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Chapter 9

Putting Students in Their Place

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PUTTING STUDENTS IN THEIR PLACE

The Role of Placement Testing in Language Programs

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A perennial issue that nearly all language programs face with the arrival of new students is: where is the best place for each student to begin their course of study within our curricular structure given their current language abilities? When students have no previous language learning experience, the decision seems easy: place them in the beginning-level class. But when students have prior experience, deciding where they belong becomes more complicated given the wide range in the quality and quantity of previous exposure and the level of ability attained. Programmatic exigencies and resources may constrain student placement even further. Administrators must answer questions such as the following:

- Do student enrollments need to increase or be limited?
- Is the student a traditional post-pubescent L2 learner, a heritage learner, or a naturalistic learner?
- Are there prerequisite levels of ability in particular language skills that must be met prior to enrollment?
- What institutional protocols are in place to restrict student enrollment, or will students be able to choose their class level regardless of any recommendation?

In this chapter, we will address core issues to consider regarding students, programs, and resources when creating placement protocols and procedures. The placement policies a program adopts impact student enrollment, teaching methods, program size, and overall well-being. We start with a brief analysis of each aspect of second language student placement (students, programs, resources) and review relevant research on placement testing. Finally, we provide real-life examples from our experiences placing students in various programs, including intensive English language programs, university non-English courses, and online English programs, highlighting lessons learned from unintended consequences.

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Fundamental Considerations

Essential Elements

Students

The diversity of experiences among students entering language programs presents significant challenges in placement decisions. Students with no prior exposure typically start at novice levels, but multilingual learners may require a higher starting point if they are familiar with related languages (Groff et al., 2023). The lack of a universally accepted method for language study, along with varied curricula and instructional techniques, complicates the placement of formal learners. Factors such as participation in dual-language immersion programs, the extent of previous coursework, and the type of instruction (grammar exercises vs. communicative practices) contribute to this complexity.

Heritage speakers represent a unique category. Often growing up around the language, they may acquire phonological features and conversational skills that resemble native speakers (Scontras et al., 2015). However, their proficiency can vary significantly across language skills, with many learners feeling more comfortable in informal oral registers (Hayakawa, 2022). Their literacy skills, especially in languages whose writing systems differ from the majority language, may be limited, posing additional challenges in determining appropriate placement (Montrul, 2011).

Programs

The diversity in second language programs is well-documented in the academic literature. Informal courses, such as those offered by community education, nonprofits, and churches, are characterized by open enrollment and a lack of formal assessment, focusing more on practical language use and community engagement. In contrast, intensive language programs are more structured, often requiring significant classroom hours and adherence to strict grading and attendance policies (Housen et al., 2019). Tertiary education programs integrate second language learning with other academic subjects, providing a more comprehensive educational experience (Harklau, 2002). Online language learning options vary widely, offering synchronous, asynchronous, group, independent, and hybrid formats, catering to different learning preferences and schedules (Dubiner, 2019).

Program objectives in second language learning can also vary significantly. Some programs may set ambitious goals like achieving native-like proficiency, though these claims are often not clearly substantiated by specific methodologies or outcomes (Hartshorne et al., 2018). Others are more focused on preparing students for specific tests or certification exams, which can lead to a narrower concentration on certain aspects of language like grammar and vocabulary, potentially at the expense of broader communicative competence.

Resources

Arguably, the most important considerations are the program's resources and trajectory. With strong student enrollment and an abundance of qualified instructors, linguistically homogeneous classes make sense. However, with limited instructors, larger mixed-level classes taught by the most capable instructors may be better. Even with enough instructors, time and space

constraints could still impede splitting classes while scheduling conflicts arise if the same levels are offered at different times.

At a time when some question any need to study other languages, introducing barriers to student placement may result in declining enrollments and may make programs unsustainable. While these factors make the reality of student placement rather complex, there are commercial vendors who claim that their product will solve all placement issues, but for a price.

