



# ADVENTURES in Online Testing

The Newsletter of OWL Testing Software • Volume 5, Issue 1

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## Who's using OWL

Welcome to OWL's newest users...

### University of Tennessee Knoxville

Department of Modern

Foreign Languages & Literatures

<http://web.utk.edu/~mfl/default.html>

### Premiere English

specializing in delivering premium, customized, onsite English programs, English classes, and English instruction to businesses, corporations, factories, manufacturing plants, or schools with foreign employees or students

[www.premiere-english.com/](http://www.premiere-english.com/)

Congratulations to OWL user...

### Information and Communications Technology Council (ICTC)

for the recent launch of Canada's Workshops Online and their state-of-the-art Language Assessment Tool

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## Contact us today

for more information about what OWL Testing Software can do for you.

### OWL Testing Software

1484 Washington Road

Pittsburgh PA 15228

877-OWL-3395

[sales@owlts.com](mailto:sales@owlts.com)

[www.owlts.com](http://www.owlts.com)

## Is there a Better Way?

The Case for Computerized Testing as a Learning Tool

by: **Christopher Dalessandri, President and CEO, OWL Testing Software**

If you are like me, you may be finding your web alert somewhat inundated by articles keying on the words “testing” and “learning.” Anecdotal evidence supporting the case for testing as a studying tool has been around for years. However, the subject appears to be gaining momentum as a multitude of studies have been published showing a correlation between testing and learning. Some of these studies look at testing and learning in general and give strong evidence that students who practice retrieving information learn more efficiently than those students who employ elaborate study strategies like memorizing, chapter outlining, and concept diagramming. Other studies focus specifically on the use of computers in learning assessment. These studies point to the computer as a very effective tool for practicing information retrieval.

Although we are not researchers at OWL Testing Software, we do interact with a wide variety of learning institutions on a daily basis. Over the past 11 years, we have learned a lot from our customers about the learning strategies they employ in their virtual and physical classrooms. Most new customers come to us seeking a more efficient way to facilitate a single high-stakes test

– either for program placement (such as SPEAK®) or end-of-program summative assessment (like SOPI). Almost without exception, OWL customers quickly recognize the potential applications for OWL in their daily learning environment. Customers report that they use OWL Testing Software to facilitate regular quizzes and practice activities (PALS) to improve student learning and facilitate formative assessment. Given OWL's integral role in all aspects of assessment, it seems appropriate to examine the case for testing as a learning tool and attempt to synthesize its relevance to OWL's online testing community.

**Testing by any other name...** In some studies, that other name is 'information retrieval.' At Purdue University, Jeffrey D. Karpicke, an assistant professor of psychological sciences who studies learning and memory, recently conducted a [study](#) showing a strong correlation between testing, or information retrieval, and learning.

(read more inside)



## Focus on Features

### Flight Path

Flight Path is a new OWL feature that allows test creators to provide individualized directions to each user on where to go next to improve their learning. When Flight Path is used, test takers will receive specific instructions at the end of their OWL online test based upon their score or rating. This differentiated feedback can direct them to other tests, tutorials, websites, quizzes, class registrations and more.

(read more on page 4)

## Is there a Better Way? (from page 1)

“...learning is fundamentally about retrieving, and our research shows that practicing retrieval while you study is crucial to learning. Self-testing enriches and improves the learning process, and there needs to be more focus on using retrieval as a learning strategy.”<sup>1</sup>

A second study refers to this as the 'testing effect' and examines possible reasons why information retrieval is more effective than the traditional ways of studying. This study points out that retrieving information can take many forms, “...whether in a pop quiz, flashcards or even a classroom game of Jeopardy”<sup>2</sup>

**Getting it right...** One of the most important aspects of testing as a learning tool is immediate feedback. In fact, it can be argued that it is crucial for the test taker to immediately know whether he has given the correct answer. If incorrect, he also should have an immediate opportunity for self-correction. It is extremely important that learners do not practice the wrong answer. This means that if we provide a variety of methods and repetitions for students to practice recall with immediate feedback, learners will learn more, and learn faster. This can be achieved by giving practice tests or other activities, such as homework or games, that give the same opportunity to practice information retrieval as traditional testing.

**The Advantages of Computerized Testing...** Computerized testing is uniquely suited to provide repetition, constant availability and immediate feedback to the learner. While some class time can be devoted to practicing recall, it is important for students to have access to practice recall outside of the classroom.

A second benefit for today's students is that they find the computer interface innate. These digital natives are more comfortable completing practice activities and taking tests on a computer than they are with traditional oral exams or paper and pencil activities. According to an article in Language Testing, “Analysis of the results indicated that the test takers had a highly positive attitude towards digitally delivered test prompts compared to the face-to-face tests of speaking proficiency. In addition, examinees found computer-based tests less threatening and more comfortable than face-to-face interview tests.”<sup>3</sup>

Computers can make each interaction unique by presenting scenarios in different formats and in a randomized fashion.

