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Assessing Thinking and Understanding: Can Oral Assessment Provide a Clearer Perspective?

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Introduction

Oral exams have historically been a popular method for assessment, but in the last 50 years the majority of assessment in Britain has been in the form of written tests, in part due to Hartog and Rhodes' (1936) criticisms of orals. However, the proportion of the population being assessed at age 16 has increased dramatically in the last 20 or 30 years from the top 10% of the ability range to around 99% of students. As we are now assessing such a wide ability range at age 16 we need to consider a variety of methods for assessment in order to ensure that we are assessing all students in an appropriate way. For those students who are low achievers the written test may not be the ideal tool with which to assess knowledge of a subject. These students have difficulty with writing and with spelling that would prevent them from demonstrating their knowledge in a written exam. For these students oral exams provide a possible alternative.

Assessing the ability to talk about a topic rather than the ability to write about it eliminates the need for the student to develop good written communication skills. In a written exam we cannot help testing the student's ability to write— to turn thoughts into a linear string of words (Pollitt & Ahmed, 1999). In some cases it is valid to test this ability as we want students to learn how to write, but in other cases this gets in the way of finding out what they have learned about the subject. One of the purposes of oral exams is to provide a way of assessing students' knowledge rather than their written communication skills. Oral exams are still widely used in assessing the Modern Foreign Languages, but these orals have a different purpose, which is to test students' verbal communication skills.

The two aims, assessing knowledge of a subject and assessing verbal communication skills, coincide in foreign language orals but may be in conflict in an oral exam for any other subject. For example, the oral exam in the Geography Certificate of Achievement (CoA) exam is designed to allow low-achieving students the maximum chance for positive achievement in Geography, and the examiners have chosen to do this through the medium of oral communication. This should allow examiners to form a clearer idea of their knowledge of Geography than they would in a written exam, as these students cannot write well and lose their confidence in written exams. For some students this method backfires as they have little confidence in an oral exam setting and feel more at ease in a written paper where they do not have to 'think on their feet'. Oral communication skills are still developing at age 16 (Dickson, 1981) and there are also large individual differences at this age.

If the aim of the oral in Geography is only to avoid students having to write then it succeeds for some students, but not for others for whom talking about the subject is just as challenging, if not more challenging. However, there is another advantage of oral exams, and that is that they are interactive. They involve a dialogue between student and assessor. The assessors (usually teachers) have the opportunity to guide the students through the questions, to prompt them and to encourage them. This allows the students to leave the exam with a feeling of positive achievement that is not necessarily related to the number of marks they have obtained.

The Geography Certificate of Achievement Oral

The Geography Certificate of Achievement (CoA) is an exam aimed for students aged 16 who are not likely to be able to achieve a grade in the GCSE exam. The CoA is currently available in Basic Literacy, IT, Maths, History, Geography, Design & Technology, Modern Languages, Physical Education, Religious Education, Science and Building Studies. At present there is an oral exam in the Languages (including Basic Literacy), the Maths CoA, and the Geography CoA. The Geography CoA consists of a written paper, written coursework, and the oral interview. The interview is designed to last approximately 10 minutes and is on a different set topic each year. The students are given a Resource Booklet to look at in their lessons in the weeks preceding the exam. During the exam *their own teacher* asks each individual student some set questions about the resources, and the student answers orally. Each session is recorded on audiotape. The Geography CoA oral represents the first re-introduction of oral exams in schools (other than language exams) in Britain for 50 years, and provides a new method for assessing students who are low-achievers.

A major issue for this exam is the way in which the teachers ask the questions, and the verbal prompts that they give to the students. The teachers are told that they may be flexible with the way in which they ask the questions, and vary the exact wording to suit their own interviewing style. The teachers are also told that they can ask supplementary questions so that students can achieve something positive. Positive achievement is seen by the examiners as crucially important for CoA candidates, and this is aimed for sometimes at the expense of reliability. In order to give these students a sense of positive achievement, many of the teachers (but not all) are guiding students' answers by giving prompts when they answer incorrectly or do not answer at all. The teachers use a variety of approaches when prompting the students. These include requesting further information; rephrasing the question into a more structured form; giving the student extra information; or simply repeating the original question.

