Placement Testing as a Sociocultural Act: Rethinking Assessment for Heritage Language Learners in the Canadian Context

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Abstract: Heritage language (HL) development is crucial for shaping learners' identities, fostering community engagement, and supporting intellectual growth. In Canada, Spanish continues to grow as a commonly spoken language, and universities are increasingly serving Spanish heritage language learners (SHLLs) whose linguistic abilities differ from second language (L2) learners. However, placement assessments used in postsecondary programs are often based on L2 models that assess formal literacy and explicit grammar, which may overlook SHLLs' oral fluency, emerging metalinguistic awareness, and lived experiences. This study presents a qualitative critical narrative review of HL education research in the United States (US) and a descriptive scan of 53 Canadian undergraduate programs to identify practices that support inclusive SHLL assessment. Based on Critical Language Awareness (Fairclough, 1992; Pennycook, 1988, 2001, 2007) and Raciolinguistic perspectives (Flores & Rosa, 2017; Rosa, 2019), the review frames placement as a sociocultural practice shaped by ideologies of language, identity, and legitimacy. Findings reveal that L2-oriented assessments often misalign with SHLLs' linguistic profiles, highlighting the need for multifaceted, context-sensitive placement tools and procedures. The study concludes with actionable recommendations for Canadian higher education, including heritage-informed assessment instruments, faculty training, and collaboration with indigenous communities to promote equitable language learning opportunities.

Keywords: Spanish heritage language learners, Placement testing, Critical language awareness, Language and power, Equitable assessment.

Introduction

A heritage language is the language spoken by immigrant families, and heritage speakers are the children born in or brought to the new country with their immigrant parents (Montrul, 2012). In a multilingual society,

language learning is both a cognitive pursuit and a social practice via which learners negotiate their identity, belonging, and legitimacy (Pennycook, 2001; Rosa, 2019). While Canada is officially bilingual, it has a growing multilingual landscape, and heritage language (HL) maintenance is crucial in connecting immigrant communities and fostering inclusion. Among these languages, Spanish has become one of the steadily growing HLs since 2001, more than doubling in size (approximately 125% increase) by the 2021 census, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Number and proportion of Hispanic/Spanish-speaking or descent in Canada, 2001 to 2021
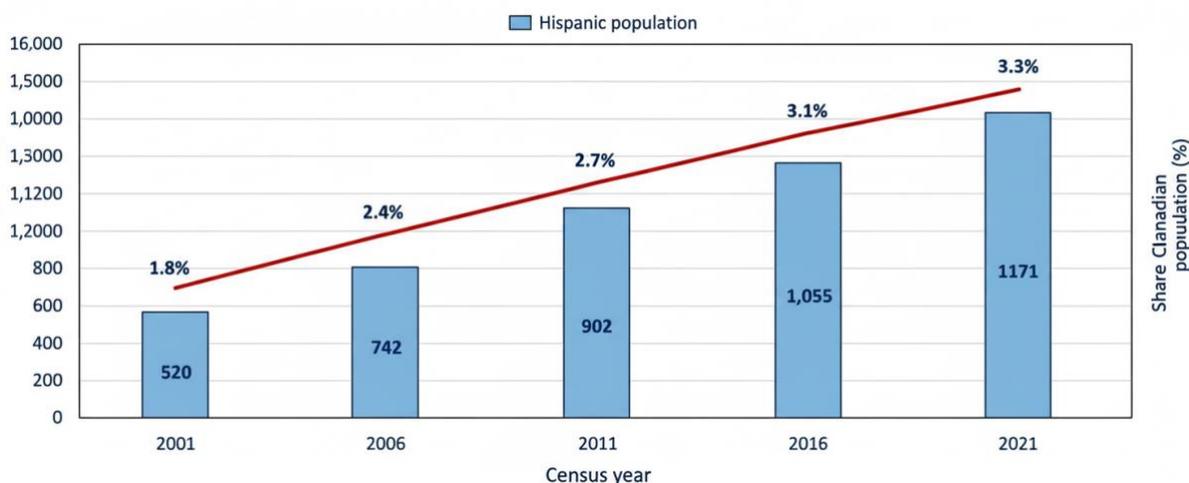
Source: Statistics Canada, 2025b, Population Census Data from 2001 to 2021

According to the 2021 census, Spanish is the most commonly spoken non-official language with over one million speakers (see Table 1). It ranked as the fourth most widely spoken mother tongue nationwide, and approximately 654,000 reported speaking it regularly at home (Statistics Canada, 2025a). This steady growth has led to a rising number of SHLLs who seek to improve their Spanish proficiency and enrol in Spanish or heritage language courses to maintain or expand their linguistic and cultural knowledge (Abde, 2009; Carlino, 2009; George & Peace, 2019; Nagy, 2021).

