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To cite this article: Elvis Wagner & Anna Krylova (2020): Temple University's ITA Placement Test in Times of COVID-19, Language Assessment Quarterly, DOI: [10.1080/15434303.2020.1862849](https://doi.org/10.1080/15434303.2020.1862849)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15434303.2020.1862849>



Published online: 23 Dec 2020.



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Temple University's ITA Placement Test in Times of COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

When the COVID-19 pandemic made it impossible to do in-person, on campus testing, we were forced to create a new system to screen International Teaching Assistants (ITA) for Temple university. We used this opportunity to address many of the concerns and problems that we had identified with the previous test, and created a new test that could be administered virtually. The new test (the TU ITA Test) makes it possible to test potential ITAs at any time, allowing departments to make instructor placement decisions far in advance. The TU ITA Test also seems to better assess ITAs' interactional competence than the previous test, suggesting it might be a more valid ITA screening measure.

KEYWORDS

International Teaching Assistant; ITA; placement testing; interactional competence

Previous ITA placement testing procedure

For many years, the SPEAK test has been used for International Teaching Assistant (ITA) placement purposes at Temple University. In a normal fall semester, about 30 potential ITAs are assessed. The procedure for a fall semester entails receiving a list of potential ITAs who did not meet the minimum TOEFL iBT or IELTS score requirement, and thus need to take the locally-administered SPEAK test. The ITA coordinator contacts them to schedule a time for them to take the test once they arrive on campus in August. The SPEAK test is an asynchronous computer-based test, administered in person. The test administrator does not interact with the test-taker during the test, but only oversees it as a proctor. Instead, test-takers sit at a computer, with a headset and microphone, and a test booklet. Test-takers can take an optional 25-minute practice test beforehand in order to get familiar with the format of the test, but this is not scored. After the practice test, the potential ITAs take the actual test, which takes about 25 minutes to complete. The test consists of 12 questions, each with a recorded prompt that test-takers must respond to orally. Each prompt is about 15 to 30 seconds in length, and involves some sort of scenario, such as looking at a map and giving directions, or telling a story based on a series of pictures. Test-takers are given a minute to plan their response and then thirty to sixty seconds to speak their answers into the computer microphone. Their spoken responses are audio-recorded, and then sent to two raters who score the test. Based on their scores, ITAs are rated as unrestricted pass (can teach undergraduate classes with no restrictions); restricted pass, meaning they can teach classes while simultaneously taking an ESL class especially designed for ITAs; or insufficient, meaning they are not eligible to teach classes that semester.

Because the university campus was essentially closed during the summer (when the ITA testing normally takes place), and because most students were not able to get visas to travel to the

US, the university administration decided that it would not be possible to have in-person testing for Fall 2020. In addition, there were real concerns about continuing to use the SPEAK test, due to its limitations. The main limitation is that with the SPEAK test, test-takers do not interact with another speaker. Rather, the prompts are provided by the computer, and test-takers respond into the microphone. This lack of assessment of the interactional competence of the ITA test-takers was recognized as a fundamental validity shortcoming of the current testing procedure. In addition, a practical shortcoming of the previous testing procedure is that because the SPEAK is an in-person test, and because most ITAs do not arrive on campus until late August, at most a week or two before the semester begins, it is not possible to assign ITAs in advance to teaching sections. Having to take this high-stakes test right after moving to campus, preparing for classes (both as students and as instructors), orientation requirements, etc., put huge amounts of stress on ITA test-takers. Finally, there are also real concerns about the security of the SPEAK prompts, as well as the fact that many of these prompts are outdated.

