A Proposal for a New Theoretical Perspective of Language Test Malcontents: Three Stories

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This study reports three international graduate students who took an English as a Second Language (ESL) test at a large U.S. public university. Some test takers might be misclassified as non-masters, required to take ESL courses, and thus unable to register for a full load of content courses. The three test-takers perceived themselves to be misclassified; we call them “malcontents.” These three students were tracked as they began their academic program, via in-depth, face-to-face interviews. Each was audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. We present narratives starting from the test-taking experience and reaching into the first year of graduate program. Two malcontents who were not convinced about their local test results at the beginning later accepted the results after their required ESL courses. Findings indicate that test contentment cannot be judged about the test alone, but can only be judged about the test in concert with any courses into which the test-taker is placed. The stories of malcontents must be identified because their experiences in subsequent courses are an important aspect of establishing the validity evidence; hence, this paper proposes a new theoretical perspective of language test malcontents.

I. INTRODUCTION

Each August, a tradition plays out at many U.S. colleges and universities. Newly-arrived international students orient to their courses of study, to new lodgings, to employment, to changes in food and lifestyle, and very importantly, to study in a foreign language setting: all their schoolwork will now be rendered in English.

A logical question arises: Does the new international student have sufficient command

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of English to pursue full-time study in the chosen major field? At the university where our research was conducted, answering this question involves two stages. First, applicants must take an internationally standardized test of English: the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). Scores on that test are part of the admission decision, both at the department and campus levels. If admitted, the TOEFL score determines if a further on-campus ESL placement test is also required. If the TOEFL score is high enough, then the student is exempted from an on-campus ESL placement test. If not, the on-campus test either exempts or requires further English classes during the first semesters of study.

Occasionally, this ‘TOEFL-then-local’ approach does not work. At his doctoral institution, the second author held a graduate assistantship to administer and report scores for the local ESL test. The term ‘malcontent’ has its genesis there, when his supervising professor once sent out to the entire program a pre-enrollment memo with various instructions about the cycle of forthcoming ESL tests. The last point on the supervisor’s memo read: “Persistent malcontents should be sent to me.”

1. Language Test Malcontents

The newly-arrived international student may feel the strongest motivation to get going—and quickly—in the major field of study. Such a student feels that s/he is not in the U.S. to study English, but to study Agronomy or Biochemistry or Zoology or whatever field is his/her destiny.

Alternatively, the new international student may wish (just as eagerly) to get going on the major field of study, but at the same time, this student may want to improve command of English before assuming full-time academic work.

Our first student feels no additional English is needed, and our latter student wants further improvement in English. In this research, we are concerned with the former type of student. There is a pragmatic benefit by investigating the first type of student; we will learn better why test takers become upset, and we will come to understand more fully what happens when the upset dissipates. We are also delicately side-stepping the complex issue of new international graduate students slated to teach in English. Our focus here is on the general demands of English as a student—not as a teacher—and our focus is on those new international students who feel that their ‘TOEFL-then-local’ ESL assessment is in error. The decision that has been made on the basis of test scores, they feel, is wrong. Their command of English is better than we say that it is, and they are unhappy.

This unhappiness may take some time to manifest itself. We need to investigate not only the student’s disagreement with the testing, but also the student’s opinion of any subsequently required ESL courses. We see four broad logical cases:
Perceived happiness takes place right after the test, while perceived usefulness comes into play during post-test instruction. If students are happy with their test decisions, they belong to the top row of Figure 1 and are classified as typical test takers in the sense that test takers’ satisfaction with their test results is what test developers are aiming for and therefore, their contentment is ideal and expected from test developers’ points of view. If they are unhappy with their test decisions, they belong to the bottom row and are classified as malcontents. Typical test takers who perceive that the courses are useful belong to the first cell (Cell 1) in the top row; however, if they perceive they did not benefit from the courses, they belong to the second cell (Cell 2) in the top row. Neither of these cells in the top row presents a fundamental challenge to the focus of this paper—existing testing practice—because the student is satisfied with the test result. We admit that Cell (2) is of serious programmatic interest, however. Any ESL program wants its clients (students) to be happy, that is, to be satisfied with their placement and with the instruction that they are receiving. In this paper, our discussions concern the placement test rather than the follow-up courses only as a matter of logistics: We began our research focusing on the test, and so Cell (2) is not relevant; however, we recognize its importance for future research.

Our work concerns Cells (3) and (4). It is motivated largely by administrative scar tissue, developed over many years of largely successful ‘TOEFL-then-local’ testing, but punctuated by the occasional, sometimes vitriolic complaint. We report here the stories of three malcontents: Amy, Betty, and Carol. We hope that the reporting of these stories will improve testing practice in our local setting as well as inform readers who may face similar dilemmas elsewhere.

We propose several new terms regarding student contentment with test results in test validation, which are malcontented, malcontentedness, and malcontents. We hope
language testers will acknowledge the importance of the role of information about student contentment with test results. ‘Malcontented’ is a descriptive adjective that can be interchangeably used with ‘unhappy’ or ‘dissatisfied.’ ‘Malcontentedness’ refers to a general phenomenon that reflects test takers’ displeasure with their test results and post-test instruction; malcontentedness is thus a phenomenon that affects the entire test (i.e., students’ responsibility to take the test, test scores, test results, and post-test instruction), whereas we can say that a given test-taker may (or may not be) malcontented. If the test-taker is unhappy with the results, then we are labeling that person as a ‘malcontent’ (the noun form).

If the ESL courses that students are required to take in accordance with local test results are not perceived to be beneficial by those students (i.e., Cell 4 in Figure 1), it casts doubt on both local test results (i.e., decisions that have been made on the basis of test scores) and on ESL instruction. This is the fundamental motive of the current research.

2. Malcontents’ Narratives as Construct Validity Evidence

The inclusion of malcontents’ points of view contributes to the understanding of construct validity in several aspects. First, the effect of the tests on students addresses consequential validity, arguably the most important type of validity evidence. Second, it focuses on test use, especially negative attributes, which are not routinely reported in most validation studies. Third, the effect of the tests on students is about experience at the level of the individual. We believe that the perspectives of students, the ultimate stakeholders in testing, need to be reflected in test validation.