Table 1. Number of speakers of heritage / non-official languages in Canada

10 Most Spoken Non-Official Languages	Number of speakers
Spanish	1,171,500
Mandarin	987, 300
Punjabi (Panjabi)	942, 200
Arabic	838, 000
Hindi	761, 400
Tagalog (Pilipino, Filipino)	737, 600
Yue (Cantonese)	724, 900
Italian	547, 700
German	419, 200
Urdu	414, 900

Source: Statistics Canada, 2021 Population Census data.

Spanish heritage language education in Canada has evolved within a long tradition of community and provincially supported heritage language programs that reflect the country's immigration patterns (Statistics Canada, 2025b) and commitment to official multiculturalism. These initiatives aim to promote cultural

retention and equitable inclusion across linguistic communities (Noels & Clément, 1998). Although there is no federal mandate for heritage language instruction beyond transitional programs for official languages, provincial governments play a central role in providing support. Programs in Ontario, Quebec, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, and British Columbia include Spanish among the most commonly taught heritage languages (Abdi, 2009; Babbaee, 2012; Canadian Education Association, 1991; Carlino, 2009; Nagy, 2021). Provinces like British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba allow heritage languages as a medium of instruction in public schools, while others like Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland and Labrador have historically prohibited heritage language instruction (Canadian Education Association, 1991; Department of Education, Newfoundland and Labrador, 2011).

In Ontario, the International Languages program has offered funding for over 100 languages since 1977, typically through weekend or after-school classes when sufficient enrollment is met (Cumming, 2014). Ontario has the largest Spanish-speaking population (Statistics Canada, 2021), and Spanish heritage programs are strong in major urban areas, such as Toronto, reflecting growth in Latin American communities (Nagy, 2021). At the postsecondary level, some universities provide separate course streams for heritage speakers to address distinct linguistic and sociocultural needs (Department of Spanish and Portuguese, 2019; Nagy, 2017; Oikonomakou et al., 2018). Despite this longstanding presence, inconsistent support, limited instructional hours, rapid language changes in immigrant families and policy debates over the role of public funding in heritage language education have led to the proposal by some Canadian educators to combine HL and L2 language programs (Cummins, 2014; Cummins, 1998).

Consequently, SHLLs often enter classrooms and assessment systems designed for L2 learners, which can be challenging for teachers and students alike (Abdi, 2009). This is because L2 and SHLLs have different learning needs (Carreira & Kagan, 2018; Torres et al., 2019) that warrant tailored instruction and assessment (Hudgens Henderson, 2022). Traditional L2 placement tests, which focus heavily on grammatical accuracy and reading comprehension, fail to capture the full linguistic and cultural repertoire that heritage speakers bring (Fairclough, 2012; Potowski et al., 2012; MacGregor-Mendoza & Moreno, 2020). As a result, SHLLs are frequently misplaced into lower-level L2 courses, where their oral fluency and communicative competencies are underutilised. Such mismatches have been shown to contribute to deficit-oriented views of heritage learners and misalignment between learners' abilities and instructional expectations (Fairclough & Beaudrie, 2016). This issue is especially pressing in the Canadian context, where Spanish HL programs remain underdeveloped or non-existent, and placement policies are inconsistent across institutions (Abdi, 2009; Nagy, 2021; Loureiro-Rodríguez, 2013). Therefore, this study is significant because it explores how placement testing can be designed to better accommodate the needs, strengths, and interests of Spanish heritage language learners in mixed postsecondary classrooms.

The article examines placement testing for SHLLs in postsecondary contexts and explores its implications for inclusive assessment practices in Canada. Specifically, it aims to:

- Synthesise key findings from international research, mainly the United States, on SHLL placement testing.

- Examine current placement practices in Canadian colleges and universities offering Spanish instruction, with attention to how these practices align with established knowledge of SHLL linguistic profiles. And

- Propose guiding principles for heritage-informed placement practices that promote linguistic equity and accurate assessment in Canadian postsecondary language programs.

