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# Assessing Bilingual Skills for Language Incentive Pay in Roanoke, Virginia

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## Case Study

### Summary

The case study provides a snapshot of the steps taken by the City of Roanoke, VA to address the communication needs of its non-English speaking residents. In response to the growing need to reach this population, the city's Community Engagement Office began offering information and resources in Spanish, the second most widely spoken language in Roanoke. To support bilingual employees and incentivize them to use their language skills to assist non-English speaking residents, the city established a bilingual incentive pay policy. Katie Hedrick, the Community Inclusion Coordinator, implemented the

Bilingual Employee Incentive Program. Employees' language skills are validated with ACTFL language proficiency assessments through Language Testing International (LTI). The ACTFL assessments were selected due to their validity, reliability, ease of setup and implementation, and flexible and straightforward assessment process. The language proficiency assessments have helped build trust between the city's government and non-English speaking residents, improving communication and access to resources and services.

**Challenge:** A need for a valid and reliable testing methods, with an emphasis on ease of use, setup, and a streamlined assessment process to assess employees' language proficiency to determine eligibility for bilingual pay incentive.

**Solution:** ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview – Computer® (OPIc) and ACTFL Writing Proficiency Test® (WPT)

**Impact:**

- Validated bilingual skills of employees for incentive pay
- Increased employee satisfaction and retention
- Improved community trust and connections



## Introduction

Roanoke, VA is a growing city with a population of around 100,000 people. Approximately 10% of its residents have limited English proficiency and face challenges accessing city services. To address this issue, the Community Engagement Office of Roanoke began offering information and resources in Spanish, the second most widely spoken language in the city. The office also established a bilingual incentive pay policy for current and prospective employees who demonstrate proficiency in a language other than English and who can assist non-English speaking residents in accessing basic resources and services, such as health emergency services, education, and legal support.

## Identifying the Need: Language Proficiency Assessments

The city needed testing instruments that met the following criteria to validate the language skills of employees eligible for bilingual pay incentive:

- Validity and reliability of assessments for specific languages
- Ease of setup and implementation
- Flexible and streamlined assessment process

## Selection Process

Katie Hedrick, the Community Inclusion Coordinator at the Community Engagement Office in Roanoke was responsible for setting up and implementing the Bilingual Employee Incentive Program, which is part of the Language Access Program. As the sole person overseeing the language assessment process, including scheduling the tests and communicating with the test takers, Hedrick researched solutions that would be quick and easy to implement. She was also focused on finding language assessments that were appropriate for her needs and supported by research and validity studies.

# Solution: ACTFL Assessments through Language Testing International®

After research and consideration, Hedrick decided that the [ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview – Computer \(OPIc\)](#) and the [ACTFL Writing Proficiency Test \(WPT\)](#) met the criteria of validity and reliability, ease of setup and implementation, and a flexible and straightforward assessment process.

## Validity and Reliability

As the exclusive licensee of ACTFL, a global leader in the development of proficiency-based teaching and testing, LTI delivers language proficiency assessments that are designed to properly determine the specific proficiency level of an individual and ultimately provide a valid and defensible language credential. For 30 years, LTI has delivered ACTFL language proficiency assessments to government, commercial, and academic institutions. “I saw that LTI was used and recommended by local governments, state governments, even the federal government, so that was a key factor for me—knowing that it was beneficial within our particular setting. The ACTFL certification further solidified my confidence in LTI, as I am familiar with ACTFL’s reputation for reliability and best practices,” said Hedrick.

## Ease of Setup and Implementation

Ensuring an easy setup and implementation of testing was one of the top factors in Hedrick’s decision to select LTI. “The process of looking for a language testing vendor was very overwhelming. I was afraid I was going to get into it, and it was going to be a whole lot of legwork just on my end. And I’ve had the opposite experience with LTI. They’ve accommodated my schedule. Everything was very straightforward and easy to manage. All the languages that we need are offered through LTI.”

An important part of the implementation process is to establish the minimum level of proficiency required for bilingual roles. The Oral Proficiency in the Workplace guidelines provided by LTI helped Hedrick understand the ACTFL Proficiency Scale and determine the minimum levels of language proficiency that employees need to demonstrate through testing to qualify for the bilingual incentive pay.

*“The implementation and onboarding process with LTI has been very smooth. I’ve found the whole system very user friendly and easy to navigate.”*

—Katie Hedrick

## Flexible and Streamlined Testing Process

It was important to Hedrick to be able to schedule the assessments on demand as “we don’t always know when people’s schedules will work out, so they can just come in when it works for them.” LTI provided a smooth implementation and onboarding process. The ACTFL assessments offered by LTI are remotely proctored, allowing for flexibility in test administration and quick rating turnaround.

*“[the process of administering assessments] has been very straightforward and easy to work with. I type in a name and click **enter**, and we have a test immediately.”*

# The Impact of Testing for Language Proficiency

Assessing language proficiency of bilingual employees ensures that the City of Roanoke has staff that can effectively communicate with non-English speaking residents, building trust and improving access to resources and services. “You can get that communication through a language line or through an interpretation service, but I think having bilingual employees that physically are answering a call or physically driving the ambulance to the hospital and are able to speak in that language and really connect with those residents, I think that has been the most impactful piece of this. It’s just developing that trust and making those connections,” said Hedrick.

She also highlighted the impact the bilingual pay policy has had on the employee satisfaction and retention. The bilingual employees see that the city

recognizes the valuable contribution they make to the community by breaking down language barriers and helping non-English speaking residents navigate complex systems, which helps develop mutual trust and understanding.

*To know that someone is actually working to compensate us and to make sure we are recognized for the extra work we’re doing, it’s very encouraging.*

*—City of Roanoke Employee*



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📍 580 White Plains Road, Suite 660 Tarrytown, NY 10591

📞 1-800-486-8444

✉️ sales@languagetesting.com

🌐 www.languagetesting.com