Malcontents’ perception data is anecdotal by nature. The anecdotal evidence is viable for the following two reasons. First, considering that Messick’s (1996) definition of evidence includes meaning and value as well as fact, anecdotal evidence is not problematic. Second, since the effect of the tests on students is experience at the level of the individual, it is unreasonable to expect purely scientific evidence like test performance data.

The question arises: How can we employ malcontents’ perspectives as construct validity evidence? We here present three ways as a starting point and we hope future studies in this area will refine them further. First of all, the fewer malcontents exist at the target setting, the better construct validity evidence becomes. That is, there should be more students who belong to the top row of Figure 1 (i.e., Cell 1 and Cell 2) than those who belong to the bottom row (i.e., Cell 3 and Cell 4). We cannot tell the proportion of students who should belong to the upper cells and lower cells at this point but future studies might suggest approximate proportions. Second, if malcontents do exist, they should accept their placement decisions upon completion of required courses. Third, if malcontents are not convinced about their placement decisions, they should at least appreciate the benefit of
the ESL courses into which they were placed. We argue that fewer malcontents, who eventually accept their placement decisions after the completion of required courses in any testing context, might correspond to minimal adverse consequences, which in turn can contribute to the construct validity evidence in support of the test.

Table 1 shows one hypothetical malcontent who changed his/her perceptions of both happiness with test results and usefulness of ESL courses. Case 1 does not find placement test decision credible at the beginning but finally accepts it. Case 1 also changed attitude toward ESL courses from ‘useless’ to ‘useful’. In Table 1, the last column (i.e., change of perceptions) is an important piece of evidence demonstrating that unintended consequences at the local setting were minimized, which in turn can serve as positive consequential validity evidence. Case 1 is just one example and in the real testing setting, other numerous cases would emerge as more studies are conducted.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Malcontents</th>
<th>Students’ perceptions at the beginning</th>
<th>Change of perceptions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Placement decisions</td>
<td>ESL courses</td>
<td>Content courses</td>
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<td>Case 1</td>
<td>Not accept</td>
<td>Useless</td>
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II. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

1. The Local ESL Placement Test

The research setting is a large public university in the U.S. The campus requires the students to take the local test if their TOEFL scores are below 610 (paper-and pencil) or 253 (computer-based). Individual departments may raise these cutoffs but not lower them—and some departments do have higher values. The primary purpose of the local test is to place students into or exempt them from appropriate ESL courses. Our research focuses on graduate students required to take ESL writing-focused courses—the largest cohort group regularly processed by the test.

There are three versions of the local test: regular, enhanced, and computer enhanced. All three are integrated English for Academic Purposes (EAP) assessments (Pyo, 2001). During the regular local test, students watch a videotaped lecture, read an article on a topic
related to that of the lecture, and write an essay that integrates information from the two sources. The essay writing has a fifty-minute time limit. Hence, the regular local test is a timed, single-draft essay test.

The local test has undergone two significant changes in recent years. Cho (2001) introduced the enhanced test. This alternative version is a daylong process-oriented writing assessment in which test takers are given sufficient time to plan, produce, and revise an essay. The two distinguishing features of the enhanced test are extended time for writing and facilitative activities such as a class discussion and a feedback session. The purpose of the facilitative activities is to counterbalance some constraints imposed on the writer like insufficient time and topic unfamiliarity that are characteristics of timed single-draft essay tests. Later (Kim, 2002), the enhanced test was adapted for delivery via computer.

Both the paper-based and computer-delivered enhanced (day-long) tests are designed to elicit the best possible positive performance from test takers, which corresponds to “Bias for Best” principle, specifically the following two features: (a) allowing test takers to proceed at their own pace and to employ support materials during the test, and (b) ensuring that test takers understand both the instructions and what is being assessed in the task (Swain, 1985).

Test-takers can select which version of the test they wish: the regular, the paper-based enhanced, or the computer-delivered enhanced test. Despite a fervent desire to move the entire testing system to the daylong enhanced exam (whether paper or computer), it has proven logistically impossible for the entire candidature. Many of the test-takers are incredibly busy with pre-instructional orientation and training for their academic programs, and so for now, the regular timed test continues its shelf life as an operational alternative.

2. Scoring and the ESL Course System

Students take ESL courses based on their test results. A holistic rating scale is used for placement decisions based on the local test. This scale addresses the following dimensions of academic writing: flow of ideas, effective elaboration, linguistic expression, synthesis of ideas, and paraphrasing. Each essay is given a single global rating, which is directly associated with the operational placement result. Essays are operationally and independently rated, and raters must have taught at least one semester in the ESL writing course sequence. Raters also undergo training and periodic re-calibration sessions.

The four levels of scores assigned to graduate students are: too low, ESL 1, ESL 2, and exempt, which are equivalent to scores from 1 to 4. Students usually do not get local test scores of 1 (i.e., too low), which indicates that students do not have the ability to take content courses and thus are not admitted. In most cases, students are given scores of either 2 or 3. The local test scores of 2 (i.e., ESL 1) indicate that students are required to
take two ESL courses in sequence: ESL 1 and in a subsequent semester, ESL 2. The local test scores of 3 (i.e., ESL 2) mean that students are required to take only the second class. The local test scores of 4 (i.e., exempt) indicate that students are exempt from ESL courses.

There exists a so-called ESL course replacement system like any other ESL programs. In the first week or so of each class, students take a ‘diagnostic’ exam. This test serves two purposes. First, it is a check on the local test, and second, it gives additional useful information to teachers to help tailor instruction. The diagnostic can move a student up the ESL course ladder: from ESL 1 to ESL 2, or from ESL 2 to Exempt. This process is called ‘proficiencied’ (the verb form) in the local setting. Students could be proficiencied when both the ESL instructor and the ESL coordinator have evaluated essays using high standards, and both have agreed that further ESL courses are not necessary. The diagnostic test results (i.e., proficiencied) will manifest in the third participant’s story, Carol.

Upon completion of the ESL courses, there is no additional testing. If a student passes the second ESL class, then the campus ESL requirement is fulfilled.