To achieve these aims, the study adopts perspectives from Critical Language Awareness, CLA (Pennycook, 2001) and Raciolinguistics (Rosa, 2019). It thus treats language education and placement assessment as sociocultural practices that intersect with institutional ideologies, learner identity, and language

legitimacy. In so doing, the study contributes to a small but growing body of Canadian research on heritage language assessment and highlights the need to treat placement not as a neutral sorting mechanism but as a site of social and ideological negotiation that reflects broader questions of power, identity, and educational access. The findings will also assist higher education language programs and instructors in refining their placement policies. Finally, insights from the study can benefit the placement assessment and instruction of other heritage languages in Canada and beyond.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

As stated earlier, the study is guided by two critical sociocultural lenses, CLA (Fairclough, 1992; Pennycook, 1988, 2001, 2007) and Raciolinguistic perspectives (Rosa & Flores, 2017; Rosa, 2019). This section presents the two concepts and how they guide the framing of language learning and assessment as socially situated practices shaped by ideologies of language, identity, and power.

CLA is a pedagogical framework that aims to foster students' critical awareness of social hierarchies surrounding language and power (Alim, 2005, 2010). CLA emphasizes that choices about what language variety and register to use are shaped by social relations and power dynamics. Therefore, it encourages alternative understandings of societal language norms and challenges dominant standard language ideologies and their role in legitimizing discrimination or oppressing minority languages. Heritage language teaching, including assessment has for long been subjected to eradicationist or appropriateness approaches (Leeman, 2005), which attempt to replace the language varieties of HLs with varieties considered to be more prestigious (Beaudrie & Loza, 2022; Fairclough, 1992). Pennycook (1998, 2001) situates eradicationist practices within broader monolingual ideologies shaped by colonial, political, and economic forces, in which standardized language-only teaching norms are constructed as inherently superior to multilingual and community-based language practices. CLA research efforts seek to move beyond such approaches to critical (socio)linguistic training that affirms home language practices and fosters positive linguistic identity development (Baker-Bell, 2020, Henderson, 2025, Holguín Mendoza, 2018; Quan, 2021; Pennycook, 2007).

Raciolinguistics is the study of language in relation to race (Rosa & Flores, 2017; Phuong et al., 2024). Although ideologies of language and race have long influenced language education and assessment, Raciolinguistic perspectives have only recently begun to systematically examine these relationships (Tavares & Benediktsson, 2025). From this perspective, language practices are viewed as racialized social processes, where judgments of proficiency reflect not only linguistic features but also racialized perceptions of speakers' identities (Flores & Rosa, 2015; Rosa, 2019). Judgments of language ability are therefore ideological, embedded in power relations that privilege particular forms of language as legitimate (Alim, 2016). Raciolinguistic ideologies draw on notions of incomplete acquisition and intersect with standard language principles to promote monolingual norms, commodify language, and frame non-dominant varieties as deficient (Heller, 2010; Flores & Rosa, 2015; Rosa, 2019).

While CLA highlights the ideological construction of language norms, Raciolinguistic perspectives show how these norms are enacted through racialized judgments of correctness and legitimacy. Together, these approaches stress that placement testing is not a neutral measure of linguistic ability but an institutional practice that determines which forms of Spanish are recognized as academically valid. From a CLA perspective, assessments that privilege explicit grammatical knowledge or decontextualized written tasks risk marginalizing the oral fluency, interactional competence, and community-based practices that many Spanish heritage language learners develop through everyday use (Beaudrie & Wilson, 2022). Raciolinguistic research further demonstrates that such evaluations are shaped by perceptions of speakers' identities, such that judgments of proficiency reflect not only linguistic content but also racialized norms of correctness (Flores & Rosa, 2015; Rosa, 2019). In heritage language education, this logic sustains deficit views by evaluating

bilingual learners against idealized monolingual benchmarks rather than their full linguistic capabilities, often overlooking the functional effectiveness of bilingual practices in family and community contexts (Recata et al., 2023). Misplacement, therefore, functions as both a pedagogical and symbolic issue, limiting learners' access to appropriate instruction, sense of belonging, and institutional recognition. These perspectives support a rethinking of placement testing for SHLLs.

Methods and Procedures

Critical Narrative Review

The study employed a qualitative critical narrative review approach because it is well-suited for synthesizing research across diverse contexts and methodologies while maintaining a critical focus on conceptual and sociocultural issues (Booth et al., 2016; Sukhera, 2022). Peer-reviewed studies published between 2000 and 2025 that focus on SHLLs education and placement assessment, program design and the application of CLA and Raciolinguistic perspectives in HL contexts were included. Sources were identified through databases such as ERIC, Scopus, and JSTOR, with inclusion criteria emphasizing works that explicitly address SHLL assessment, mixed L2/HL classrooms, and program-level placement practices. This review is necessary because research in heritage language education and sociolinguistics complements CLA and Raciolinguistic perspectives by offering empirical evidence on the linguistic profiles, knowledge types, and educational experiences of SHLLs (Fairclough, 2012; Montrul, 2010, 2016; Potowski, 2015). The findings provide insights that can inform placement assessment in Canadian context.

