2019).

The Seal of Biliteracy serves several purposes: it encourages language study, certifies biliteracy skills, highlights the value of language diversity, and prepares students with marketable 21st-century skills. For universities, the Seal of Biliteracy also provides one way to recognize and credit students for their multilingual abilities. However, the wide variation in proficiency levels for attainment of the Seal of Biliteracy across all 50 states makes it problematic to rely on this measure of language proficiency with any sustained confidence (Davin et al., 2022). Such a statement is corroborated by the results of this study, which show disparity in proficiency level results between those who reported earning the Seal of Biliteracy and those without it. Subjects in all three languages were widely dispersed among the proficiency levels, regardless of attainment of the Seal of Biliteracy or not.

Referring to Tables 3 and 4, there were more participants who reported not having received the Seal of Biliteracy than those who reported having earned the Seal of Biliteracy. The researchers would expect participants who reported earning the Seal of Biliteracy to have an Intermediate level of proficiency at the least. However, that was not the case for the three languages. When examining the data from Table 3 for the ALT, few participants who reported having the Seal of Biliteracy achieved a rating of Intermediate-Low or higher in French and Portuguese, However, all of those participants taking Spanish achieved ratings at the Intermediate level. With respect to results on the ART, one third of the participants reporting to have earned the Seal of Biliteracy received a proficiency rating at the Intermediate-Low level or higher whereas one of the two in Portuguese received a rating in the Intermediate levels. Slightly more than half of those in Spanish reporting that they earned the Seal of Biliteracy received a rating in the Intermediate levels. Overall, a higher percentage of those who reported not having earned the Seal of Biliteracy had achieved a higher rating in both listening and reading proficiency.

The researchers concluded that the data did not indicate that by having earned the Seal of Biliteracy participants would have achieved a higher proficiency rating in the two modalities. Such a finding suggests that those participants who did not receive the Seal of Biliteracy yet had achieved a proficiency rating in the two modalities at or above the Intermediate-Low level might be discriminated against in terms of receiving placement credit for prior WL learning. For example, if a WL program were only to place WL learners based on achievement of the Seal of Biliteracy, many language learners may not be placed correctly. The data show that many students of Spanish who reported not having the Seal of Biliteracy achieved at least an Intermediate level of proficiency in the two modalities.

While all 50 states have now recognized the Seal of Biliteracy, some WL programs with dynamic curricula and instruction may not be participating in a Seal of Biliteracy program where their students can possibly receive higher education credit and a more advanced level placement in WL classes. The researchers advance the notion that a Seal of Biliteracy with uniform criteria adopted by the 50 states that promote proficiency in the target language would be beneficial to place language learners in the appropriate levels in higher education. By doing so, language learners can begin to track their path toward higher levels of proficiency as they move from secondary to postsecondary WL programs. At present, there is a need in the United States for more people with second language abilities in the workforce (ACTFL, 2019), and the researchers predict that as the American economy continues to be more global, there will be a need for bilingual individuals in just about every language.

While the topic of how to move WL students up the proficiency ladder was not the central topic of this research, it is important to note that building WL proficiency in the target language hinges on teachers' ability to ascertain and even control execution of CLT approaches in the WL classroom. In other words, the goal is to pinpoint the most effective teaching styles/methods to facilitate language learner movement along their individual interlanguage continuum, to the end of increased language proficiency. WL teachers come from a variety of backgrounds and educational bases, and it would be implausible to expect that they all teach precisely in the same way. Nevertheless, an overall adherence to CLT in the classroom has been shown to be a successful approach to increasing language proficiency among learners (Lightbown & Spada, 2021).

Although this study adds to the literature, it is not without its limitations. First, several of the participants did not receive a proficiency rating for reading. While participants were asked to try their best, it is unknown if they did so. Second, due to privacy concerns regarding participants' academic records, it was not possible to verify if they did or did not actually receive a Seal of Biliteracy. Finally, the participants are enrolled in a military academy and thus may have different motivations and approaches to WL learning than those at a four-year postsecondary institution. In spite of these limitations, the researchers call for further research on placement of WL learners in higher education. It would be informative to design and carry out qualitative studies to determine commonalities and differences between those who earned the Seal of Biliteracy and those who did not. Additionally, future research could focus on productive skills (i.e., speaking,

writing) where the present study focused on receptive skills (i.e., listening, reading), which would be able to be compared to earlier studies (Isbell et al., 2018).

CONCLUSION

Clearly, WL proficiency is a vital component of success in many sectors of today's society: the military, the business world, the economy in general. Thus, the national WL teacher shortage is of great concern for those involved in language instruction and learning. Any encouragement for learners to continue their language study is welcome. This includes proper placement in language courses to ensure efficient progress along the interlanguage continuum. It also relies on WL instruction stemming from the most current and effective methods and approaches being employed in the classroom. Emphasis on learners reaching their full WL potential by achieving proficiency in their chosen language is a fundamental but essential step. Focusing on the tenets of CLT, employing successful classroom practices, and highlighting the overall importance of mastering a second (or more) language(s) will place learners in an optimal position to thrive in their chosen life path. A well-planned program of K-12 WL articulation is the foundation for these language learners to succeed.

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