

Case Study

University of Utah

The University's Need

Like many universities, the University of Utah frequently hires international graduate students to teach courses. However, before they are placed in a teaching role, these graduate students are required to be cleared by the ITA Program.

Diane Cotsonas, the coordinator of the International Teaching Assistant (ITA) Program for the University of Utah, had a problem: many international graduate students were arriving at the ITA workshop without the oral English skills necessary to function effectively in the classroom.

Diane needed an English speaking test for entrance into her training program. Initially, she 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.

When the ITA program consisted of only a few dozen students, the SPEAK solution worked fine. But within 4-5 years, the ITA program grew to over 130 students. By 2001, administering and grading the SPEAK test had become 'nightmarish,' Diane said. 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 the SPEAK," Diane said. The University of Utah needed a more efficient entrance testing solution.

The Versant Solution

Diane 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, responding and reacting to voice prompts. The Versant patented testing system analyzes the test-taker's responses and, in minutes, returns a personalized score report available over the Web.

Diane 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. Diane performed a pilot with students taking both the Versant and the SPEAK. She found the Versant and SPEAK scores to be comparable. At the same time, Versant was quicker, more cost-effective and much easier to administer.

To implement the Versant English Test, Diane enlisted the help of the Versant benchmarking system to identify cutoff scores for admittance to the training workshop. In the benchmarking process, Diane 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 Diane to analyze the results of the benchmarking to determine a score which students needed to be admitted into the ITA program.

Program Results

After using the Versant test for almost four years, Diane is "more than pleased with the reliability." In the past, Diane 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 Versant 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 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," Diane 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 60 students before offering admission into their graduate programs.

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