3. Tuition Benefit

Malcontentedness is multi-dimensional in the sense that it is related to cultural, social, and motivational factors. Most importantly, it is directly related to the tuition benefit at the local setting. Taking an ESL course at the campus has the effect on tuition charges, which are computed in ‘Ranges.’ Range 1 refers to registration in 12 or more credit hours. At the time this research was conducted, Range 1 results in US $9000 in tuition fees. Range 2 refers to registration in more than 5 and less than 12 hours, which leads to US $6000 in tuition fees. If students take ESL courses, their requirement for taking classes is less than 12 hours and the tuition will be assessed based on Range 2. However, if international students do not take ESL courses, they would need to register for 12 hours and their tuition will be assessed based on Range 1. University oversight of this enrollment credit has increased since the events of 9-11-2001, in congruence with tightened U.S. visa regulations and laws.

At the time of this research, ESL classes carried variable credit. Most international students choose the option of taking ESL courses as zero hours because credit in ESL courses is not counted toward a graduate degree in any event. However, they sometimes creatively decide whether they will take content courses for full credit or not to lower the tuition and fee range. In most cases they take two content courses as 4 hours each and one ESL course as a zero hour, which will lead to 8 semester hours, henceforth, Range 2 and a tuition of $6000. In some cases, students take three content courses and one ESL course. They might take two content courses as 4 hours each, one content course as two hours, and one ESL course as a zero hour. This will lead to 10 hours, hence, Range 2 and tuition of
$6000. However, if a student is fully exempted from ESL, then three content courses are required and tuition will be in the higher Range 1. ESL classes are thus a way to save money.

In summary, to get tuition benefit, there are two condition to be met; (a) students should be enrolled in ESL courses, regardless of whether or not they take them as a zero hours or not, and (b) students should be enrolled in less than 12 hours, including ESL courses and content courses. Taking ESL courses has the effect of saving tuition of $3000.

We believe that if the campus did not have this policy, there would be a larger number of malcontents. Lee (2005) reports on one student who took an ESL class and two content courses and was satisfied with her local ESL testing results–she would fall into either Cell 1 or Cell 2 in Figure 1 above. Her satisfaction was not about the actual testing score, but had more to do with the tuition benefit to save $3000 in her first semester. Lee did not track this student for longer than one semester. Subsequent research could identify and do so with other such students as the campus policy is unchanged, and as the tuition costs have gone up.

4. Statement of Purpose

The following two research questions were addressed in this study.

1. What is the direct impact of the ESL placement test on international students who are not happy with their test results, that is, language test malcontents?
2. Do malcontents perceive that their placement decisions are in error? Stated differently, to what extent and in what way do they perceive they were misclassified as non-masters?

III. A PROPOSAL FOR A NEW THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE OF LANGUAGE TEST MALCONTENTS

No research on language test malcontents has been conducted in language testing field. This paper indeed proposes a need for a theory of language test malcontents, which is a new territory being explored for the first time. It is difficult to position our research in the scholarly literature, because malcontentedness may reflect a wide variety of factors--beyond the test, itself. Our research on malcontented students is a new category of test validation enquiry, one that focuses on individual students as the focus of theoretical concern. We believe a ‘theoretical perspective of malcontents’ may be the best way to proceed, and at the end of our paper, we sketch the beginnings of such a theoretical
perspective.

However, there are two general areas of scholarship on which our work definitely touches: ESL student needs and test impact—most notably the former. Malcontentedness is driven, in part, by the needs that students face as they move into full-time content study in English—if they feel that the ESL test (and subsequent instruction) fulfilled those needs, they will (we assume) be more content with the ESL system. Our work is also relevant to study on test impact, but as we make clear elsewhere in the paper, we cannot really judge the impact of a test—or its level of contentedness—without also judging the unique narrative of each student’s experience in the test-mandated ESL classes. If a student is malcontented, s/he may be unhappy for reasons that have little to do with the test, and so test impact may not be relevant. We believe that the best first step in an enquiry such as this is to present the stories of several malcontents, as we do in this paper, and suggest a scope and direction for future research, as we also do.

Since this study is a seminal work on language test malcontents and thus it seems impossible to do a literature review on malcontents, we proceeded to provide a brief review on two relevant studies: ESL student needs and test impact.

1. ESL Students’ Academic Needs for Successful Performance

Newly admitted international students face a double dilemma: the English-medium study situation and new academic system. This dilemma is particularly acute during the first year of graduate education due to the interactive nature of the reading, writing, speaking, and listening tasks required in college coursework. They are expected to read critically, to synthesize and to evaluate information, and to write papers; furthermore, they occasionally seek help from faculty and fellow students—by choice or by assignment. In particular, students from Asian countries need to adjust their “reproductive” approach to learning to the “analytical and critical” one used in Western institutions (Ballard & Clanchy, 1991).

Previous survey studies illustrated ESL students’ pressing academic needs. Johns (1981) administered a survey to get an understanding of the academic skills required of ESL students for them to succeed in university classes. The most essential skill perceived by the instructors was reading, followed by listening, writing, and speaking. Although writing was not seen as the most important language skill, proficient writing ability was also found to be indispensable to academic success.

Carson, Chase, Gibson, and Hargrove (1992) conducted a literacy analysis of History

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1 This point may be the strongest argument for a specific theoretical perspective of malcontentedness.
113, which is a high-demand course at a major urban university. They employed a multiple data source approach and obtained four different types of data: (a) classroom observations on a weekly basis, (b) instructor interviews, (c) student surveys, and (d) an analysis of written materials including course syllabi, texts, assignments, additional handouts, exams, and quizzes. The literacy task analysis indicated that a complex interaction of reading, writing, speaking, and listening is required to manage course demands. They found that the key requirement of this course was the integration of reading with writing, although both faculty and students ranked reading as the most important skill.

Ostler (1980) asked ESL students to list academic skills needed to successfully complete their studies based on student questionnaires. She found that distinct differences existed in the academic skills according to class standing. Undergraduates indicated a greater need for skills in taking multiple-choice exams, writing lab reports, and reading and making graphs and charts. In contrast, graduate students indicated the following five academic needs: (a) reading academic journals and papers, (b) giving talks in class and participating in panel discussions, (c) writing critiques, research proposals and research papers, (d) discussing issues, and (e) asking questions in class. This study is informative in the sense that it looked at required academic skills from students’ points of view. Most survey research on academic needs elicited faculty perceptions; students’ views of needs complement faculty perspectives of necessities and deficiencies.

