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Students' Perceptions of Placement Test Accuracy, Class Fit and Skill Development in a French Immersion Programme: Evidence from the Nigeria French Language Village, Badagry

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Abstract

Placement tests have been used to determine the starting point of language learners, while students' judgements in the placement of Nigerian French immersion has not been explored. The present study examined the learners' perception of the accuracy of the placement in the Nigeria French Language Village (NFLV), Badagry, the fit of the class and the development of the skills after seven months of immersion. The study was descriptive cross sectional and a total of 100 students were asked to fill in a questionnaire at the end of the programme. It comprised of 12 five-point Likert items, which were summarised by counts, valid percentages, means and standard deviations, and five open-ended items, which were analysed thematically.The majority of students reported that the test was a good measure of their true capabilities (79.0% or M = 3.98) and that they were positioned correctly (82.8% or M = 4.09). Where placement led to teaching, endorsement was low for placement tailored to their level (53.3%, M = 3.58) and neutral (38.0%). The perceived gains ranged from reading comprehension (87.0% agreement; M = 4.18) to oral communication (61.0%; M = 3.67). Written comments requested slower listening audio, easier beginning point and more practical and interactive learning. Results indicate the students were satisfied with the placement decision, but did not see a clear impact of the decision on their teaching, and that spoken production was the least perceived outcome of the programme. The author suggests that the decision of placement should be based on the result of the placement and makes suggestions regarding the design of listening tests, differentiated teaching and structured speaking practice.

Keywords: Placement Testing, Test-Taker Perceptions, French As A Foreign Language, Language Immersion, Nigeria French Language Village, Perceived Proficiency Gains

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INTRODUCTION

French is a peculiar language in the Nigerian higher education system. It is a foreign language in an anglophone country, surrounded by francophone countries and its demand is sustained by historical, economic and cultural relationship between Nigeria and francophone countries (Ibrahim & Isa, 2025). The classroom training has not always resulted in functional speakers. Balogun and Kezie-Osuagwu (2020) pinpoint grammar translation instruction, lack of motivation, lack of resources and lack of immersion opportunities as some of the reasons why Nigerian learners have poor oral competence. Immersed in the system is its most conspicuous solution to this space.

That response is found in the Nigeria French Language Village (NFLV), Ajara, Badagry which is the national centre. Undergraduates of Nigerian universities and colleges of education from all the six geopolitical zones attend it for their language immersion programmes (Adejo, 2020). The studies conducted on NFLV have been on the use of inputs like teachers, materials and facilities (Jaja, 2023), the use of libraries (Adejo, 2020) and comparison with a francophone centre in Benin (Vincent & Tataw, 2024). None of these studies has focused on the initial placement decision, made at the beginning of the immersion process, on what class a given student should be placed in.

This is important as immersion is brief and intense. A student who is placed too high will find the material difficult and a student who is placed too low will find that he or she has to learn material again which will wastes valuable months. While it is hoped that appropriate placement helps to promote effective teaching and learning, the actual effect of appropriate placement in foreign language contexts has not received much attention (Liao, 2022). Placement validation studies have been mainly based on scores, correlations and course outcomes (Liao, 2022; Naqvi et al., 2023; Wudthayagorn & Nipaspong, 2025), and a recent systematic review of 81 test-taker perception studies suggested that more studies need to be conducted on test consequences and under-represented groups (Xie, 2025). One such group is the Nigerian learners of French in a national immersion centre.

This paper fills that gap. It does not replace evidence of accuracy based on scores with students' perceptions; rather, it explores students' perceptions of their placement, the appropriateness of their class and their French development after seven months of immersion at NFLV. The research questions that guided this study were:

1. To what extent did students feel that the placement test reflected their actual level and placed them in an appropriate class?
2. How did students perceive the teaching, support and resources that followed placement?
3. How did students perceive their development in reading, writing, oral comprehension and oral communication after seven months of immersion?
4. What strengths, concerns and improvements did students identify in their written responses?

LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

What Score-Based Placement Research Can and Cannot Demonstrate

The majority of placement validation studies are based on the question, does a test correctly classify students and provide scores? Liao (2022) studied the validity of using a national entrance test to assign 100 university students to English classes in Taiwan. The test distinguished clearly good from clearly bad but not for the borderline group and a three-level division was superior to finer divisions. It was not a good predictor of course grades and predictive value varied by course according to course design and grading policies. The results were more favourable in the study by Wudthayagorn and Nipaspong (2025), in which a specially designed test was administered to 303 first-year students in Thailand: there was a moderate

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correlation between test scores and course performance; and the test was effective in identifying students with low proficiency levels who required additional assistance.

Altogether, the studies demonstrate that the notion of placement accuracy is a multi-dimensional characteristic of a test. It is not consistent throughout the spectrum of achievement, is weak in the middle band where the majority of students demonstrate and is reliant on the subsequent course. Liao (2022) found that course design is related to the success of placement, and Wudthayagorn and Nipaspong (2025) found that the diagnostic writing component of the test provided formative feedback for teachers to adapt their teaching. Based on this evidence, placement is valuable only if it is used to inform teaching, not just if it is used to assign students to rooms. On the other hand, Ahmed (2025) found that a placement test was able to correctly place students mostly due to its score distribution over levels and recommended that listening and speaking should be included in the test and that feedback from students should be taken into consideration. A distribution does not indicate who belongs where, it only indicates where students are placed. Naqvi et al. (2023) provide a more defensible model that involves content moderation, IELTS benchmarking, reliability statistics, and a student survey of face validity, which is similar to this article, using student perception as one strand of evidence among several.

Students' Perceptions as Evidence: Acceptance Does Not Mean Agreement

Test-taker strand of research: Test takers can describe things about a test that can't be measured by the scores. Xie (2025) found that there are three themes in test-taker perceptions as a basis for test design, test-taker perceptions as evidence for test consequence, and test-taker perceptions as documentation of test-taking experiences, from a review of 81 empirical papers published from 2010 to 2023. The field has been on high stakes English testing and research on under-represented groups is suggested, the review said.

A common theme is that students' acceptance of the result of a test is not the same as their belief that the test measured them accurately. Hamid et al., (2019) conducted a survey of 430 IELTS test takers from 49 countries which indicated some level of fairness, but its extent of reflecting the test takers' abilities was still questionable. The same split was noticed in a placement setting: 94% of 120 university students in Lithuania accepted their placement and enrolled at the level recommended, but the respondents were divided equally between those who thought placement tests were a good indicator of the real proficiency and those who did not and those who were unsure (Cvilikaitė-Mačiulskienė, Zutkienė, 2024).

Wallace and Qin (2021) provide an explanation for this gap. They surveyed 192 English learners in Macau and differentiated Distributive Fairness (Do the scores reflect performance?), Procedural Fairness (Are the procedures applied equally?), and Interactional Fairness (Does the teacher treat the students with respect? Students rated the test fairly in terms of procedure and interaction, but were somewhat neutral in rating whether or not they thought their own results were fair. Only interactional and distributive fairness predicted students' judgements of the justness of their programme. Therefore, even a well-controlled test might lead to students' doubts, and the relationship in the classroom after the test could determine the verdict. Arai (2025) tracked the flow experiences of nine Japanese students at four instances during an English speaking course and concluded that there was no one-to-one relationship between teachers' one-off judgments of correct placement and students' flow experiences, but rather a relationship to the classroom context and the students' activity of finding meaning in the course. Perception data is therefore not a poorer quality form of accuracy data, but rather a record of the effects of placement, which is not recorded in accuracy data. They do have their limits. Butler (2024) determined that self-assessments are not highly correlated with external assessments, and that lower-proficient learners have a tendency to overestimate their skills, therefore rating should be interpreted as a report of experience and not a measure of proficiency.