Historical Perspectives

Glen Fulcher stated that "[t]he goal of placement testing is to reduce to an absolute minimum the number of students who may face problems or even fail their academic degrees because of poor language ability or study skills" (1997). This simple perspective of placing students into the right class seems easy and straightforward, however there are always classification errors when decisions are made. False-positive errors classify someone as proficient enough to enter at a particular level when they are not. False-negative errors classify someone as not proficient when they are. Classification errors are inevitable, but their impact can be minimized through different processes, such as scoring models (Cizek & Bunch, 2007). Perhaps the simplest example of a scoring model is setting an appropriate cut score on a test that determines whether a student is admitted to one course or another. Correctly classifying and placing students is exacerbated not only by the complexity associated with students, programs, and resources, but also by competing priorities of diverse stakeholders (Bernhardt et al., 2004). In general, students want a test that is quick and easy, while instructors want something that is maximally informative and accurate. Likewise, researchers want strong empirical backing, while administrators would like testing to be cheap, or even free.

Language placement testing has been used in academic institutions for decades to assess incoming students' proficiency levels and place them into appropriate language classes. The practice emerged as the study of foreign languages became more prevalent in schools and universities in the 19th and 20th centuries and as more students sought higher education in languages they did not speak in their homes (Kunnan, 2017; Smith & McLelland, 2018).

Initially, language placement relied on instructor permission or students' previous coursework and grades rather than standardized tests. Students would be placed based on how many years they had studied the language during their secondary education, their grades in prior language classes, or both. However, this did not account for variation in the quality of instruction, and any informal language learning, such as living abroad or self-study, that may have taken place. The use of standardized placement exams became more prevalent by the mid-20th century. These tests aimed to evaluate language skills in a consistent way across institutions. The first efforts focused on placing English-speaking students studying foreign languages, the two most popular at the time being French and Spanish. Those efforts were soon followed by the need to place students from other language backgrounds learning English. To remain in harmony with the audio-lingual teaching approach that was popular in that era, many of the items assessed grammar (e.g., verb conjugations) and vocabulary (e.g. word definitions) using fill-in-the-blank sentences, and matching items with vocabulary words in one column and definitions in the other (Bolton, 1954; Presser & Harold, 1950; Wisconsin, 2011).

Early Foreign Language Placement Testing

Foreign language placement testing in the United States was pioneered by the Modern Language Association as part of their 1955 Foreign Language Program initiative to improve college language instruction (Parker, 1955). Teams of language teaching experts in French and Spanish were assembled to work on each test and relied heavily on the audio-lingual teaching approach that was popular at that time. The tests aligned with the drills practiced in classes and thus did not test communicative ability. By 1957, the initial versions of the tests were published and made available to colleges and high schools across the United States. For many institutions, it was their first foray into standardized foreign language exams, and it ushered in a new era in which standardized assessments evaluated incoming students' language skills rather than relying on seat-time, coursework, prior grades, or internal assessment instruments.

Early English as a Second Language (ESL) Placement Testing

English language placement tests designed for non-native speakers were developed soon after their foreign language counterparts. In the 1950s and 1960s, the number of international students studying in English-speaking countries grew rapidly. This created a need for standardized assessments of English abilities for admission into US universities. A consequence of these entry requirements led to the creation of intensive English language programs that would help prepare students' English skills to meet university admission standards. The first placement tests for English as a Second Language (ESL) were simply the standardized college admission's tests like the Scholastic Aptitude Test and the ACT (formerly American College Testing) exam written in English for native English-speaking applicants. If students scored high enough, they could be admitted into the university. If the score was not high enough, students could be grouped into cohorts based on their score and placed into ESL classes.

The University of Michigan's English Language Institute developed some of the first tests in the early 1960s to place students into their programs. These tests included the Michigan Test of Aural Comprehension and the Michigan Test of English Language Proficiency. In 1961, the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) was developed by Educational Testing Services (ETS) with grant funding from the Ford and Danforth Foundations and was made available to ESL programs throughout the US (Dizney, 1965; TOEFL, 2020). Like their foreign language counterparts, these early tests did not assess productive skills but focused on grammar and vocabulary presented in written form with some including reading and listening comprehension as well. In 1965, the British Council in collaboration with the University of Oxford designed a test focused on assessing English for academic purposes, namely, the English Language Battery (ELB). In the 1970s, the British Council in collaboration with the University of Cambridge designed tests focused on English abilities for higher education called the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) (Davies, 2008). These pioneering English assessment tools marked an important shift toward standardized language testing to support growing numbers of non-native English-speaking students and professionals. However, these early tests uncovered several difficulties in placing students. Since the test items were designed to measure readiness to study at English medium universities, there were not as many items written for beginning-level students. Thus, a natural outcome of fewer items at a given level resulted in a larger standard error

of measurement for novice-to-intermediate learners. And the cost of these high-stakes tests became prohibitive for beginning-level students who were far from having the skills to begin their university studies.