*The OWL PALS program is well suited for this type of learning. PALS allows students infinite opportunity to not just show what they know—but also to learn as they go. The activity items are limited in number to encourage rapid learning. Students receive immediate feedback. To increase their likelihood of success, they are encouraged to move through the activities from the easier receptive skills to the more difficult productive skills.*<sup>4</sup>

Computers also more effectively measure a student's success and report progress. According to Purdue's Karpicke, “most students are not good at judging the success of their study habits.”<sup>1</sup> Taking practice tests online allows the computer to give the student definitive progress results. With OWL, students can even maintain an electronic portfolio of their work.

**Areas of concern...** There appear to be two major areas of concern with implementing these findings. The first issue is how much to test. In many cases, today's students are over-tested. This means that students develop testing fatigue and waste the most valuable learning resource they have -- instructional time with a teacher. With the advent of standardized testing as a panacea for all that ails public education, many students spend entire months completing standardized tests instead of learning. If you add in the time devoted to preparation for these standardized tests, students may be losing 6-8 weeks (or more) of instructional time.

The second concern involves the inappropriate application of computers. Computers should be used for what they are good for and should NOT be used for what they are not particularly good at. Despite the notoriety of computers like IBM's “Watson,” who beat human contestants on the popular game show Jeopardy!, computers are not yet capable of replacing human raters for analyzing complex speech or writing.

While computers are not good at analyzing writing or speech, computers can make it easier for those human raters to do their job and for students to access their valuable feedback. OWL users find it particularly beneficial that the software puts assessment, evaluation and feedback all in one online tool.

## Computers can provide a better way...

Educators who see the potential benefits of online testing solely as the mass marking of exams are missing the true rewards. Computers are great for making testing fun by testing recall in a game format. With software, like OWL, computers can better simulate real life situations by integrating multimedia. Networked computers are excellent as a means to remove time and distance constraints from testing. Online testing offers an opportunity to integrate technology into the formative assessment process, raise the student's comfort level, and ultimately contribute to overall learning success.

As both the reports from our customers and the findings of these recent studies point out; part of what we have to do if we want our students to achieve the best results is rethink our definition of 'testing.' Practicing information retrieval is important to efficient and effective learning and can be accomplished in many ways other than a traditional tests. Computers can play an important role in practicing information retrieval by creating games, self-correcting activities, as well as testing. While implementing such findings in today's rigid and cost-constrictive learning environment proves to be quite complex, most would agree that helping students learn more efficiently is a worthy endeavor. In the end, computers may provide a better way to achieving that worthwhile objective.



### NOTES:

1. AMY PATTERSON NEUBERT, “Research finds practicing retrieval is best tool for learning” Purdue University News Service, Jan. 20, 2011. <http://www.purdue.edu/newsroom/research/2011/110120KarpickeScience.html>
2. ANNE MCILROY, “Tests get high marks as a learning tool” Globe and Mail, Dec. 03, 2010. <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/technology/science/tests-get-high-marks-as-a-learning-tool/article1824878/page1/>
3. “Evidence about computerized testing / digital natives more comfortable” Language Testing, Vol. 5 | Issue 1, Cover date: July 2009, page(s): 37-48 (Print ISSN: 1833-4105)
4. “PPS Launches District-Wide Foreign Language Competition.” Pennsylvania Language Forum, Spring 2010, 80 (1), 80-81.

### OTHER SOURCES:

RADDOUANE CHIHEB, RDOUAN FAIZI, ABDELLATIF EL AFIA, “Using Objective Online Testing Tools to Assess Students' Learning: Potentials and Limitations” Journal of Theoretical and Applied Information Technology. <http://www.jatit.org/volumes/research-papers/Vol24No1/8V0124No1.pdf>

## New Language Testing Software a Win-Win for Students & Faculty

by: Terry Mares

The Department of Modern Languages at the College of Staten Island recently implemented new oral OWL Testing Software. The platform is now being used by more than 800 CSI students for all proficiency levels of French, Spanish, and Italian. There are also plans for the Department to employ the software for the assessment of Mandarin Chinese and Basic Arabic later this semester.

Commenting on the choice of the new platform, Valeria Belmonti, Director of CSI's Modern Languages Media Center, says, "The Media Center was looking for a user-friendly application to provide enough flexibility for faculty to customize oral exams according to languages and levels. Another important criterion was to find software that includes a built-in assessment module that would allow faculty to grade oral exams on the same platform used by students to record oral exams. Training efficiencies are quickly realized by having students and professors using the same software. We also needed an online application that would allow faculty to grade exams on and off campus.

What does this platform have that old evaluation methods didn't? According to Belmonti, "OWL allows us to integrate multimedia into the questions, time students' answers, randomize questions in various ways, and apply different grading rubrics and/or points systems to different sections of an oral exam. OWL's ability to generate reports also makes it easy for the Department to record and analyze the results of oral exams. [In addition] the OWL built-in audio recorder has particularly streamlined the process of oral exams, since students now access the questions and record their answers using the same interface.