In summary, the most essential skill to succeed in university classes might be the integration of reading with writing, although the particular needs differ somewhat between graduate and undergraduate students.

2. The Impact of Tests on Students

Washback refers to the effects of tests on teaching and learning. Tests can have either beneficial or harmful effect on teaching and learning. Although we expect that good tests will promote good instructional practice, we cannot simply assume that this is the case. Empirical studies on washback have grown in recent years, largely motivated by the need to clarify that assumption. We pay particular attention to the most recent empirical studies in relation to the testing on students.

Saif (2006) investigated the washback effect of a new performance test of spoken language proficiency for international teaching assistants (ITA). Twenty six new international students took the new performance test before and after training program linked to it. The new performance test consists of a 10-minute teaching followed by a 5-minute question and answer from a panel of five raters. The data were collected from teachers and raters through interviews, class observations, and test administration. The results showed that the new performance test had positive influence on teaching content,
teaching methodology, and students’ learning.

Fox (2005) examined the validity of language residency requirement for admission to universities in Canada. As long as language residency requirements (i.e., three-year study at English-medium high school) have been met, ESL students do not have to take the Canadian Academic English Language (CAEL) Assessment and thus are not eligible for special EAP courses. Results showed that there were no significant differences in the performance of 265 students admitted to a university based on 3, 4, or 5 years in English-medium high school. The language residency group of students underperformed all first-year students in GPA. Fox argues that special attention should be paid to students who had to take the CAEL and EAP courses due to insufficient year (i.e., 2 years) of study at English-medium high school. These students expressed appreciation of EAP courses they had to take and reported that they benefited from the practice with spoken communication and writing. Fox maintains that language residency requirements should be changed into the need for language assessment and language support programs.

IV. METHOD

1. Test Instrument

As noted above, we examined the computer-delivered enhanced (day-long) local test. The test instrument employed in this study is called the Computerized Enhanced ESL Placement Test (CEEPT). During the morning session, examinees watch the video, read the article, and write first drafts with the help of a group discussion. During the afternoon session, examinees write their second and final drafts based on the peers’ comments. ‘Computerized’ in the CEEPT means that test takers only had access to a word processor for essay writing. Videos were shown on a big screen and articles were provided in hardcopy. Participants completed the CEEPT using a Microsoft Word program. They did not have access to spell checkers or grammar checkers; only the copy and paste function were allowed.

The research was conducted in a pilot study followed by a main study—both being part of a larger validation project for the computerized local test (Lee, 2005). There were three malcontents in total: one student from the pilot study and two students from the main study. Because the basic procedures to analyze malcontents were the same in both the pilot and main studies, we report three malcontents’ stories in this paper.
2. Pilot Study

A pilot study was carried out in the spring semester to help shape the main study scheduled for the fall semester. The local test was administered in January in a multi-functional computer lab. Students among the local test takers in January volunteered to participate in the pilot study. One malcontent was selected based on survey responses. Responses to the item 4 in the self-assessment survey made a researcher identify a pool of potential malcontents. The item 4 asked if they were satisfied with their placement decisions and further asked to specify the reasons behind their satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Only one student responded to item 4 on the survey that she was not happy with the local test result and a researcher solicited her.

3. Main Study

A hundred international graduate students took the computer-delivered enhanced local test in August, prior to the start of the Fall semester. Participants represented a range of graduate fields: Business (n=43), Humanities (n=20), Science (n=9), and Technology (n=28), and various first language backgrounds: Chinese (n=32), Korean (n=31), Spanish (n=10), and other (n=27). The mean for these 100 students’ CEEPT scores was 2.72 (which approximately corresponds to ESL 1 in placement decisions) with a standard deviation of 0.58. The mean for TOEFL total scores for a sub-sample of 88 participants for whom official TOEFL scores were available was 235.88 with a standard deviation of 18.96.

Malcontents from the main study were selected based on survey responses as well. Twelve students out of 100 answered that they were not happy with their local test results. Among these 12 students, two were selected based on their interest and availability.

4. Participants

The following is a brief description of these three students. Each student was assigned a pseudonym.

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2 The survey was devised to investigate predictive validity of the local test. A self-assessment survey was administered to elicit students’ own assessments of their academic progress and performance at the mid-semester. Items 4 and 5 in the self-assessment survey were inserted to solicit malcontents. Only these two items appear in Appendix B to keep the length limit. For a full copy of the “Self-assessment Survey”, please contact the first author.
TABLE 2
Description of Three Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Major</th>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Nationality</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amy</td>
<td>Electrical and Computer Engineering</td>
<td>Doctoral</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Serbia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Betty</td>
<td>Economics</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Guatemala</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carol</td>
<td>Kinesiology</td>
<td>Doctoral</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>China</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a Amy was the malcontent from the pilot study, not the main study.

These three malcontents were not different from the remaining 10 malcontents in terms of TOEFL total and CEEPT scores. Three malcontents’ average TOEFL total and CEEPT scores were 241 and 2.3, respectively, while the other 10 malcontents’ average TOEFL total and CEEPT scores were 244 and 2.6, respectively.

5. Data Collection and Procedures

The first author (henceforward, ‘researcher’) interviewed the three malcontents individually five times from fall to summer (or from spring to fall in the pilot study). Each interview lasted approximately one and a half hours. Representative interview questions (sorted out by the theme) appear in Appendix A. The researcher conducted in-depth, face-to-face interviews. Interview data from students were transcribed and analyzed thematically, using standard procedures for inducing and refining categories and themes (Brown, 2001; Patton, 2000). Specifically, the first author reviewed the data, inductively generated categories from the data, coded the data into these categories, and then iteratively refined the categories. Qualitative data collection strategies included prolonged engagement with participants, that is, the study was approximately nine months in duration.

The first interview in September (or in spring in the pilot study) covered participants’ perceptions of placement decisions and a conversation about academic backgrounds and career goals. Three interviews from mid fall to spring (or mid spring to summer in the pilot study) focused on academic performance in content courses, English-related problems, and the usefulness of ESL courses. The last interview during summer (or fall in the pilot study) focused on overall reflections on their first year of study.