Descriptive Scan of Canadian Postsecondary Placement Practices

Identification of Programs and Data Collection Procedures. In addition to the synthesis of published research, the study includes a descriptive environmental scan of Canadian postsecondary institutions offering Spanish instruction. To document prevailing practices, publicly available placement information was collected from the websites of 53 colleges and universities across Canada. Institutions were identified using a systematic, web-based search strategy conducted through Google, with keyword combinations such as *university-level Spanish programs in Canada, college-level Spanish programs in Canada*, and *postsecondary Spanish heritage language courses in Canada.* To ensure coverage of regions with the largest concentrations of Spanish-speaking populations, targeted searches focused on institutions in Ontario, Quebec, British Columbia, Alberta, Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Nova Scotia, supplemented by provincial listings of colleges and universities. Institutions were included if they offered undergraduate Spanish courses and provided publicly accessible information related to placement testing, registration, or enrolment. For each institution, the main website and Spanish or modern languages program pages were examined, with particular attention to sections addressing placement testing, course registration, advising guidelines, and descriptions of students' linguistic backgrounds. Program names and placement-related information were systematically documented.

Coding and Analytical Procedures. Placement information was analyzed using a descriptive, two-phase coding process. In the first phase, placement tools reported by each institution were categorized as department-developed online placement tests, language background questionnaires, advising or self-placement guidelines, external diagnostic or commercial assessments (e.g., DIALANG or Cervantes test), or other institution-specific approaches. These data informed Table 4 in Section 5. In the second phase, program descriptions were examined to determine how heritage learners were positioned within placement systems. Institutions were categorized according to whether SHLLs and L2 learners shared placement tools and course sequences, followed separate placement procedures, or were directed to distinct courses or content-based pathways, as summarized in Table 3. Coding decisions were guided by recurring institutional language (e.g., references to prior home use of Spanish or informal language exposure) and informed by previous descriptive reviews of heritage language programming (e.g., Valdés et al., 2006; Fairclough, 2012).

The full search and coding process was conducted twice at different stages of manuscript preparation using the same procedures. The second pass yielded the same set of institutions and stable coding categories, with only minor refinements to descriptive detail, thus providing support for the reliability of the analysis. The scan provides a broad snapshot of institutional practices while recognizing that publicly available information may not capture informal advising or internal decision-making processes.

In the next section, the discussion of the findings is organized into three parts. The first reviews key insights from the U.S. context, which has long served as the research base for Spanish heritage language education. The second situates these insights within the Canadian landscape, focusing on institutional placement practices and policies that shape SHLL experiences. The third section proposes a framework for inclusive placement practices and outlines implications for curriculum design, instructor training, and institutional policy. The sections combined argue for reconceptualizing placement testing as a tool for recognizing, rather than erasing, the diverse linguistic competencies of Spanish heritage learners in Canadian higher education.

The U.S. Context: Key Findings from Existing Research

This section examines how empirical studies on SHLL education and assessment have approached placement practices and identifies insights relevant for Canadian higher education. The review provides understanding of:

- How placement tools recognize or overlook SHLLs' lived linguistic resources.

- How institutional placement norms and L2-oriented assessment traditions shape decisions about what counts as "proficient" Spanish.

- How assessments can better capture oral fluency, interactional competence, emerging literacy, and metalinguistic growth as interconnected elements of learning.

Placement Testing: Purpose and Challenges

Placement testing is designed to group students according to their linguistic abilities to ensure that instruction aligns with their needs (Bachman & Purpura, 2008; Fairclough, 2012). These assessments may also distinguish SHLLs from L2 learners, a distinction that plays an important role in student success (Thompson, 2015). For SHLLs, placement decisions are especially consequential because they shape access to courses that build on existing communicative strengths while addressing gaps in literacy and metalinguistic development. However, research shows that existing placement tools are unable to accurately assess the proficiency level of SHLLs because of the lack of specific indicators of proficiency levels, a wide range of proficiency levels and inadequate assessment tools to measure linguistic abilities. In other words, heritage learners vary widely in literacy, metalinguistic awareness, and exposure to academic registers, and standardized tests designed for L2 learners frequently fail to account for this diversity (Burgo & Canaria, 2020; llieva & Clark-Gareca, 2016; Sohn & Shin, 2007). As a result, misplacement into courses that are either too low or too high is common and can lead to frustration and fewer opportunities for linguistic development (Moreno & Garett-Ruck, 2021).