Language Proficiency Scales

Early foreign language and ESL testing faced challenges due to an overemphasis on grammatical and lexical knowledge, which often did not correlate with communicative competence. High test scores did not necessarily imply proficiency in real-world communication, especially for non-traditional learners. This discrepancy led to the development of the first proficiency scale by the US government, designed to be comprehensible to all stakeholders, regardless of their background in language education.

The need for this scale emerged post-World War II, as the US increased its global diplomatic efforts, necessitating government employees with adequate language skills. Existing language certifications were insufficient for the government's requirements. The proficiency scale, developed by the Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) in the 1950s, provided clear criteria for language abilities relevant to various governmental roles. This scale led to the adoption of criterion-referenced testing (CRT), focusing on specific proficiency levels rather than norm-referenced testing's distribution curve. The ILR's scale has influenced similar frameworks by NATO's Bureau of Language Coordination (BILC), the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), and the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) (Winke & Brunfaut, 2020).

Most proficiency scales anchor their levels and descriptions to the construct of communicative competence and how language is used in real-life encounters. The American Council on the Teaching for Foreign Languages (ACTFL) defines theirs as a "description of what individuals can do with language in real-world situations in a spontaneous and non-rehearsed context" (*ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines, 2012*), rather than merely what students can do regarding outcomes or objectives in a specific course. Proficiency assessments can be used for a wide range of testing purposes, including placement, but they are best utilized with programs that are proficiency driven with proficiency-trained instructors. While official, high-stakes proficiency assessments can be quite costly, there are low-cost and low-stakes options for proficiency-based assessments.

Placement Testing Research

Literature concerning placement testing tends to feature more prominently in handbooks for practitioners engaged in developing tests than it does in peer-reviewed studies (Green, 2012; Hughes & Hughes, 2020). There are, however, a few general trends from published research that may be informative. First, test validation is a time-consuming and resource-intensive process and most commercial tests publish technical reports with their in-house research. Therefore, there appeared to be more local, in-house placement tests featured in scholarly journals, many of which detail the extent to which those tests meet their curricular needs. While commercial tests might seem easier to administer, they might not align well with the program's curriculum (Brown, 1989; Fulcher, 1997; Kokhan, 2013; Wall et al., 1994).

Second, research on English language placement found that academic success for non-native English speakers entering post-secondary education relied heavily on correct placement (Lee & Greene, 2007). While the use of vocabulary tests for placement and promotion from

one course to another has yielded some promising results (Clark & Ishida, 2005; Fountain & Nation, 2000), reliance on a single aspect of language ability is more likely to increase the chance of misplacement and be less informative for curricular or pedagogical decisions (Green & Weir, 2004).

Third, research focused on *Languages other than English* (LOTE) explored areas of self-assessment options, computer-assisted and online assessments. In general, research found that both in-house and commercial online assessments, such as the Oral Proficiency Interview – Computer and the WebCAPE, can place students correctly across multiple student ability levels (Bernhardt et al., 2004; Blais & Laurier, 1995; Larson & Madsen, 1985; Tigchelaar, 2019). Research on self-assessments as placement tools is mixed, but they tend to be most effective when administered with a specific linguistic task. (Brantmeier, 2006; Edele et al., 2015).