How the test and procedures were adapted to deal with COVID-19

Because of these limitations, and because of the recognition that the current testing procedure was not feasible in the COVID-19 pandemic, the Curriculum and Assessment Specialist at the Temple Center for American Language and Culture (TCALC) decided to create a new test. This decision was made in conjunction with administrators from the Graduate School and the director of TCALC. In addition, the TCALC Curriculum and Assessment specialist worked with a faculty member and language assessment researcher, and discussed different possible tasks and procedures for a new test. In addition, the results of a previous research study that was conducted on the ITA testing procedures at Temple (Wagner, 2016) factored heavily in the design of the new test. This study examined how well different test scores predicted ITA teaching performance, and concluded that using measures of listening ability in addition to measures of speaking ability (i.e., SPEAK test scores) better predicted ITAs' teaching performance. In addition, the assessment specialist utilized her experience with administering and scoring the SPEAK test for many years, and also considered the test's shortcomings, and strategies for its improvement. Finally, she examined ITA testing procedures at peer institutions, especially those in Pennsylvania which have to meet the same state requirements. Having completed all of these steps, the assessment specialist designed the test prompts and procedures for a new test, the "Temple University International Teaching Assistant Test" (TU ITA Test).

Based on the needs of the different departments at the university, the assessment specialist decided that the TU ITA test would be delivered via video conferencing technology (i.e., Zoom), and would address the problems that were already identified with the old test and the old testing procedure. Because it would be administered remotely via Zoom, potential ITAs would be able to take it in advance, which would allow departments to make course staffing decisions in advance. In addition, the prompts were designed to be more attuned to and relevant for ITAs at Temple and more representative of the types of language use expected in an ITA target language use domain. Perhaps most importantly, the tasks were designed so that they would involve real interaction between the test-taker and the human interlocutor, in order to better assess the test-takers' interactional competence.

The TU ITA Test takes between thirty and forty-five minutes to complete via Zoom (the Zoom session is recorded so that it can be reviewed and scored). The test administrator

connects via Zoom with the test-taker, introduces the test and explains the procedure. The test administrator then verifies the test taker's identity—in order to receive the link for the Zoom meeting, the students have to email in advance their signed consent forms agreeing to be video recorded, and also send a copy of their state-issued identification that they will present on the test date. The test administrator examines the identification that they display on the webcam, and then the test begins. It is composed of six parts (a warm-up question that is not scored, and then five scored tasks). Each task begins with some sort of visual image presented to the test-taker. The test taker has a minute to review the image and then the interlocutor proceeds to asking questions. The five tasks include: (1) Use a map of a city to give directions to various locations; (2) Describe a manufacturing process based on a set of ten pictures; (3) Interpret numerical information represented by a diagram, a pie or a bar chart; (4) Use a schedule to set up a meeting; (5) Answer a set of questions about future experience as a Temple University student. Each task takes from about three to five minutes to complete. The test administrator asks a number of questions throughout each task that the test-taker is expected to respond to.

The test takers are assessed on the following competencies: (1) Functional competence – the speaker's ability to successfully accomplish the task demands, by using correct and appropriate language needed to complete the task. (2) Sociolinguistic competence – the speaker's ability to demonstrate an awareness of audience and situation by using appropriate language, register (level of formality), and tone. (3) Discourse competence – the speaker's ability to develop and organize information in a coherent manner and to make effective use of cohesive devices to help the listener follow the organization of the response. (4) Linguistic competence – the speaker's ability to use effective selection of vocabulary, demonstrate control of grammatical structures, and produce accurate pronunciation along with smooth delivery in order to produce intelligible speech.

Challenges in adapting the testing process

One of the challenges faced in developing the test was deciding on the logistics and procedures for maximum efficiency. Some of the most difficult aspects in developing and administering the test included:

- Elaborating the set of procedures for the test: This included the different software platforms used; the step-by-step procedures for the actual test, as well as procedures for communicating with the test takers and the larger Temple University community; creating a timeline for the test; preparing documents to share with test-takers.
- Identifying and integrating the various software and communication platforms: To communicate with the test takers and different schools and colleges, we use Gmail and Outlook; to register with the ITA Program, the students use a Smartsheet form; for making test reservations, students use Microsoft Bookings; to conduct the test itself, we use Zoom.
- Ensuring the test-takers' technology would be compatible: A set of technical requirements needed to be provided to test-takers beforehand so that they could check their computer functionality.
- Not overwhelming the test-takers with too much information: It was crucial to create a clear and concise timeline about when and how to share the different information regarding technology requirements, identification documents, test procedures, etc., with the test-takers.