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Class Fit and Grouping by Level

Placement results in the formation of groups and students' perspectives on grouping are challenged. Simonová and Navrátilová (2025) conducted a study involving 20 lower-secondary students where they identified some issues with ability grouping and the changing of groups and suggested that these issues could be solved by transparency of criteria, regular feedback and student participation in the process. Tereshchenko et al. (2019) identified that in England, secondary students' attitudes to grouping were linked to their prior attainment with low attainers showing particular positivity towards mixed-attainment classes. The relevance here is conceptual, both studies are school-based, and satisfaction with an assigned class may vary by level, as well as students' sense of fit may depend on whether they understand—and can question—the rationale for their placement.

Skill Development in Immersion: Why Context Matters

Skill development is dependent on environment and the sequence of development varies. Dewaele and Dewaele (2021) followed the experiences of 33 British and Irish students learning overseas in francophone countries. Self-reported speaking and listening continued to increase over the course, while reading and writing only increased significantly after mid-way through the course; students who were least proficient at the start showed the greatest gains and gains related to developing a robust local French social network. NFLV is not in a francophone environment, however. Vincent and Tataw (2024) attributed the higher rating of a centre in Benin, compared to NFLV, to its francophone location even though their t-test showed that there was no significant difference and their reporting is inconsistent. The students in the NFLV may therefore have fewer opportunities to hear and speak French outside of organised activities and skills developed through instruction and materials (such as reading and writing) may progress at a faster rate than spontaneous speaking.

Affective factors are in the same direction. Botes et al. (2020) meta-analysed 99 effect sizes, and found moderate negative relationships between foreign language classroom anxiety and achievement for each of the categories, with the highest summary estimate for listening ($r = -.53$) and the lowest for speaking ($r = -.26$), which indicate publication bias. Alonso Alonso (2023) reported that learners believed that out-of-class exposure increased all skills except grammar and valued it for enjoyment and social learning, both of which could be significant for oral development, as well as excursions and socio-educative activities. Nigerian studies have shown that there is value in immersion but the resources are inadequate: Ololo and Bello (2025) reported that the 40 college of education students they surveyed experienced improved proficiency and teaching ability, but there were inadequate resources; Jaja (2023) surveyed 377 NCE and 17 facilitators and found that most material resources and physical facilities were in short supply; and Faloju et al. (2023) reported problems of finance, culture shock and limited emotional support. There are no studies focused on placement.

Conceptual Framework

This study treats placement as the first link in a chain with three interrelated stages:

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1. **The placement decision:** whether students felt the test represented their actual ability and their class suited their level (Items 1–3).
2. **The instructional response:** the perceived match between instruction and the level identified by placement (Items 4–8).
3. **Perceived outcomes:** perceived growth in reading, writing, oral comprehension and oral communication (Items 9–12).

The framework is grounded in the CEFR concept of transparency and coherence within an institution's curriculum, teaching and assessment (Council of Europe, 2020, p. 27) and not on the premise that NFLV sets students against CEFR levels. It forecasts that a break at each link will be reflected in students' ratings and, according to Dewaele and Dewaele (2021) and Vincent and Tataw (2024), that improvements in written skills could be greater than improvements in spontaneous speech in a non-francophone context.

METHOD

Design, Setting and Participants

The study was of descriptive and cross-sectional questionnaire type, and data were collected at the end of the 7-month immersion programme. Closed responses were quantitatively summarised and written responses analysed thematically; the two strands were combined in the interpretation phase. The article is part of a broader project at NFLV that examined placement and achievement test scores; the claims are based on what students said, not the statistical accuracy of placement. The subjects were the undergraduate students of French at the NFLV, Badagry, Nigeria. The project started with 200 students; the analytical sample of 100 students is due to the attendance in the end of programme administration and data cleaning (Table 1).