Selection of Placement Tests

In the following section we provide a succinct list of core issues program administrators must keep in mind when selecting language placement tests for adult learners, categorized into three main areas:

1. Purpose and Goals of Language Placement Testing
   - Identifying Language Ability vis-a-vis Curricular Levels: Depending on how tight the alignment is, placement tests can be used to determine how a student's current level of language ability maps on to the curriculum of the program, enabling them to be placed in appropriate instructional courses that align with their abilities. However, this usually requires the placement test be created for a specific course, or that the course outcomes are modified to align with the test.
   - Guiding Curriculum Selection: Placement test results inform the selection of appropriate curricula and materials for each learner, ensuring that instruction is tailored to their individual needs and maximizes their learning potential.
   - Tracking Progress and Outcomes: Placement test scores serve as a baseline for measuring individual learner progress and evaluating the effectiveness of language instruction programs when students are re-tested at the end of instruction as a type of exit exam. Please note that unless there are stringent requirements for advancement, students may be promoted to the next level without being at the same level as newly placed students.
2. Types of Language Placement Tests
   - No-Test and "Low-Test": Higher education institutions often place students based on predefined rules for known groups. For instance, a student with two years of high school German is placed in 102, while heritage speakers go to 202. Those who don't fit these groups can consult an instructor. This works well for large institutions with many students of consistent ability levels, whereas smaller programs or individual teachers create customized placement tests aligned with their course objectives. This approach suits small programs as instructors must maintain and grade the tests to place students accordingly.
   - Standardized Tests: These tests are widely used and have established norms for different proficiency levels, allowing for standardized comparisons of learners' abilities. Often these tests are norm-referenced and are more useful in comparing students to one another than to external criteria.

- Criterion-Referenced Tests: These tests measure learner performance against specific language skills or benchmarks, providing detailed information about their strengths and weaknesses in different areas of language proficiency. These are often aligned closely to language proficiency scales.
- Locally Developed Tests: These tests are created by individual institutions or programs to align with their specific curriculum and instructional goals. While they may offer greater flexibility and customization, they may lack the standardization and established norms of widely used tests.
- Self-Assessment: Having students complete a survey or questionnaire about their self-perception of their abilities also has a long history. While self-assessments can be inexpensive and easy to administer to many students, they may have more classification errors than other methods (Edele et al., 2015). Many students' minimal language experience tends to inflate their ability, while others might underestimate their ability. However, if developed appropriately and used properly, programs and instructors can use the results from self-assessments to not only place students but also help them understand the gaps in their perceived and actual language ability.
- Computer/Technology-Assisted Language Testing (CALT): These assessments use computer technology to create, administer, and score language assessments (Suvorov & Hegelheimer, 2013). CALT encompasses a range of applications, from simple computerized versions of traditional paper-based tests to sophisticated systems that use multimedia for testing receptive skills and/or employing artificial intelligence to score productive skills. One of the primary advantages of CALT is its ability to offer immediate feedback to test-takers. Unlike traditional testing methods, which often require significant time for scoring and result dissemination, CALT can provide instant results to place students.
- Computer-Adaptive Tests: These tests adjust question difficulty based on learners' responses, offering personalized and efficient assessments. Popularized in the 1980s and '90s, they promise shorter testing times and more accurate results. In the LOTE testing world, the Web-delivered Computer Adaptive Placement Exam (WebCAPE) (Larson & Madsen, 1985) remains a popular option for foreign language placement, featuring adaptive sub-scales in reading, listening, and grammar. Such tests suit institutions with many incoming students and limited resources but may result in negative washback and higher classification errors due to their focus on receptive skills only.

3. Selection Considerations and Challenges
    - Learner Characteristics: Program managers should consider factors such as learners' age, educational background, prior language experience, and learning goals when selecting a placement test. It's particularly important to know which populations were used to validate and norm the tests.
    - Test Validity and Reliability: The chosen test should have established validity, meaning it accurately measures what it claims to measure, and reliability, meaning it produces consistent results over time and across different administrations. Reliability should be reported and can be examined from reported reliability coefficients.
    - Test Administration and Scoring: The practicality of administering and scoring the test should be considered, including the availability of resources, staff expertise, and potential costs. Moreover, understanding how cut scores were established is important to know.
    - Integration with Instructional Programs: The placement test results should be effectively integrated into the instructional program, ensuring that learners are placed in appropriate courses and receive personalized support.

- Addressing Equity and Bias: Program managers should be mindful of potential biases in the test selection process and ensure that the chosen test is fair and equitable for all learners, regardless of their background or learning style.

