

University of Houston:

Placement Exam for Heritage Learners of Spanish

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Anjana Singhal,
instructional designer at UH

Background

Founded in 1927, the University of Houston is the leading public research university in Houston, Texas. Each year, the school educates more than 36,000 students in nearly 300 undergraduate and graduate academic programs, on campus and online. UH award more than 6,500 degrees annually and has nearly 200,000 alumni.

Identifying Knowledge Gaps

The Spanish department at the University of Houston conducts branched, online placement-and-credit exams designed to measure the different language skills of students entering the Spanish for Heritage Learners Program. These exams are designed to identify students' proficiency gaps by testing them on a wide range of linguistic skills including vocabulary, grammar, reading, writing, and oral production.

Moving Tests from Paper to Online

Due to enrollment growth in the past 5 years, paper-and-pencil exams were no longer feasible for the Spanish department at UH. The Program needed a more suitable tool for:

- managing the rising number of students;
- properly placing students in any of the three levels (basic, intermediate and advanced);
- granting a significant number of college credits for previous knowledge of Spanish;
- collecting valuable statistic data; and
- simplifying administration of the test

"The tool we were seeking was a practical and reliable computerized, branched-type test that could measure receptive as well as productive and creative abilities in the heritage language," explains Anjana Singhal, instructional designer at UH.

Singhal worked closely with Flavia Belpoliti, coordinator of the Spanish as a Heritage Language Program, a subject matter expert for the project, and User Services Specialist Deborah Richardson to develop the right test and the right plan to achieve all of the project's goals.

The placement exam is administered 12 times during the academic year. It is made up of five different assessments, which are set up as pass/fail branching exams. UH determines the students' language levels according to exam levels and scores.

Spoken-Response Questions

The fourth exam before the final comprehension and essay section is the oral test section, which includes three types of "spoken response" questions within Questionmark Perception:

- An audio question in Spanish asking for a spoken response from the student
 - A picture asking the student to describe what they are seeing
 - A video playing a conversation between a man and a woman: the student must complete the scenario by finishing the conversation
- "Since this a language exam, testing students' oral skills are important," adds Singhal. "Students who perform well on the spoken response questions are placed in higher levels of Spanish Speaking and Comprehension classes."

Benefits & Positive Feedback

Aside from cutting costs and saving faculty and staff valuable time, the switch from paper to online assessments continues to help UH instructors analyze test results and gather reports used for data interpretation.

Looking Ahead

UH is coming up with new versions of the Spanish placement exam and instructors are currently working to come up with new questions. "We hope to develop a question bank to diversify the tests," Singhal explains. "We also hope to expand the use of Questionmark on campus by encouraging other departments to use this tool."

More information

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