Differences between SHLLs and L2 Learners

Studies have repeatedly shown that SHLLs and L2 learners draw on distinct types of linguistic knowledge (Fairclough, 2012; Montrul & Bowles, 2012; Viera & Arispe, 2021). SHLLs typically develop native-like phonology and fluent oral skills through naturalistic exposure in family and community settings. Their judgments often rely on intuitive, implicit knowledge rather than explicit grammatical rules (Hulstijn, 2011, Moreno & Garett-Ruck, 2021). In contrast, L2 learners build literacy, grammar, and metalinguistic

knowledge through formal instruction (MacGregor-Mendoza & Moreno, 2020). These contrasting profiles shape how each group performs on assessments: L2 learners may excel on written or form-focused tasks but struggle with spontaneous discourse, while SHLLs often show the reverse pattern (González-Pino & Pino, 2000; Thompson, 2015). Given these differences, researchers emphasize the need for placement tools and pedagogical strategies that reflect the strengths and developmental trajectories of both groups (Correa, 2011; Vañó García, 2023).

Mixed or Separate Courses for L2 and SHLLs

Given these divergent profiles, many scholars argue for separate instructional tracks for SHLLs and L2 learners (Beaudrie & Ducar, 2005; Fairclough, 2012; Lee, 2000). When separate tracks are unavailable, often due to limited resources or low enrolment, SHLLs enter mixed L2-oriented courses that may not adequately address their academic needs (Sohn & Shin, 2007; Thompson, 2015). In such settings, accurate placement becomes even more essential, as misplacement can hinder learners who require targeted development in academic literacy rather than basic communicative skills.

For instance, some researchers argue that, in addition to the four communicative language skills, metalinguistic awareness is important for SHLLs' skills development (Llombart-Huesca, 2018). Metalinguistic awareness is the ability to think about and reflect on language as an object in itself. It encompasses skills such as phonological awareness, word awareness, syntactic understanding, and pragmatic knowledge, as well as the ability to analyze and regulate how language is processed (Bialystock, 1988). From a CLA perspective, fostering metalinguistic awareness in SHLLs can enable them to reflect on their own linguistic practices, recognize variation across dialects and registers, and critically engage with dominant norms of academic Spanish to develop their identity as legitimate speakers in both formal and informal settings (Moreno & Garett-Ruck, 2021). Additionally, Leeman et al. (2011) argues that "the best educational programs recognize and value students' home identities, building on their existing linguistic and cultural knowledge" (p. 484). In this sense, placement practices represent an important first step of the process, as they shape how language programs identify, recognize, and build upon learners' existing skills.

Placement Testing of SHLLs

Although placement testing is essential for HL development, in the field of HL education, Son (2017) found "assessment and evaluation issues to be among the most critical gaps in the literature" (p. 368). HLLs bring varied social and linguistic experiences to the classroom. Some demonstrate strong oral fluency but are developing literacy, while others may have limited speaking exposure but more experience with reading or writing (Sohn & Shin, 2007). When placement tests designed for L2 learners are applied to SHLLs, they often measure the wrong competencies and underestimate heritage learners' abilities (Ziegler, 1981; MacGregor-Mendoza & Moreno, 2020). However, a national survey revealed that only 11% of U.S. institutions with SHLL programs use placement exams specifically designed for heritage learners (Valdés et al., 2006). This is partly because developing such tools requires time, expertise, and institutional resources (Thompson, 2015). Another concern raised by MacGregor-Mendoza (2020) is the common misconception by L2 Spanish teachers that the language SHLLs bring to the classroom is underdeveloped, impure or flawed in some way.

Despite these challenges, there is consensus on the need for inclusive placement instruments that reflect the linguistic realities of diverse learners. This includes assessing competencies beyond grammatical accuracy and reading comprehension, such as oral fluency, interactional competence, discourse-level abilities, and emerging metalinguistic awareness. (MacGregor-Mendoza & Moreno, 2020; Moreno & Garett-Ruck, 2021; Wilson & Zabaleta, 2013). Recent initiatives demonstrate that more responsive assessment is possible. For example, MacGregor-Mendoza and Moreno (2020) developed an in-house placement test tailored to the linguistic profiles of their student population, while Potowski et al. (2012) designed an adaptive online exam

that differentiates SHLLs from L2 learners and places each into an appropriate track. More recently, Moreno and Garrett-Rucks (2021) described a placement test for SHLLs that incorporates a sociolinguistic understanding of Spanish. Drawing on principles of CLA, the test recognizes the legitimacy of diverse Spanish varieties, highlights students' linguistic strengths, and challenges deficit-based evaluations. The goal was to provide an example of thoughtful placement test development that guides the identification and placement of SHLLs in courses that respect their linguistic resources and dignity.