Program managers should consider their language program's context, goals, resources, and adult learners' diverse needs when selecting placement tests. There are many other options, and third-party placement tests will likely increase. Despite our preference for proficiency testing, there is no one-size-fits-all approach. Each institution must find practical solutions balancing student needs, program priorities, and available resources. Careful evaluation and informed decisions ensure effective placement testing.

Implications and Applications for Language Program Development and Administration

A Tale of Three Placement Testing Experiences

To concretize the foregoing discussion, we offer three experiences that have helped us ask and answer the right questions in creating strategies to place students.

Placing Students in an Intensive Program

For 17 years, I (Troy) managed the placement and progression of approximately 200 students each semester at an Intensive English Program (IEP). The program offered seven levels, from beginners to those preparing for university. Students enrolled in four classes: Listening/Speaking, Reading, Writing, and Grammar, with classes scheduled concurrently at four different times throughout the day (BYU-ELC, n.d.). The teaching staff included full-time faculty, community adjuncts, and student instructors from the university's TESOL program.

Placement and promotion were determined by a computer-based test battery, including multiple-choice questions on reading, listening, and grammar, a timed essay, and a computerized speaking test (Cox & Davies, 2012). Teachers, trained in language assessment literacy, rated speaking and writing tests using benchmark and threshold exemplars to ensure consistent and fair ratings (Cox, 2013).

Students often presented a *jagged* profile in their test scores, excelling in some areas while lagging in others. Initially, we considered allowing students to enroll in classes matching their varied skill levels, but logistical challenges, such as scheduling conflicts and resource allocation, made this impractical.

Ultimately, we adopted a hybrid scoring model (Cizek & Bunch, 2007), using weighted averages with a focus on productive skills to predict the most suitable level for each student. Students were then placed into cohorts, with their placement reviewed after the first week of classes. This system, refined over several years, has been effective for over 15 years, though it may not be suitable for all educational settings.

Placing Students in University Languages Other Than English (LOTE) Courses

After transitioning from an Intensive English Program (IEP) to a university language center, I (Troy) encountered different challenges in student placement. Because university LOTE programs face challenges in attracting sufficient student enrollment, an online, unproctored placement test was implemented to reduce barriers to participation and facilitate easier access

for prospective students. The diverse teaching staff had varying degrees of language pedagogy training, thus complicating the issue of finding a unified placement solution.

For placement, students initially used the WebCAPE test (Turner III, 2017). However, its random item selection sometimes led to skewed results, prompting some departments to average scores from multiple test attempts. When asked to devise a more accurate placement method, I (Troy) proposed a controlled test battery similar to the IEP's. However, concerns about cost, test security, and the existing system's flexibility halted this idea. The university setting also presented unique challenges, such as varying student motivations and logistical complexities in class scheduling. For example, at times proficient students have enrolled in a beginner's classes due to scheduling constraints but have been utilized as teaching assistants.

Considering these factors, the group managing the project decided on a hybrid approach combining self-assessment and rater assessment of speaking and writing samples, evaluated against the ACTFL scale called the Language Ability Self-Evaluation Resource referred to by its acronym, LASER (BYU-CLS, n.d.). It allowed instructors to make informed placement decisions, accommodating students' schedules and preferences. Regular training on the ACTFL scale was provided to ensure a common understanding of learning outcomes. This approach, still being refined, has proven as effective as the WebCAPE, with the added benefit of encouraging student self-reflection and fostering a more engaged learning attitude.

Placing Students in Online Courses

At the same university where previous placement scenarios played out, the online division of the sponsoring church, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, requested assistance determining placement for English language learners in an online ESL program offered through BYU-Pathways (BYU-Pathway, n.d.). These students were often nontraditional in that many were coming back to school after already starting families and entering the workforce. Students would meet once a week in person with other learners to form a community of practice (Wenger, 1998) in which they could offer student-led peer support, but they would be placed into a self-paced, competency-based curriculum. Students could proceed through modules online at their own pace allowing for flexibility for students whose familial, work, and other responsibilities made traditional coursework difficult. At the time of the request for a placement instrument, the curricular modules were still being developed. The program was nonprofit, and the students were international with varying levels of internet access. Cost and ease of access were the driving constraints, meaning that a test that required human raters for speech and writing evaluations would not be possible. Further, costs associated with the development, either of content or extensive technological infrastructure or delivery, would also not be covered. Notwithstanding our bias toward proficiency-based testing, we realized that, given the constraints, another approach would be more appropriate.