Table 1

Participant Characteristics (N = 100)

Characteristic	Category	*n*	%
Sex	Female	86	86.0
	Male	14	14.0
Age	16–19 years	27	27.0
	20–25 years	64	64.0
	26 years and above	9	9.0
Initial proficiency level	Beginner	37	37.0
	Intermediate	61	61.0
	Advanced	2	2.0
Previous placement test experience	Yes	57	57.0
	No (first-time taker)	43	43.0

Instrument and Procedure

The demographic data in Table 1 were collected in Section A of the questionnaire. Section B consisted of 12 statements which ranged from strongly agree to strongly disagree, from Items 1 to 3 on placement decision, Items 4 to 8 on instruction, support, materials and overall satisfaction and Items 9 to 12 on perceived development in the four skills. The global judgement of progress (item 5) is reported with the instruction items it was part of. There were 5 open-ended questions in Section C about what students liked, how the placement test could be improved, if immersion had an impact on their performance on the

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end-of-programme re-test and general recommendations. The items were not intended to be scales; therefore, they are analysed individually. Before analysis, identifying details were removed, and approval body/institutional permission and how informed consent was obtained were included, as well as confirmation that the responses were not related to students' grade or placement.

Data Analysis

Responses were scored from 5 (strongly agree) to 1 (strongly disagree). The analysis includes the distribution, the percentages that agree, are neutral and disagree, the mean (M) and the standard deviation (SD) for each item based on valid responses. Items 2 (n = 93), 4 (n = 92) and 11 (n = 98) had missing responses. Item-level responses could not be linked to subgroups, so no subgroup comparisons were made. Written responses were coded for strengths, concerns and suggestions and put into themes, but no theme frequencies were kept; quotations are indicative of the range of views.

RESULTS

Table 2

Response Distributions and Descriptive Statistics for Questionnaire Items

Item	Statement	SA	A	N	D	SD	Valid *n*	Agree %	Neutral %	Disagree %	*M*	*SD*
1	The placement test reflected my real level	26	53	15	5	1	100	79.0	15.0	6.0	3.98	0.84
2	I was properly placed in a class reflecting my level	25	52	15	1	0	93	82.8	16.1	1.1	4.09	0.69
3	I was satisfied with my academic group	27	50	16	6	1	100	77.0	16.0	7.0	3.96	0.88
4	Teaching activities were tailored to my level	13	36	35	7	1	92	53.3	38.0	8.7	3.58	0.87
5	I noticed great improvement in my learning	33	48	16	3	0	100	81.0	16.0	3.0	4.11	0.78
6	Teachers were available and helpful	34	38	27	1	0	100	72.0	27.0	1.0	4.05	0.81
7	Materials were adequate and useful	21	57	16	6	0	100	78.0	16.0	6.0	3.93	0.78
8	I was satisfied with the programme generally	23	34	40	3	0	100	57.0	40.0	3.0	3.77	0.84
9	I am better at reading comprehension	33	54	11	2	0	100	87.0	11.0	2.0	4.18	0.70
10	I am better at writing	21	51	27	1	0	100	72.0	27.0	1.0	3.92	0.72
11	I am better at oral comprehension	22	46	22	7	1	98	69.4	22.4	8.2	3.83	0.90
12	I am better at oral communication	20	41	27	10	2	100	61.0	27.0	12.0	3.67	0.97

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Note. SA = strongly agree (5); A = agree (4); N = neutral (3); D = disagree (2); SD = strongly disagree (1). Statements are abbreviated. Percentages are of valid responses.

Placement Decision (RQ1)

Students were overall positive about their setting. The range of agreement for Items 1-3 was between 77.0% and 82.8%, with the highest disagreement of 7.0% not occurring. There was greatest agreement about being placed in a class reflecting their level (82.8% agreed, 1 disagreed) and a slightly lower level of agreement for the test reflecting their actual level (79.0% agreed, 6 disagreed). The academic group experienced the most variation (SD = 0.88), indicating that there was more variation in experience of the peer group than in the judgement of the placement itself.