Although this new test had to be developed very rapidly, it was fortunate that the assessment coordinator had a very good understanding of the population of test-takers, and the needs and constraints of the different departments that needed the test for ITA placement purposes. In addition, the results of the Wagner (2016) study also pointed the way towards the new testing procedures and content.

Impact of the new test and procedure in terms of validity, reliability, and practicality

Obviously, this online format is very different from the in-person (computer-administered) test that was previously used. In addition, the new test is much more interactive, with a human interlocutor who asked repeated follow-up questions during the administration. These changes had a profound impact on the reliability and practicality of the testing procedure, as well as the validity of the inferences made about the test-takers' English ability as course instructors. We are in the early stages of analyzing how these test characteristics impact the validity, reliability, and practicality of the test, but some initial results are briefly described here:

- The new test seems to better assess test-takers' interactional competence, because the test-taker interacts (virtually) with a real human being, as opposed to listening to a recorded prompt and then speaking into a computer microphone, as with the previous test. Overall, the test-takers seemed more relaxed and more eager to produce speaking content than with the previous test procedure.
- The prompts and questions for the new test are more current, and more in line with the context of an ITA context/teaching position.
- The anxiety level of the test-takers seems to be lowered, because they are able to take the test far in advance, rather than having to take it the days before the semester starts.
- The reliability of the scoring seems unchanged from the previous test. Two raters watch the video recording of the test, and then score it. This is the same procedure as for the previous test, although previously they only listened to and scored the audio recordings. The ability to view the test-takers' facial expressions and body language seemingly did not impact the ratings.
- The reliability related to the administration is obviously lower than with the previous test, which was completely standardized because it was computer-administered.
- While developing an entirely new test was time and resource intensive, ultimately the new test has a number of practicality benefits. Foremost is the fact that because the test can be given far in advance (rather than waiting until potential ITAs arrive on campus), placement decisions about instructors and class sections can be made far in advance, too, which is highly beneficial for both the ITAs and the different departments in the university.

The test was only administered to 11 test-takers for the fall, and one person (the TCalc testing coordinator) was able to administer all the tests. Most of these 11 test-takers were from China, India, Iran, and Vietnam, which is representative of the ITA population at Temple. Eight of the 11 participants took the test in their home countries, and ten of the 11 reported taking the test in their home or dorms, while one took the test in his office. The technology worked very well for these test administrations, and the test-takers seemed to

have read the information provided to them about the technology requirements, as there were no technology problems to report. While the analysis and validation of this test are ongoing, the initial analyses undertaken to this point have resulted in a number of refinements to the test that will be implemented for Spring 2021, including requiring test-takers to email in advance a copy of the ID which they will be presenting on their test day.

In future semesters there will be many more test-takers, and so one of the immediate objectives is to train additional interlocutors to administer the test. They will need to be trained in how to administer the test so that there is standardization across administrations. Part of this training will be focused on how to use the technology required, but also on training the raters to ask appropriate follow-up questions. More raters will be needed as well, so rater training and norming sessions will have to be conducted. Similarly, more test-takers will necessitate that more versions of the test tasks will need to be developed, in order to ensure test security.

The second main objective is the ongoing development of a validity argument supporting the use of the TU ITA test for ITA placement purposes. This validity argument will include analyzing the reliability of the administration and scoring of the test, the comparability of the different task versions, and an examination of how ITAs who are placed as class and lab instructors based on the results of the test perform in their teaching duties.

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Reference

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