The solution at the time for this scenario was to find an existing test that could be administered easily, at scale, and in low-bandwidth areas that didn't require human raters or extensive and ongoing maintenance. We recommended using the English version of the WebCAPE (Cox, 1996). Knowing that the WebCAPE did not capture students' writing or speaking abilities, we worked with the online institution to establish sound policy and practice for making course adjustments for students who may be misplaced or who might need

extra support. Further, we set up metrics to track student performance in the program and to adjust the placement test cut scores as necessary.

This is an important point when deciding on a placement. In many situations, an innovative solution is cheaper and more practical than a test built to fit a program's exact needs. Further, most of the risk associated with test creation and delivery is assumed by the test vendor. Despite our bias toward proficiency-based assessments, this choice was the right one for this situation. However, in the ensuing years, data gathered from the program have indicated the need for new placement procedures to better fit the profiles of students and instructors. The program is now moving toward a proficiency-based approach that aligns more closely with their current and future priorities and needs.

Essential Questions

A fundamental issue in creating a placement testing strategy is determining where you want students to be after they have taken the courses you are offering. What can someone who has taken a class do that someone who has not taken the class cannot do? Clear articulation of learning outcomes at the program and course level in such a way that they reflect performance objectives (i.e., can-do statements) will aid in determining how students can and should be placed. The next task is the identification of existing assessment instruments and placement procedures that align with those objectives. In some cases, self-placement without an instrument is the best course of action.

To this end, we offer the following questions to guide deliberations regarding placement tests and procedures.

Purpose

- What is a one-sentence mission statement that describes the purpose of the program?
- How do individual classes and class levels support the program purpose?
- What are the learning outcomes of each course in your sequence?

Until there is agreement at the program level in answering these questions, it will make little difference which placement assessment is used.

Program Description

- Is this a full-time intensive language program (e.g., an IEP) or part-time (i.e., will students be studying other subjects as well)?
- Is the program online, in person, or hybrid?
- Are students to be placed into a curriculum with explicit levels or similarly skilled cohorts?
- Who will teach the curriculum and what are their qualifications?
- For intensive programs, do the courses integrate language skills or are they separated by skill, content area, or both?
- Can students be in different levels within the program based on skill area or are they placed into a single level?
- How much agency will the students have in determining the courses they take, regardless of the results of their placement exam?

As mentioned earlier, as the program changes, the strategies will also need to change. If the program has tighter controls on the student enrollment, teacher selection, and scheduling, the protocol can be more regimented. When the program has fewer controls, the protocol will likely need to be more flexible.

Logistics

- Is there existing software that perfectly aligns with your learning outcomes? If not, could it be adapted?
- If you want to create your own testing solution, do you have the necessary expertise to build and support it?
- Will your tests be proctored?
- What skill areas will you test?
- What scoring model will you use?
- What is the protocol for misplaced students?

To use a cliché, the devil is in the details: even a program with a clear purpose and solid description can be easily derailed if logistics are not carefully considered.

Future Directions

With greater amounts of data, better statistical models, increased research, and further development of artificial intelligence, language testing in general and placement testing specifically can expect interesting and exciting developments in the upcoming years. We look forward to advances in quicker, less expensive rating of speaking and writing, better prediction of proficiency, and fewer classification errors. Nonetheless, innovative technology is not a panacea and by itself will not solve the complexities in education. Amid the ever-changing landscape of education, there are constants that can aid institutions with achieving desired outcomes above simply choosing what is easiest, fastest, newest, or cheapest. Our hope is that administrators will be wise enough to start with the needs of students, program priorities, and available resources when developing and implementing their placement strategy.

Conclusion

In conclusion, student placement in language programs is complex and requires a tailored approach. A balance must integrate student needs, program objectives, and resources. We highlighted how placement decisions affect teaching methods and program health by exploring placement testing history and research. Real-life examples of placement test creation and implementation were provided. By considering student backgrounds, programmatic needs, and resource limitations, instructors and administrators can select effective placement instruments and develop robust placement protocols.

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