The pilot study did suggest one important enhancement to the main study. Interviews with malcontents’ content area faculty would be useful in nailing down the nature of the malcontentedness. This proved impossible, as neither of the main study participants felt comfortable enough to permit such contact.
V. THREE CASES

1. Malcontent 1: Amy

Amy was a doctoral student in prestigious Electrical and Computer Engineering program. She completed her bachelor degree in engineering in Serbia. She took the local test in January. She subsequently invented an antenna in Fall and took a semester off in Spring to patent that antenna and to write papers about it. She is currently working as a research assistant in Serbia, but she plans to continue her study in Europe.

Placement decisions. Amy was required to take the two ESL courses in sequence, meaning that the first would be during Spring term and the second either in Summer or Fall. Although she liked the overall test content, she was disappointed at her local test result. She had received a score of 5 on the writing section of the TOEFL, which is a high score for students in engineering. She expected that she would be required to take only one ESL course. She did not find her local test result credible. She was classified as not having a mastery of English like other test takers who scored above the cut-off score, and was expected to have some difficulty coping with the language demands of the first semester of study. She was required to take more ESL classes than she perceives she needs to.

Research assistant’s job. Amy held a fifty percent research assistantship and she worked on the aforementioned Antenna project. There was a lot of interaction among project members. They asked questions about how to connect and how to model in computer simulations. At first, she had difficulty in understanding since they did not speak slowly. When she did not understand explanations and answers, she asked them to repeat, which was her strategy.

ESL courses in the spring semester. Amy complained of taking ESL courses. Her ESL 1 class in spring was from 6:00 to 8:00 pm on both Monday and Wednesday, after classes from 9:00 to 4:00 pm. If she were exempt from ESL courses, she would have more time to do the homework and research in content courses. If she compared herself with others in her ESL class, she thought she is better. According to her, taking an ESL course was better than nothing because she could get a little out of the class. Overall, the ESL course was not very useful due to lack of writing and grammar activities. The following is a direct quote about her perceptions of the usefulness of ESL 1 class along with her placement result.

When I received a slip of a paper, I mean, test result in January, I was not surprised because I did not know the difference between ESL 1 and ESL 2. I did not know ESL 2 is higher than ESL 1. I know that I am not good but I did not know how bad I am. So, I did not know if I am right for ESL 1 or ESL 2. However, based on my performance in ESL course, now I know that I am a strong student, although there is another guy who is also very good.
I am not offended by the fact that I had to take both ESL 1 and ESL 2 courses because I believe that every kind of ESL course will be helpful for me. This is also related to my engineering course requirement, essays. I did not expect that I would be assigned to write an essay at the first semester. However, I have to write an essay and I am not confident about my academic writing style. I do NOT [emphasis] like the content of ESL 1 class. I need more writing instruction as well as grammar activities.

Content courses in the spring semester: During the first semester of her graduate program, Amy had to take two courses in electrical engineering and one ESL course, although she wanted to take three engineering courses. At the beginning of the spring semester, she underwent significant transitions. Everything was so different from the academic environment she got used to in Serbia. In a course on antennas, she earned a B+. In a course on microwaves, she earned an A-. She was not satisfied with her content course grades. She did not attribute this to her English. For example, in the course on microwaves, she received a lower grade than she expected because she did not do well on the final exam, which contributed to 45% of the final grade. The final exam was an open book test, which required calculation and problem solutions. She did not do well not because of her writing, but because of a wrong choice of a particular formula.

ESL courses in the summer term of 2004. The ESL 2 course she took in summer was very useful. She did not think that a non-native speaker of English instructor would be good. But she turned out to be an excellent instructor. In particular, individual conferencing and grammar handouts were useful. Based on her previous quote about the need for writing and grammar instruction, her change of perception is not surprising. In retrospect, she is convinced that the language training she received in accordance with her local test results was beneficial. By the end of the Summer term and consequent completion of ESL 2, she had accepted the decision made on the basis of her local test result.

Content courses in the summer term. Amy took one ESL course and one advanced engineering course during the summer term. She received a grade of A because she was able to develop study and time management skills, and she got used to American teaching styles.

The importance of writing in the program. Amy felt writing is not crucial in her academic studies; originality of research is more important. She acknowledged that she was not sure how important writing would be because she had not worked on her dissertation yet. She saw herself as a better writer than before mainly due to the useful ESL 2 class she took in summer – her second semester after the local test.
2. Malcontent 2: Betty

Betty is a student in the Master’s of Science in Policy Economics (MSPE) program. Her first language is Spanish and she is an employee of the Central Bank of Guatemala. She earned BA and MBA equivalent degrees in economics in Guatemala. She earned a total score of 223 on the TOEFL, which she reported to admissions. Since her government funded her, she had to take the TOEFL in summer before the semester starts, to show evidence of improved English. Her three TOEFL scores in June, July, and August were above 253. If she had reported one of these scores to admissions, she would not have been required to take the local test.

Perceptions of the local test. Betty did not like the overall content and format of the local test. She reported that she did not improve her second drafts because she was tired during the revision session in the afternoon.

Placement decisions. Betty was very disappointed in her test result. She expected she would be exempt from the test because she had earned a score of six on the writing section of the TOEFL in July. She reported her reaction toward the test result as follows:

I am not satisfied with the test result. It’s not like I would appeal to the university. I do not think it’s necessary and that’s not who I am.

I guess I should blame myself. I didn’t like the CEEP from the beginning to the end, group discussion and peer review. The peer review session was boring for me. I got so bored and tired in the afternoon. So, I did not revise the essay much.

ESL courses in the fall semester. For Betty, the ESL course was time-consuming in general. The writing instruction, which included academic essay structure, thesis statements, outlining, and paraphrasing, was boring because she had studied this in her previous ESL instruction at the University of Colorado. She had taken 20 weeks of intensive ESL instruction in Colorado before coming to our university. However, specific instruction on APA citations, library research, and American culture was useful.

