

New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) Adds Technology and Multimedia to Language Proficiency Exams



BACKGROUND

As a global center for media, art, tourism, finance, food and home to the United Nations, the City of New York is one of the world's great multicultural cities. The New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) supports the single largest school system in the United States, serving 1.1 million students in over 1,800 schools located across more than 32 communities. NYC students and their parents communicate in over 180 different languages. As part of their mission, NYCDOE offers comprehensive proficiency examinations in Languages Other than English (LOTE) to enable their high school students meet the Advanced Regents diploma requirements with a passing score on one of their world language assessments. Students who pass a LOTE exam receive special recognition.

LOTE exams are currently offered in 21 languages, and contain four components:

1. **Speaking:** This is a one-on-one teacher-student conversation in the target language administered prior to the other exam components.
2. **Listening:** Students are asked to listen to a native-speaker teacher read a short text aligned to an authentic scenario (e.g., listening to the radio, short conversation with peers, etc.) for 30 seconds at a time, then they answer multiple-choice questions.
3. **Reading:** Students are asked to read authentic texts in the target language before answering multiple-choice questions.
4. **Writing:** Students are required to compose two essays in the target language.

CHALLENGE

The LOTE exams are administered in two parts. Students are offered up to three hours for the reading, listening, and writing components of the standardized exams which are administered concurrently on a specified, city-wide date.

The administration of the exams is not without challenges. The exams are offered across all the schools, in multiple languages, relying on live, native speakers, and the distribution and collection of thousands of paper-pencil-based exam materials. Wanting to make the process more efficient, the NYCDOE decided to try a technology-based approach, phasing in the use of technology in a carefully coordinated plan.

The first phase focused on utilizing technology for the listening component of the Spanish test. Due to the sheer

number of students who wish to take this exam—20,000 a year—it's difficult and time-consuming to schedule native-speaker teachers to provide the live "listening" sessions in each school and to assign a test-time for every student. It's also a logistical challenge to deal with the large amount of paper-based testing materials within each site and across the district as a whole.

In an effort to streamline the administration of the exams, the NYCDOE first wanted to see if it was possible to move from a paper-based assessment to an online assessment. They put the idea to the test, digitally administering the listening part of the Spanish language proficiency exam to an entire class of 9th to 11th grade students at a specified time.

SOLUTION

The NYCDOE had already successfully piloted the TAO digital assessment platform for its Gifted and Talented placement tests, so it was a natural choice to use the TAO platform to explore the feasibility of introducing an online component for the LOTE exams. Aside from the ease of administration, we found that “the kids much prefer doing it online,” concludes Mr. Tejada.

As further discussions took place regarding the logistical issues of the LOTE exams and the technical features of TAO, “we thought: why not make a recording available as part of the online listening exam so students could just click and listen? Eliminating the need for live native speakers to be present for that part of the test would make it much easier for everyone,” says Guillermo Tejada, Director of Assessment Technology at NYC Department of Education.



NEXT STEPS

“It makes perfect sense to further leverage TAO for the language proficiency exams as it allows multimedia and can potentially eliminate the need for live speakers for the administration of the listening component. It’s the ideal solution to this logistical nightmare. Now that we know that online administration works for us, the plan is to leverage the audio recording Portable Custom Interaction (PCI) feature for the listening component. We look forward to putting the entire Spanish LOTE exam online next year and rolling it out to multiple schools.”



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– GUILLERMO TEJEDA
Director of Assessment Technology
NYC Department of Education

ABOUT TAO

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