

## CASE STUDY : University of Utah

### *Ensuring Teachers' Language Proficiency Skills with Versant*

Graduate students oftentimes go overseas to teach courses in their chosen field. Doing so allows them to get more hands on experience as well as expose undergraduate students to material and views from other cultures. Like many universities, the University of Utah frequently hires international graduate students to become teaching assistants. However, before they are placed in a teaching role, these graduate students are required to be cleared by the International Teaching Assistant (ITA) Program.

#### *Need: Pre-Admission Test for International Teaching Assistants*

Many international graduate students were arriving at the University of Utah's ITA workshop without the oral English skills necessary to function effectively in the classroom. The University needed an English speaking test for entrance into their training program. Initially, they used the human-graded SPEAK test from Educational Testing Service. Students were sent to the University's testing center to take the 20-minute test and appropriate university personnel graded the tests.

#### *Challenge: Efficiently Assess English Speaking Skills*

When the ITA program consisted of only a few dozen students, the SPEAK solution worked fine. But within four to five years, the ITA program grew to over 130 students. By 2001, administering and grading the SPEAK test had become 'nightmarish,' said Diane Cotsonas, the coordinator of University of Utah's ITA Program. Students had to wait days to take the test, and there were not enough raters available before the semester began to score the tests in a timely manner. Some of the results were not available until after the workshop was already completed. "It was getting really, really difficult to use SPEAK," said Cotsonas. The University of Utah needed a more efficient entrance testing solution.



#### *Solution: Integrate Automated Speaking Test into Pre-Admission Program*

The University learned about the Versant English test, a fifteen-minute computer-scored English test. To take a Versant test, a candidate interacts with the testing system over the telephone or computer, responding and reacting to voice prompts. The patented Ordinate<sup>®</sup> testing system analyzes the candidate's responses and, in minutes, returns a personalized score report available online.

The ITA Program needed an English test that was fast, efficient and accurate. Fifteen-minutes in length, automatically scored and delivered, and extensively validated – Versant was a perfect fit. The University of Utah performed a pilot with students taking both the Versant and SPEAK tests. They found the Versant and SPEAK scores to be comparable. At the same time, Versant was quicker, more cost-effective and much easier to administer.

*"Versant saved me. Without it, we would still be trying to find a solution"*

*– Diane Cotsonas, ITA Coordinator for University of Utah*

To implement the Versant English Test, the University of Utah enlisted the help of the Versant benchmarking system to identify cutoff scores for admittance to the training workshop. In the benchmarking process, Cotsonas and her staff listened to a selection of speech samples representing a wide range of Versant scores. They determined whether each response represented acceptable or unacceptable oral proficiency based on the University of Utah's standards. The Versant Test Development team then worked with the University to analyze the results of the benchmarking to determine a score which students needed to be admitted into the ITA program.

### *Results: Increased Rate of Qualified TA's*

After using the Versant test for more than six years, the University of Utah is "more than pleased with the reliability." In the past, Cotsonas admitted every applicant into her training program. Now she admits only those students who have a good chance of clearing the workshop the first time through.

During a recent testing, for example, 79% of the students received a score sufficient to be admitted to the workshop. Further, the immediate scores generated by the Ordinate scoring system allowed the 21% of the students who didn't meet the cut-off to move quickly into English courses to improve their proficiency. Without the testing and immediate results, those students with insufficient English abilities would have likely entered the workshop but would not have had the oral skills necessary for clearance.

Since Diane Cotsonas started using the Versant English Test, her clients (the academic departments) have been extremely happy with the results. In fact, no department has complained to her about the language skills of the teaching assistants she is certifying. "In my field, the highest praise is often reflected by a lack of comment," Cotsonas explained.

Moreover, the university has expanded its use of the Versant English Test to testing oral English for certain programs. The chemistry department, for example, recently tested students before offering admission into their graduate programs.

"Versant saved me," Cotsonas said. "Without it, we would still be trying to find a solution."

### *Ordinate Testing Technology*

Ordinate, creator of the Versant tests, has been combined with Pearson's Knowledge Technologies group. Ordinate has been producing automated spoken language tests since 1996 and is the leader in the field. The patented Ordinate® automated testing system was developed to apply advanced speech recognition techniques and data collection via the telephone to the evaluation of language skills. The system includes automatic telephone reply procedures, dedicated speech recognizers, speech analyzers, databanks for digital storage of speech samples, and scoring report generators linked to the Internet.

Pearson's Versant English Test is the result of years of research in speech recognition, statistical modeling, linguistics, and testing theory. Ordinate scoring technology has been applied primarily to Pearson's own language tests, such as the Versant series, but also to customized tests. Applications of Ordinate technology include assessment of spoken English, children's reading proficiency, adult literacy assessment, and the collection and human rating of spoken language samples.



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