Predicting placement accuracy and language outcomes in immigrants’ second language education

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This paper reports on a recent initiative in Finland to improve the accuracy and comparability of assessments that aim at placing adult immigrants on integration training that suit their proficiency in Finnish as a second language (L2) and their previous educational level. Since the aim of this training is to bring immigrants’ language proficiency to level B1 of the Common European Framework, these assessments can also be seen to predict the learners’ achievement in L2 proficiency. Four types of integration training tracks are available: basic literacy, slow, medium, and fast tracks. They differ mainly in how fast progress the learners are expected to make (given their initial proficiency level and previous education).

The initiative to improve pre-training assessments originated at a ministry responsible for immigrants’ integration training. The initiative involves co-operation with a university with expertise on L2 Finnish and language assessment and testing, and with a group of adult education institutions that have developed and validated a placement system that consists of language tests, measures of learning aptitude and skills, and information about learners’ background (e.g., level of previous education). The aim is to spread the system into wider use at the national level, as well as to develop it further.

We report on the accuracy of placement decisions and the extent to which the different parts of the placement assessments (i.e., different language skill tests, tests of learning aptitude, background variables) predict final language test results at the end of the typically one-year long integration training courses. The data come from over two hundred immigrants with different backgrounds who took the placement tests, completed integration training and then took the final language tests. The presentation will focus on the main findings and discussion about their relevance to both placement assessment and integration training.

Keywords: placement assessment, testing, integration training.