Gerry Milligan, Acting Chair of the Modern Languages Department, Assistant Professor of Italian, and Italian Studies Coordinator, states, "The software is useful for faculty because it allows for swift oral exams [which is particularly useful when a large number of students require an oral exam at any given time]... Also, the software allows faculty to create an electronic portfolio of students' verbal skills at critical moments in their training,

## Spotlight on Relationships



At OWL Testing Software, we are pleased to be working with CSI/CUNY's Department of Modern Languages to further understand the applications of our software in their language-lab environment. This article, which last month appeared in the college's online news bulletin, CSI Today, explores some the efficiencies gained by using OWL in a large language-lab environment. We have reprinted it with permission here. You can see the original article or read more news about the College of Staten Island at: [csitoday.com](http://csitoday.com)

This is particularly useful for outcomes assessment because the portfolios allow faculty to determine students' performance at each level of our language sequence. Finally, the possibility of giving the students oral feedback is fundamental to error correction of pronunciation, a central issue in second language acquisition."

*As for the benefits to students, Milligan points out that "the software, unlike the online activities provided by the students' workbooks, allows students to create a portfolio of verbal recordings. They can practice their verbal skills and even receive recorded oral feedback from the instructor. They can also listen to their previous recordings in order to practice their speech as well as monitor their own progress. Ultimately, we are creating superior language learners and, in particular, better second language speakers."*

Professor of French and French Program Coordinator Kathryn Talarico notes that her students "seem to like the ability to see immediate results and get oral feedback from their instructor. Some students have said that they like the pressure of being timed in their answers since it forces them to think on their feet and to respond quickly. Since language study is all about communication, a serious program that tests oral skills (listening and speaking) makes learning a language more authentic."

Regarding her opinion as an educator, Talarico states that, beyond the platform's ease of use, "I have found that we can do more intensive oral testing and training of students, something that really isn't done with any regularity or consistency at other colleges around the country. In French, we use the software for both testing and for systematic training of students' pronunciation. The software allows instructors to leave oral feedback from students, so, for instance, if they mispronounce something or make a mechanical error, the instructor can record the correct answer. Students can get their grades with both oral and written feedback a few days after the test or exercise is over."

Another faculty user, Sarah Pollack, Assistant Professor of Spanish and the Coordinator of the Spanish Program, says that when it comes to her students "Listening and speaking are probably the hardest language skills to acquire in the classroom. By incorporating this software into the curriculum, students will be afforded more opportunities to practice and be evaluated on these fundamental areas of communication. I also agree with Professor Talarico that the ability to leave oral feedback for students is incredibly beneficial, as they can get immediate, individualized feedback on their speaking—something that is difficult to do effectively in the classroom setting."

Pollack also appreciates the flexibility of the software and notes that "the OWL platform allows us to create oral exercises that are close to real-life situations, and [this allows] students to practice language in a more authentic setting." In addition, she says, "We can now efficiently create exercises and exams that evaluate all of our students in a creative and systematic fashion. My hope is that we can slowly increase our use of OWL in the Spanish Program until we are able to give as much weight to oral work as to written work."





## OWL Testing Software

1484 Washington Road  
Pittsburgh PA 15228  
877-OWL-3395

[sales@owlts.com](mailto:sales@owlts.com)  
[www.owlts.com](http://www.owlts.com)

## Focus on Features

### Flight Path (continued from page 1)

Flight Path is end-of-test messaging that changes based upon the individual's score. In addition to displaying a student's position on a proficiency scale, Flight Path can include links to direct students to other web-based activities or information. This tool is useful in self-guided online tests, competency examinations, registration, or any other situation where a series of tests may need to be administered.

OWL users can begin using Flight Path now for their auto-rated tests. Because feedback is immediate, Flight Path is applied to a scored assignment that has been set to "Show Instant Test Results", such as Multiple Choice examinations. To turn on this feature select "Flight Path (dynamic feedback)" on the feedback tab in your OWL test builder.



## Perspective on Products:

### OWL version 3.8

OWL version 3.8 gives users even more tools to create an assessment environment tailored to the very specific characteristics of their testing population. We hope that our software will engage test takers and enhance their overall online assessment experience.

### OWL Flight Path <sup>NEW</sup>

- ✓ Dynamic feedback
- ✓ Instantaneous instructions
- ✓ Differentiated based on score
- ✓ Use links to direct test takers to other Web locations (e.g., tests, tutorials, websites, quizzes, classes registrations)

### Test Taker Localization <sup>NEW</sup>

- ✓ OWL User Interface appears in the test taker's first language
- ✓ Personalized testing experience
- ✓ Available in French, German, and Japanese
- ✓ Spanish and other requested languages coming soon

Commencer le test

### File Exchange <sup>ENHANCED</sup>

- ✓ Import your ready-built tests from an expanding list of content publishers
- ✓ Migrate your existing test materials to OWL's Web-based platform

### Internet Security <sup>ENHANCED</sup>

- ✓ Added security for OWL Hosted users
- ✓ OWL security certification available

### Auto Resume <sup>NEW</sup>

- ✓ Advanced feature
- ✓ Allows a closed or incomplete assignment to be resumed
- ✓ Returns to the same point where test was halted
- ✓ Useful if test is interrupted unexpectedly or the test taker inadvertently closes their test before completion

### Parsing Report <sup>NEW</sup>

- ✓ For advanced test creators
- ✓ One place to see all system elements on an OWL test

