

Guidelines for (online) oral exams

How to make sure the exam is valid, reliable and transparent?

Drawn up by UT/CELT March 2020 – based on [A short guide to oral assessment](#). Gordon Joughin. Leeds Metropolitan Museum.

When we talk about oral assessment or oral exams, we refer to the assessment of the student's knowledge and skills, determined on the basis of the spoken word. The assessment can be exclusively oral, for instance when the examiner asks questions about the course content and the grade depends on the quality of the answers. But the oral assessment can also be an addition to another assessment form. For example, when the student is asked to give a verbal explanation of a design or the design process or when the student is asked to reflect on an achievement or activity. Oral assessment usually will involve the student and an assessor or assessors. Others may also be involved in the interaction process, like peers.

Oral assessments can be administered face-to-face or online, using computers with audio equipment and a webcam, in combination with the features of a learning management system or common software or apps like for instance SKYPE.

Often-heard merits of oral assessments are that follow-up questions can be used to determine the limits of what the student knows and that it suits some students better and provides a broader image of students' abilities. But in order use it well, there are a number of important considerations and points of attention.

Concerns and points of attention:

Validity

An oral assessment usually can be seen as conversation between assessor and student to evaluate the extent to which the student has achieved the intended objectives. Basic questions are: Which learning objectives should be assessed? Will an oral assessment be a suitable way to assess these learning objectives? In what way, if an oral test is used, can this be done?

To ensure validity, for assessing the subject matter, a test specification matrix (learning objectives versus the questions and the level of the questions), just like for a written test, will be useful. If the assessment is used to assess for instance reflective skills, a scheme showing the alignment between learning objectives > provocative questions > and criteria will be practical.

Reliability

- The assessment should be fair to all students. Each student should have equal opportunity to perform and show what (s)he knows and is able to. Standard procedures will ensure an equal treatment. One factor for instance is the duration of the assessment. Instruments, like a question checklist or test specification table, may help with addressing the same kind of questions in the same way.
- For scoring in a consistent way, a rubric or marking guide with explicit criteria and standards will be useful. Or model answers. Structured forms can be useful for the assessors for making notes, scoring and for giving feedback afterwards.
- Anxiety on the students' side might interfere with a student's performance. Clear information in advance about what a student can expect and, if possible, a practice moment, will help. Assure

the students that the assessment is meant to provide the opportunity to let someone show his/her knowledge and skills, not to trap him/her or anything like that.

- Objectivity and bias. Be aware that as an assessor your judgement should not be influenced by factors that aren't related to what you are meant to assess. Like: whether you like someone, gender, language shortcomings, former learning activities or results etc.
- Articulateness and shyness can affect the perception of what the student knows. Some students need a bit more encouragement during the process.
- For reliability and in order to be able to substantiate your judgment and to have a defense in an appeal case, considering whether extra assessors or observers are needed, whether the conversation should be recorded, what kind of instruments will be used for scoring and grading and to substantiate the results. *NB. For using recordings, privacy rules may apply. Better to check the regulations. It may be necessary to ask the students for permission in writing. The request for permission must indicate what the recordings are used for and how and for how long they will be stored.*

Interrater reliability and protocols

- If more assessors of other people are involved in the assessment, it should be clear what everyone's role is. If peers are involved, they too should be well prepared for their role. Are they only allowed to ask questions? Do they also give feedback? Do they assess? Written protocols or manuals, ideally to be discussed in advance, will help.
- If more than one assessor is involved (which will increase the reliability) it is important to discuss the procedures, instruments and criteria beforehand ('calibration' session). A rubric or marking guide with explicit criteria and standards or an answer model will increase the interrater reliability. Preferably all assessors develop the procedure, instruments and criteria together to develop a common understanding of what is examined and what the expected standards are.

Fraud

In a face-to-face oral assessment, fraud will not likely happen. When the assessment is organized online, by using a webcam, the chances of fraud will increase a little bit. Students may use a crib sheets, look at a screen somewhere (not visible for the webcam), have an earphone plugged in. If the questions are not about facts or definitions, but about insights, applications, argumentation etc., if the student is asked about experiences and own examples, a look at a cheat sheet or outside help will not help the student very much. By probing and by keeping a close eye on the non-verbal behaviour of the students, if necessary by asking the student to show the ears, use the camera to show the surroundings or to zoom out now and then, possible fraud can likely be detected.

NB. Of course you need to make sure at the start that the student who has to take the assessment, will not be represented by anyone else.

Transparency. Preparing the students

If students are not familiar with oral assessments, steps should be taken to inform and prepare them thoroughly. What will be helpful?

- Provide clear written information about the assessment and discuss the assessment in class or provide opportunity for questions.
- Ideally, arrange for practice beforehand. If that is not possible, a demonstration video may give an impression of what they can expect.

Evaluate the process

Evaluate the process to learn for a next time.