Her ESL instructor also thought that she was well trained to use academic writing conventions. She earned a score of 60 out of 65 on an in-class five-paragraph essay assignment. The following is an example of the written feedback from her ESL instructor:

You are an advanced writer and you have a good grasp of writing in English. The mistakes you made are somewhat minor. Your overall organization, flow, and style are excellent.

Content courses in the fall semester. During the first year of her master’s program, Betty
had to take a demanding series of required courses in MSPE: three courses on economics and statistics in addition to ESL 2. Each MSPE instructor gave a weekly assignment.

If she had not taken the ESL course, she would have had more time to study for her content courses. At mid-semester, she reported that she felt she had sufficient English to manage three courses. She perceived that she was good at listening and writing, compared with other international students. For example, her listening was good enough to explain key points which her classmates missed during lectures.

However, although she did not have problems with her English, at the end of the fall semester, she said that she struggled with understanding some questions in the homework and the textbook. This was the only English-related problem she has encountered. Her classmates also found the same few questions extremely difficult. She had to read the questions several times and ask the T.A. about them; however, her T.A. also had a hard time understanding the questions. She earned two As and one A- in three content courses. However, she wished she had made straight As, but she was satisfied with her first semester GPA.

The importance of writing in the program. Although content courses in economics program involve a lot of math, she perceived the program expected graduate students to learn about academic writing. She believed this was the reason why there was a specifically-scheduled and funded ESL course for students in the MSPE program only.

Content courses in the spring semester. Betty took four content courses in Spring. She did have some difficulty with the amount and the pace of readings. But besides this, she reported that she did not have any specific problems due to her English.

She really worked hard and made straight As in the four courses in spring: three A’s and one A. She received better grades than she had expected. The following comment made by her instructor on her final exam showed how hardworking she was:

You are the only student who cited works from a suggested bibliography and therefore, you deserve A+ rather than A.

ESL courses in the spring semester. At the mid semester of Spring, she perceived that the previous ESL course was linked to what is essential for coping with her program. She realized that the ESL course had provided training to improve writing skills. For example, she said that she was able to do well on essay questions during an in-class midterm. She effectively used citation skills she had learned (e.g., phrases such as: According to Kydland's methodology...).

During summer, she reported that she was satisfied with her local test result. She drastically changed her attitude toward her test result and ESL 2 instruction. She found the ESL instruction very useful during the spring semester, in particular when she wrote final
papers for two economics courses. The following is a direct quote about her placement decision during the last interview:

The first thing that came to my mind when I received the test result was ‘Oh man, why should I take a course? It will be so boring’. But I didn’t have a choice. This is the obligation and I should take the course. At the beginning I doubted the test result. I can tell you that it wasn’t the excitement at all.

It took almost one year to realize this. Even though I didn’t like the exam, it was very useful to take ESL courses. I gradually liked the ESL course as well as Nancy, the instructor. I looked at handouts Nancy gave us and all the handouts were very useful. She is very nice as a person and she feels like a mom and she teaches well. To me, happiness with the test result is the same as the usefulness of ESL courses. Now, I am satisfied with my placement decision. For me with a high TOEFL score, the ESL course was really useful [she smiled here]. I really benefited from the ESL course in writing two papers in spring. I benefited from the ESL course because I knew how to write thesis statements and where it should be located in the paragraph. For Financial Business Management course, he wanted clear thesis statements for each essay question during in-class midterm exam.

3. Malcontent 3: Carol

Carol is a doctoral student in Kinesiology. Her first language is Chinese and she earned her BA in the same field from a Chinese university.

Placement decisions. Carol was required to take the two-course sequence: ESL 1 and ESL 2. Although she liked the overall content and format of the test, she was disappointed at her local test result. She expected that she would be assigned to at least an ESL 2. However, she was required to take more ESL classes than she perceived she needed. Carol can be called a double malcontent. She was dissatisfied with the diagnostic as well as the local test results. Her male Chinese friend, whose English, she perceived, was worse than hers, ‘proficienced’ into the ESL 2 class based on his diagnostic test result. Please recall that based on diagnostic test results at the beginning of ESL courses, students can be placed into higher ESL courses (i.e., proficienced) than they were initially assigned. The fact that she was not asked to move to a higher ESL class bothered her.

ESL courses in the fall semester. Carol found the ESL 1 class to be very useful. According to her, there are two benefits of taking ESL classes: practicing speaking in a comfortable setting and learning about academic writing conventions.

She perceived that she was more proficient than most of the students in her ESL class, although not the most. Although taking ESL classes did not have an immediate effect on
helping her manage her content courses, she believed that it would pay off. She realized that those who had not taken ESL classes would not have the knowledge she learned about academic writing conventions.

Nevertheless, at the end of the semester, her perception of the local test placement decision had not changed; she remained doubly malcontented. The following is a direct quote about her placement decision during the second interview:

I am not satisfied with my test result not because I do not need to take ESL courses. My Chinese friend has the same English ability as me and he does not take ESL 1. I need to take this course and it is so unfair. That is the main reason why I am not satisfied with the test result. Actually, I am not happy with both CEEPT and diagnostic test results. I am more dissatisfied with CEEPT results than diagnostic test result.

I am not satisfied; however, I like the ESL class. What bothers me is I am worse than others who are in an ESL 2 class [raising her voice suddenly]. In my ESL class, I think I am doing OK and should be much better than most other students. I do not think I am the best, though.

**Content courses in the fall semester.** During the Fall semester, Carol took two courses besides the ESL 1: one on measurement and the other on statistics. She did not have English-related problems in these two content courses. For example, listening was not a problem at all because the instructor provided PowerPoint notes. She did, however, struggle somewhat with the readings because of the many unfamiliar expressions in her field. For a course on measurement in Kinesiology, there was a short report on the fitness center. She earned a full 50 points, which contributed to 5% of the final grade. For the statistics course, most of the students had a solid background in statistics; however, she had not taken any statistics courses before. Therefore, studying for this course was harder than for any other courses, but the difficulty had nothing to do with her English.

She earned a *B* in measurement, and she received an *A- in* statistics. These grades were as she had expected. She attributed the *B* grade to her poor performance on the second in-class exam. The measurement course was an undergraduate course in which 57 domestic students were enrolled. She thought that taking in-class exams was more disadvantageous for international students such as she than for domestic undergraduates.