Instruction After Placement (RQ2)

The distinction between placement and teaching is the most clear-cut. The level of agreement on tailoring teaching activities to their level was slightly lower at 53.3%, about 30 percentage points lower than agreement on correct placement, all of which was primarily shifted to neutrality (38.0%) rather than disagreement (8.7%), with Item 4 having the most missing responses. Materials (78.0%) and teacher availability (72.0%) were rated more favourably, and 81.0% reported great improvement in their learning. There was a significantly lower overall satisfaction with the programme (57.0%), and the neutral response was the highest of all the items (40.0%).

Perceived Skill Development (RQ3)

Perceived development declined from reading comprehension (87.0%; M = 4.18) to writing (72.0%; M = 3.92), oral comprehension (69.4%; M = 3.83) and oral communication (61.0%; M = 3.67). The percentage of disagreement increased in the same manner (2.0% to 12.0%) as did the standard deviations (0.70 to 0.97). The highest rating was given to writing, meaning that the greatest difference was between written and oral modes, not between receptive and productive skills.

Written Responses (RQ4)

Four themes emerged. First, students' learning was the most enjoyable when it was interactive and experiential, such as through excursions, cultural outings, debates (le débat), role-play (le jeu de rôle), peer and native speaker conversation, and approachable teachers. Second, suggestions for the placement test focused on the listening and oral aspects of the test; some students indicated that the speed of the listening was too fast, some wanted a "stepped" entry level for beginning students, some said that the test was "perfect" and was a "great idea to evaluate progress. Third, students credited improved performance on the re-test to greater vocabulary, more precise grammar, improved time management and decreased anxiety, which will be examined by the score-based study. Fourth, the students demanded to continue and expand the programme with its socio-educative excursions as they asked for "practical more than theory", and raised welfare issues of hostel maintenance and bedbugs. These comments are in line with the ratings – the call for practical speaking is in line with the low oral ratings, and the welfare complaints, none of which were raised by any closed item, help to explain the lower general satisfaction.

DISCUSSION

Acceptance of Placement Is Not Evidence of Accuracy

Approximately 80% of the students agreed with their positioning. However, as in Cvilikaitė-Mačiulskienė and Zutkienė (2024) and Hamid et al. (2019), acceptance does not mean confidence in measurement; here too, there was a hint of this distinction in the data—agreement that the class was right (82.8%) was slightly more than agreement that the test captured students' level (79.0%). The endorsement for this sample is

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further restricted by three aspects of the sample. The first is that 61% started at the intermediate level, at the band where Liao (2022) was discriminated the least. Second, 37% were beginners, who are more likely to overestimate their ability (Butler, 2024). Third, the students were surveyed after seven months in their class and endorsement may as much be a reflection of adaptation as of judgement of the original decision, as evidenced by Arai (2025) that student experiences can differ from teachers' judgments of the accuracy of placement. The defensible conclusion is more limited: students did not report placement as an issue and the validity of placement, particularly at level boundaries, is a concern of the score-based analysis.

The Placement–Instruction Gap

The biggest impact is the reduction from 82.8% 'agreement on correct placement' to 53.3% 'agreement on teaching tailored to level'. Placement is justifiable based on the instruction it can support, which the CEFR describes as coherence between curriculum, teaching and assessment (Council of Europe, 2020). Liao (2022) discovered that the prediction power of placement was contingent upon course design, while Wudthayagorn and Nipaspong (2025) discovered that their test was useful partly because of its diagnostic aspect to provide feedback to teachers to adapt instruction. Information provided to teachers that is usable for differentiation is different from information that is provided only to the level of class placement. It is unknown from this study whether or not NFLV teachers receive such information.