Types of Placement Tests Used with SHLLs

Placement tools used in U.S. Spanish programs generally fall into five categories:

1. Oral Interviews: Effective for assessing naturalistic speaking and comprehension, but resource-intensive as SHLL enrollment grows (MacGregor-Mendoza & Moreno, 2020).

2. Language Background Questionnaires: Useful for identifying heritage learners but insufficient for determining placement levels (Fairclough, 2012).

3. Standardized Computerized Exams:

    - Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) and WebCAPE assess proficiency but are rooted in L2 acquisition norms (Viera & Arispe, 2021).

    - Parisi Assessment System for Spanish (PASS), developed specifically for heritage learners, is one of the few HL-focused standardized tests (Potowski et al., 2012).

4. Self-Assessments: Practical and low-cost but often unreliable, as learners may misjudge their abilities due to limited metalinguistic awareness (Thompson, 2015).

5. Departmental Placement Tests: Frequently recommended because they can be adapted to local curricular goals and learner populations (Beaudrie & Ducar, 2012; MacGregor-Mendoza, 2012).

Although not the primary focus of this review, it is important to acknowledge the existence of other widely used language tests, such as the Diplomas de Español como Lengua Extranjera (DELE, Diplomas of Spanish as a Foreign Language, Instituto Cervantes, n.d), European Consortium for the Certificate of Attainment in Modern Languages (ECL, n.d.) and Duolingo Spanish Placement Test (Duolingo, n.d.), which provide additional standardized measures of Spanish proficiency.

Components Assessed in SHLL Placement Tests

Researchers debate what placement tests for SHLLs should measure. Some advocate assessing what learners already know and can do (Polinsky & Kagan, 2007), while others stress identifying areas requiring development (Zentella, 1997). A more balanced view suggests assessing both strengths and areas for growth (Fairclough et al., 2010; Moreno & Garett-Ruck, 2021; Sohn & Shin, 2007; Son, 2017; Thompson, 2015). Common recommendations include assessing:

- Oral proficiency and interactional competence

- Literacy and academic language

- Frequency and contexts of heritage language use

- Emerging metalinguistic awareness

- Recognition of both local/regional and general Spanish varieties

- Awareness and use of linguistic variation and dialects

- Critical engagement with language norms and ideologies

Lexical recognition tests, such as the Yes/No test, can distinguish proficiency levels among L2 learners but show ceiling effects for SHLLs familiar with high-frequency vocabulary (Fairclough, 2011). Elicited imitation tasks (EIT) capture oral fluency, pronunciation, and syntax and have shown promise for placement of both SHLLs and L2 learners, though performance may be influenced by memory and processing speed (Gaillard & Tremblay, 2016). Overall, the literature supports multifaceted placement approaches that combine several task and knowledge types to reflect the complexity of SHLL language development (Ilieva, G. N., & Clark-Gareca, 2016; Moreno & Garett-Ruck, 2021; Polinsky & Kagan, 2007).

Table 2. Summary of Placement Test Types Used with SHLLs

Test Type	Primary Competencies Assessed	Strengths	Limitations for SHLLs	Key Sources
1. Oral Interviews	Speaking, interactional competence, comprehension	Rich, naturalistic linguistic data; captures oral fluency and pragmatic skills	Time- and labour-intensive; less scalable in large programs	MacGregor-Mendoza & Moreno (2020)
2. Language Background Questionnaires	Language use history, domains of use, self-reported proficiency	Efficient for identifying SHLLs; low cost; provides sociolinguistic context	Cannot determine placement level; relies on learners' self-perceptions	Fairclough (2012)
3. Standardized Computerized Tests (OPI, WebCAPE, PASS)	Grammar, reading comprehension, elicited proficiency	Practical; easy to administer; PASS designed specifically for heritage learners	OPI/WebCAPE based on L2 norms; may misrepresent SHLL abilities; PASS availability varies	Potowski et al. (2012); Fairclough (2012)
4. Self-Assessments	Self-rated linguistic skills across modalities	Fast, scalable, low cost; useful supplementary data	SHLLs may underestimate or overestimate abilities due to emerging metalinguistic awareness	Thompson (2015); Asher (1990)
5. Departmental (Locally Developed) Placement Tests	Flexible: can include oral, written, lexical, discourse-based tasks	Can be adapted to local curricular goals and diverse learner profiles; often most accurate for SHLLs	Requires design expertise and institutional support; variable quality across programs	Beaudrie & Ducar (2012); MacGregor-Mendoza (2012); Potowski et al. (2012) Moreno & Garett-Ruck, 2021