*The importance of writing in the program.** She emphasized the importance of writing in her program, which reflects her future academic career plan. Because she wants to be a professor in the U.S. after graduation, she aims to master skills in writing grant proposals and publishable papers.
Content courses in the spring semester. Carol took three courses during the Spring semester: ESL 2, one statistics course, and one Kinesiology course. At mid-semester, she reported that she was struggling with jargon; however, she perceived that her overall English proficiency was adequate to manage her content courses. Studying for the statistics course became easier than before because she had become used to studying statistics, and also because the spring course followed in sequence to the fall statistics class.

She received a B in the Kinesiology course. She received a lower grade than she expected because she did not do well on the first exam out of four. The test format was the same across four exams; multiple choice, short answers, two short essays with half a page, and one long essay with two pages. She did not have specific problems with writing timed essays during exams. The ESL writing instruction did not specifically help her in timed essay exams. For the statistics course, she did not receive a grade by the end of the term, and instead, she chose to do a subsequent project for extra credit.

ESL courses in the spring semester. Carol reported that she has benefited from ESL courses and appreciated the benefit. She perceived that ESL courses provided training to improve her writing skills. The training she received would be useful when she wrote abstracts for conference presentations and papers for publications.

According to her, happiness with test results and usefulness of ESL courses are two separate issues. She was not convinced that her friend should have ‘proficienced’ to ESL 2, as she felt that his English was worse than hers. That is, she was still unhappy with her test result. This was not because she perceived that she did not need to take ESL courses but because of the perceived unfairness.

4. Summary of Findings

Table 3 summarizes the three malcontents’ graduate study during the first year.
### TABLE 3
Three Cases of Malcontents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Malcontents</th>
<th>CEEP Test result</th>
<th>Placement decisions</th>
<th>ESL courses</th>
<th>Content courses</th>
<th>Placement decisions</th>
<th>ESL courses</th>
<th>Content courses</th>
<th>Change of perceptions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Amy</strong>&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>ESL 1</td>
<td>Did not accept</td>
<td>Useless</td>
<td>No specific problems, Lower grades than expected</td>
<td>Accept&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Very useful (grammar handouts &amp; conferencing)</td>
<td>A good grade (development of study skills)</td>
<td>(1) Placement decision: Did not accept → Accept (2) ESL courses: Useless → Very useful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Betty</strong></td>
<td>ESL 2</td>
<td>Did not accept</td>
<td>Time-consuming</td>
<td>Misunderstanding of questions in the textbook, High grades as expected</td>
<td>Accept&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Very useful, Benefit from the ESL course in writing two papers</td>
<td>Some difficulty with the amount and the pace of readings, Higher grades than expected</td>
<td>(1) Placement decision: Did not accept → Accept (2) ESL courses: Time-consuming → Very useful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Carol:</strong>&lt;br&gt;<em>A double malcontent</em></td>
<td>ESL 1</td>
<td>Did not accept both local test and diagnostic test results</td>
<td>Useful (speaking practice &amp; writing convention)</td>
<td>Some problems with readings because of unfamiliar expressions, Average grades as expected</td>
<td>Did not accept both test results</td>
<td>Useful, No immediate effect on helping manage her content courses</td>
<td>Difficulty with jargon, Lower grade than expected</td>
<td>No change</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>a</sup> Amy was a malcontent from the pilot study, not the main study.

<sup>b</sup> Malcontents' perceptions of placement decisions during the second semester reflect change of perceptions upon completion of ESL courses.
The trajectory of the first malcontent, Amy, showed that she was not convinced about her local test result at the beginning but accepted the result after her second required ESL course. She reported that she had benefited from the ESL courses and that she did not have major language-related difficulties in her coursework. The problem of malcontentedness may be a function of subsequent programs of study. Displeasure at a test result may be displeasure at the entire post-test instructional sequence; therefore, the ultimate satisfaction and the ultimate realization of its beneficial value may need to await the completion of that instructional sequence. This is supported by the second malcontent, Betty, who followed a very similar path as Amy. After her required ESL class, she became happy with her test result. Considering that Betty earned a high score on the TOEFL, her changed attitude toward her test result deserves an attention.

The third malcontent, Carol, found the ESL course useful at the first instructional sequence; however, she was not happy with her test result even after the completion of the ESL instruction. Considering that Carol is a double malcontent, it is not surprising that she was not convinced about her test result in the end. It is possible that the ultimate satisfaction with the test result is case-sensitive and some other personality factors are also important. Carol may have overestimated her English proficiency. Since Carol was not asked to move up to a higher ESL class based on the diagnostic exam during the first week of the ESL instruction, it seemed to indicate that Carol was accurately placed to begin with.

If we go back to Figure 1, which cell might each malcontent’s case belong to? For Amy and Betty, they belong to the Cell 3; they were unhappy with their test result, but they perceived benefit from ESL courses. If we also consider their changed attitude, their cases might be a combination of Cell 1 and Cell 3. For Carol, her case just belongs to Cell 3.

As we discussed earlier in Table 1, the last column (i.e., change of perceptions) is an important piece of evidence demonstrating that unintended consequences at the local setting were minimized. That is, the fact that the two malcontents accepted the placement decisions finally and one malcontent benefited from taking ESL courses and appreciated the benefit, revealed that adverse consequences might have been minimized at the target institution. This can serve as one type of construct validity evidence in support of the local ESL placement test, that is, positive consequential validity evidence.

There is a pragmatic benefit in identifying and tracking malcontents; we will learn better why some students become upset, and we will come to understand more fully what happens when the upset dissipates. We suggest routinely implementing the kinds of malcontents tracking that we have pioneered, in other testing contexts.
VI. CLOSING REMARKS

As best as we have been able to determine, no research on test malcontents has been conducted in language testing scholarship. We offer this research as a starting-point for such enquiry.

Two malcontents who were not convinced about their local test results at the beginning later accepted the results after their required ESL courses. Findings indicate that test contentment cannot be judged about the test alone, but can only be judged about the test in concert with any courses into which the test-taker is placed. Generalization from these three cases is dangerous, but so far as we can determine, there is no negative feedback to the ESL instructional program–save possibly Carol’s request for more practice in timed essay exam writing.