The difference was manifested in neutrality, not disagreement. Students were not saying that teaching was misaligned; they were saying that they could not tell. This is the same for level classes, where the activities are broadly the same and differentiation is not apparent to students, or for an item that required students to make a judgement about teachers' intentions. It does not seem to be a reflection on poor relationships as teachers were rated as helpful and Wallace and Qin (2021) found that interactional fairness influenced students' judgement of their programme. The less robust is the curricular one. According to Simonová and Navrátilová (2025), providing a description of each level and how teaching would be different might render the current differentiation visible, or expose the lack of differentiation.

The ratings for general satisfaction (57.0%) were lower than the ratings for specific aspects because, as the written responses indicated, students also rated the programme on accommodation and welfare which were not included in the closed items. This is similar to reports of scarcity of resources at NFLV (Jaja, 2023; Adejo, 2020) and of welfare issues in Nigerian immersion programmes (Faloju et al., 2023), revealing a limitation of the instrument.

A Written–Oral Gradient

It is also a decline from reading to oral communication as opposed to francophone countries where Dewaele and Dewaele (2021) found the increase from reading to oral communication. While in a francophone context, it is possible to find opportunities for oral interaction in everyday life, this is not the case in the context of NFLV in an anglophone country (Vincent & Tataw, 2024). Reading and writing are supported reliably through instruction and materials but spontaneous speech is only produced as much as is planned in the programme. This is the reason for the rating of writing over oral comprehension, which corroborates Balogun and Kezie-Osuagwu (2020) who reported the weak oral competence of the Nigerian learners. Affective factors could exacerbate the trend: Botes et al. (2020) reported that the strongest link between anxiety and achievement is for listening, and students reported that the placement audio was too fast. Furthermore, the broader range of oral ratings indicates unequal oral development and, based on Dewaele and Dewaele's (2021) finding that lower-proficiency students benefitted the most, this is a factor that should be compared across levels in future research.

The students appreciated debates, role play and conversation, but the oral communication was the lowest.

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The two findings are consistent: learners appreciate interacting activities as their primary means to practice speaking, and they might still feel that they had not enough out-of-class speaking practice as Alonso Alonso (2023) discovered in the case of out-of-class contact. The call for "practical more than theory" mirrors the call for Communicative and Task-based approaches by Ibrahim and Isa (2025). Lastly, the students' remarks on fast audio are relevant to validity: When listening speed is too high for the beginning student, it can also be a measure of tolerance for speed and stress and anxiety–listening link (Botes et al., 2020) can exacerbate this effect. These comments are similar to those of Ahmed (2025) which suggest that student feedback should be sought to determine which section of the document needs to be validated against evidence of student achievement.

Recommendations

1. **Review the listening section of the placement test.** Check audio speed against the target level and examine whether beginners' listening scores cluster at the bottom of the scale.
2. **Share diagnostic information with teachers.** Provide a profile of each class's strengths and weaknesses by skill, not only class lists.
3. **Make differentiation visible.** Explain what each level means and how teaching differs, and offer an early point at which a placement can be reviewed.
4. **Build structured speaking practice into the timetable.** Expand debates, role-play and socio-educative trips, linked to explicit speaking objectives.
5. **Widen programme evaluation.** Include items on accommodation, welfare and facilities in future questionnaires.

Limitations

Evidence is self-reported and is perceptions of evidence, not measured proficiency or placement accuracy (Butler, 2024). Data were collected at the end of the programme, and the sample (100) is a sub-sample of a larger target group. Because there were no item-level responses, there was no ability to look at any differences among subgroups. The questionnaire included single items and no validated scales and no theme frequencies were recorded, and procedural fairness, communication and welfare were not included.

Conclusion

The majority of the students accepted their position, though only approximately half felt that there was clear evidence that teachers differentiated their work to the level of students, and they felt that they were making the greatest progress in reading and the least in spoken French. The article provides the perspective of Nigerian students learning French on a test-taker literature that is largely dominated by English tests, demonstrates that the point of weakness in the decision was not the placement, but what happened thereafter, and reveals a written–oral gradient that corresponds to the immersion in a non-francophone environment. This should therefore be considered a success if the student not only reaches the right class, but what they will do after they get there.

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