Current Practices in Canada on Placement Testing of SHLLs

In keeping with the second objective of the study, this section examines current placement practices in Canadian programs offering Spanish language instruction, with particular attention to how these practices

align with what is known about SHLL linguistic profiles. The review of publicly available placement information from 53 Canadian colleges and universities offering undergraduate Spanish courses reveals substantial variation in placement practices for SHLLs. Across institutions, placement procedures for SHLLs are most often embedded within systems originally designed for second language (L2) learners, as summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Placement Assessment for SHLLs in Canadian Spanish Programs (N = 53)

Placement Pathway	Description	Number of Programs
Shared course, shared placement tool	SHLLs and L2 learners placed using the same assessment and enrolled in the same course sequence	37
No formal placement test	Placement based on self-advising, written guidelines, or consultation with the department	11
Shared course, separate placement tool	SHLLs and L2 learners share courses but follow different placement procedures	3
SHLL-specific courses	Programs offering courses explicitly designed for heritage speakers	2
Direct entry to content courses	Heritage speakers directed to literature or culture courses, sometimes with separate assessment	1

The findings revealed that the majority of programs (37 out of 53) place SHLLs and L2 learners into the same course sequences using the same placement tools, with no explicit differentiation in assessment design. An additional 11 programs do not report the use of a formal placement test and instead rely on self-advising, written set guidelines (E.g., register for upper-level courses if your Spanish is strong and you use it at home), or consultation with departmental advisors. Only a small number of programs report placement testing that explicitly recognize heritage learner status, either through separate placement procedures within shared course sequences (3 programs) or through courses specifically designed for SHLLs (2 programs). One program directs heritage speakers directly into literature or culture courses, bypassing language instruction altogether.

With respect to assessment methods, as shown in Table 4, online placement tests are the most common tool used by 32 programs. These assessments typically emphasize grammar, vocabulary, and receptive skills such as reading and listening. Fewer programs rely exclusively on language background questionnaires (4) or externally developed diagnostic tools (3), such as the DIALANG test funded by Lancaster University and the Cervantes proficiency test by the Institute of Cervantes. Eleven programs depend primarily on self-placement guidelines or departmental consultation, while only three employ mixed approaches combining background information, standardized testing, and interviews.

The analysis of placement practices across the 53 Canadian undergraduate programs reveals a clear misalignment with the linguistic profiles of SHLLs. Most institutions embed heritage learners within tools designed for L2 instruction, emphasizing grammar, vocabulary, and receptive skills through online or multiple-choice formats. This design prioritizes decontextualized knowledge over the oral fluency, interactional competence, and community-based practices that SHLLs typically bring to the classroom. From a CLA perspective, these practices reflect institutional assumptions about which forms of Spanish are academically legitimate, evaluating learners primarily on less developed areas such as literacy or formal grammar and increasing the likelihood of misplacement.

Table 4. Types of Placement Methods Used in Canadian Spanish Programs (N = 53)

Placement Method	Description	Number of Programs
Online placement tests	Grammar-, vocabulary-, reading-, and listening-based tests, often multiple-choice	32
Language background dquestionnaires	Self-reported linguistic history and exposure	4
External diagnostic tools	Standardized tools developed outside the institution (e.g., DIALANG, Cervantes)	3
Self-placement / consultation	Departmental advising based on guidelines or informal consultation	11
Mixed assessment approaches	Combination of questionnaire, interview, and standardized testing	3

Moreover, the scarcity of heritage-specific placement pathways signals implicit expectations that SHLLs' Spanish should conform to monolingual academic norms, even when their bilingual practices are functionally effective. Raciolinguistic insights inform us that placement decisions in these contexts operate not only as administrative mechanisms but also as sociocultural processes that shape access, recognition, and belonging. Therefore, while these practices do not appear deliberately exclusionary, they reflect structural reliance on L2-oriented systems and institutional inertia. The findings suggest that without intentional adaptation, Canadian programs risk replicating a narrow view of academic Spanish, overlooking the diverse competencies and communicative strategies that SHLLs develop through lived experience.