We do have some important evidence from Carol’s case that supports anecdotal program perception: namely, that the ESL placement testing is not (really) done until after the diagnostic test is finished, and that we should view the diagnostic as a second chapter of the placement test itself.

There are several limitations of this study. First, the results of this study might have been different if a different malcontent had been selected. That is, two participants out of 12 in the main study were selected based on their interest and availability, which might suggest that the selected sample may not be representative. Second, the inclusion of one malcontent from the pilot study might induce unavoidable variability although the basic procedures to analyze malcontents were the same in both the pilot and main studies. Third, data source only stems from students, not faculty members. A researcher was not able to interview malcontents’ content area faculty members since neither of the participants felt comfortable enough to permit such a contact.

EFL language test malcontents as well as ESL language test malcontents need to be identified because their experiences in subsequent courses are an important aspect of establishing the validity evidence. The research on language test malcontents will be invaluable in the Korean context as well, considering that some universities have developed their own English proficiency tests and have used them as one criterion of graduation. It is very common that those who fail to show the minimum English competence are required to take English courses offered by General English Program or any equivalent program at universities. It is very likely that there exist Korean malcontents at various academic institutions. If students who were not convinced about their test results at the beginning perceive the usefulness of English courses and later accept the result after the required courses, we can be confident in asserting that adverse consequences of local tests have been minimized at the target Korean institution.

In the case of research on malcontents, we suggest five future research agenda items.
These suggestions transcend research on testing, instructional programs, student attitude, or other traditional and canonical areas of research. We believe that test malcontentedness is very difficult to pigeonhole into an existing research database, and so it may become its own domain of enquiry:

- First, a longitudinal study involving more than one year might produce more insightful findings.
- Second, it will be valuable if we can investigate faculty perceptions about malcontent’s English proficiency and academic performance. Although it was not possible to get these three malcontents’ permission to contact their professors, we strongly encourage future researchers to try.
- Third, we might try training students in self-assessment. Evidence about the consequences of test use is anecdotal in this study. Formal training in self-assessment skills can contribute to students’ solid understanding of their progress toward overall proficient English skills as an outcome of ESL instruction.
- Fourth, we suggest self-report memos or reflective journals as ongoing data elicitation techniques during post-test academic work. Eliciting information about English-related problems only through interviews is limited because participants usually do not have fresh memories about specific examples or incidents. Asking malcontents to write self-report memos throughout the semester as soon as a researcher recruits them will be helpful.
- Finally, we return to the second author’s supervisor who once advised his entire staff: “Persistent malcontents should be sent to me.” The present research solicited malcontents by asking if test-takers were unhappy with their results. Such solicitation is not typical test administration practice. Far more typical—as the second author can easily attest—are malcontents who step forward to complain. Malcontentedness in real use of this local test seems to be self-selected rather than solicited, and what is more, some of the self-selected malcontents can indeed become very persistent. Language testers need a diplomatic research tracking mechanism to track those self-selected malcontents, as well.

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3 Perhaps it could be.
4 Perhaps there are categories of malcontents: those who self-select and step forward to complain, and those whom the program discovers through elicitation (e.g. a survey). Such a dichotomy could distinguish the attitude of the program toward the problem in the first place, for instance, if there are notable distinctions between self-selected and elicited malcontents. And regardless of how the malcontent is identified, perhaps there are useful additional characterizations: (simple) malcontent, persistent (but polite) malcontent, and vitriolic (and possibly persistent) malcontent. Other adjectives will doubtless emerge. Maybe there are malcontents who suffer silently, unwilling or afraid to step forward in a new culture where they are unfamiliar with norms of complaint.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A
Representative Interview Questions

Background Information

1. What is your first language?
2. How old are you?
3. What department are you in?
4. What is your current academic status?
5. Please self-report your TOEFL scores, as you recall.
6. How long have you been in US?
7. What is your previous educational background in your home country?
8. What are your plans after graduation?

Placement Decisions and ESL Courses

1. Are you happy with your placement decision?
2. What was your first reaction when you received your test result?
3. What do you think about the ESL course you are taking, as a result of the CEEPT?
4. What is the format and content of the ESL course?
5. What do you think about your performance in ESL courses, compared with fellow international students?

Content Courses

1. How many courses are you taking this semester?
2. Do you think that your English proficiency affected your academic performance in your course? If so, to what extent? Please elaborate your answer.
3. Do you think your English was adequate for study in the first/second semester of course?
4. Was the class similar to the one you expected before the term started?
5. To what extent is the classroom environment here at our university different from that in your home country? What are the similarities?

Academic Writing

1. Do you like writing in English?
2. Do you read any books or magazines in English other than class assignments?
3. Have you ever been taught how to write papers in English? If so, when?
4. What kind of papers do you write in your field (e.g., reaction papers, data analysis, lab reports, etc.)?
5. What is your understanding of the term academic writing?
6. How important do you think writing is in your present program?
7. What do you think that your program expects you to learn about academic writing?
Writing Assignment

1. What is your topic of your final paper?
2. What concerns did you have when you prepared for this paper? What issues were you dealing with (e.g., topic, process of writing, format, etc.)?

English Support

1. Have you received any help with your English?
2. If so, what kind of help (e.g., editing written assignments, practice speaking) did you receive? From whom (e.g., paid editors, paid speaking tutors, etc) and how often?
3. If you did not receive any help with English, is it because you did not need it or were there other reasons (e.g., financial difficulties, and insufficient time, etc)?

APPENDIX B
Selected Items from the Self-Assessment Survey

Part 2. Open-ended Questions
Please answer the following questions with a few sentences. Your detailed comments will be helpful.

4. (a) What is your ESL placement decision? Please check one.
   (    ) ESL 1
   (    ) ESL 2
   (    ) exempt
   (b) Are you satisfied with your placement decision? Why or why not?

5. (a) Are you currently taking an ESL class this semester? Please check one.
   (    ) No → (if No) please skip (b).
   (    ) Yes
   (b) Do you think that the ESL course you are taking is useful? Why or why not?
Applicable levels: university
Key words: language test malcontents, students' perceptions, test decisions, consequential validity

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