A Framework for Inclusive Placement in Canadian Higher Education

Findings from the literature review and the scan of Canadian placement practices point to several principles and actionable strategies for improving placement policy and practice in postsecondary Spanish programs. These strategies address assessment design, instructional use of placement data, holistic evaluation approaches, and instructor development, while also highlighting system-level actions that can enhance program inclusivity and responsiveness.

- **Toward Inclusive and Context-Sensitive Placement Design**

There is a need to move toward placement designs that explicitly account for heritage learner profiles. Given that most programs rely on L2-oriented placement tools, developing or adapting assessments to capture oral performance, contextualized language use, and emerging literacy alongside traditional skills would improve placement accuracy for SHLLs, particularly in programs where SHLLs and L2 learners share course sequences.

- **Multifaceted and Holistic Approaches**

The limited use of multifaceted placement approaches suggests an opportunity to adopt more holistic models. A growing body of research supports such approaches that combine formal testing with language background information, guided self-assessment, and targeted performance tasks. They allow programs to evaluate a broader range of competencies while reducing reliance on single-test outcomes. Incorporating CLA and Raciolingusitic perspectives into assessment and pedagogy will ensure that placement supports learners' voice, dignity, and positive linguistic identity, building on their home language practices. Such approaches are especially relevant in contexts where learner backgrounds are diverse, and prior exposure to Spanish varies widely.

- **Placement as a Resource for Tailored Instruction**

Placement data can serve as a resource for instructional and curricular planning, not only for course assignment. More detailed placement information would enable instructors to anticipate common patterns among SHLLs, such as strong oral fluency alongside developing metalinguistic awareness, and to design instruction that builds academic literacy while valuing learners' existing communicative strengths.

- **Training for Instructors and Educators**

Professional development for instructors emerges as a critical component of equitable placement systems. As mixed SHLL–L2 classrooms are the norm in many Canadian programs, training that raises awareness of SHLL linguistic profiles, learning trajectories, error and assessment interpretation, and responsive pedagogy can help ensure that placement outcomes translate into meaningful instructional support for diverse learners. Training should also address misconceptions that SHLLs' language is flawed or incomplete (MacGregor-Mendoza, 2020) to help instructors avoid deficit-based evaluations.

- **System-Level Recommendations**

Institutions should implement measures that go beyond program-level practices to support inclusive placement. These include ongoing faculty development in heritage language pedagogy, partnerships with indigenous and heritage language communities to inform curriculum and assessment, and institutional policies that ensure placement tools and procedures reflect diverse linguistic competencies. Policies should affirm the legitimacy of heritage learners' linguistic practices, recognize their social and cultural capital, and counter monolingual or deficit-based assumptions. Integrating placement data into program planning, resource allocation, and policy development can help ensure placement outcomes promote equity, recognition of linguistic diversity, and meaningful opportunities for all heritage learners.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the review of Canadian Spanish programs is based exclusively on publicly available placement information and program documentation. As a result, informal practices, internal assessment procedures, or placement decisions made on a case-by-case basis may not be fully captured. Moreover, program descriptions vary in level of detail and transparency, which may affect how placement practices are categorized. In some cases, the absence of documented placement tools does not necessarily indicate the absence of placement decision-making, but rather limited public reporting. Finally, this environmental scan focused on institutional policies rather than student outcomes. It does not examine how placement decisions affect SHLL academic performance, persistence, or learner perceptions. Future research incorporating student experiences, instructor perspectives, and placement results would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of current practices.

Summary and Conclusions

This study examined placement testing of SHLLs in postsecondary programs, with a focus on informing practices in Canada. Findings from U.S. research and a descriptive scan of 53 Canadian institutions reveal that placement systems rely mostly on L2-oriented tools, such as online tests, questionnaires, and self-assessments, which often overlook SHLLs' oral fluency, interactional competence, and community-based linguistic skills. These practices, from CLA and Raciolinguistic perspectives reflect institutional ideologies that privilege standardized and prestigious forms of Spanish, marginalizing learners' full linguistic resources and shaping their opportunities for recognition and equitable participation.

The misalignment highlights the need for inclusive, context-sensitive, and multifaceted approaches that combine formal assessment, language background information, guided self-evaluation, and targeted performance tasks. Placement data should also inform instruction, enabling educators to build on learners' strengths, support metalinguistic development, and foster academic literacy while affirming linguistic identity. At the program and institutional level, professional development, system-level policies, and community collaboration can ensure that placement practices validate diverse linguistic competencies rather than perpetuate deficit-based evaluation. By framing placement as a sociocultural practice, this study contributes to Canadian HL research and offers guidance for postsecondary programs seeking equitable, linguistically responsive assessment and instruction.

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