Data

Questionnaires were sent to all of the schools taking part in the Geography oral in 1999, and 36 completed questionnaires were returned. These gave the teacher's views on aspects of the oral such as issues of prompting and marking. Some of the results of these can be seen below. Four teachers and 16 students were interviewed in detail about their experiences in the oral exam and their views can also be seen below. A detailed analysis of 12 transcripts of taped orals was carried out, along with a comparison of marks on oral and written coursework.

Prompting

Utley, Mitchell, & Phillips (1983) conducted a review of oral tests and concluded that they can be suitable for subjects other than languages. They suggested that it is necessary to have a clear policy for prompting in order to ensure reliability. The policy can vary from allowing no prompts at all to allowing teachers to repeat or re-phrase questions, or even leaving the prompting to the teacher's discretion, which is what occurred in the Geography oral. There were clear differences in the ways in which different teachers decided to prompt their students, and in the ways in which one teacher prompted different students. Utley et. al. (1983) suggest that one possible solution lies in writing questions that are specific enough or transparent enough to need no prompting. However, starting with very specific questions can lead to different problems of prompting. If the student cannot answer the very specific question what does the teacher do? There is a choice of either moving on to the next question or trying to re-phrase the question. In this case the re-phrasing cannot consist of making the question more specific, so instead the

teacher asks a slightly different question. This can lead to ambiguity about what the task actually is.

Another important issue is when to prompt the student. Should teachers prompt after a certain length of silence, or should they prompt if the wrong answer is given? Should they prompt until they get the right answer or until they decide they will never get the right answer? Should they prompt until the student feels a sense of positive achievement? Finally, how should the amount and nature of prompting be reflected in the marking?

It is impossible to give instructions for prompting that can be applied by every teacher to every student. Each student needs a different amount of support. The issue here is the sort of model we are following for assessment. Assessment can be conducted by gradually adding higher hurdles to a task, or alternatively it can be conducted by gradually removing support from the student completing the task. The number of hurdles passed or the amount of support needed can be used as an indication of the level of the student. We run into difficulty when we try to combine these two models for assessment. In the case of the Geography CoA oral, the teachers are giving different levels of support to the students, but the students are then being assessed on their performance on the task, that is the number of hurdles they achieve in the exam. They are assessed, using a generic mark scheme, on the amount of information they recall, the number of terms they can define and use, whether they can identify and give explanations for patterns and relationships and so on.

It is possible to remove support gradually from a series of written questions, but for individual questions in the oral it is more appropriate to add support gradually, which is what the teachers are doing when they are prompting. If this is the desired technique for the oral then it must be reflected in the mark scheme, with more credit gained for achievements without support and less if support was needed. However, problems would occur if the mark scheme consisted of a combination of statements about levels of performance on a task and statements about levels of support needed. Without support, students doing the CoA may not be able to identify the opportunities in a question, and may only give minimal responses. Adding support gives every student a chance to exploit the opportunities in a question.

The questionnaire data from the teachers who carried out the oral assessment in 1999 showed that 91% of the teachers had to re-phrase questions, with 88% giving prompts to help the students answer. Most of the teachers felt that they had been consistent in the degree of support they gave each student, although 68% said they had to change their approach to give each student the best chance of answering the question. The comments the teachers made are more revealing. Some of the teachers were not confident about how to prompt and how much to prompt:

‘I tried to be flexible with the questions but found it difficult.’

‘Prompting is hard to do without ‘helping’ the candidate.’

‘I needed to lead the candidates to get more detailed answers but I wasn’t sure how much

was allowable.’

‘...but how far can you go to lead them? How far should you coax them?’

Others took a slightly different view:

‘...even if I had prompted too much, and given them too much help, the most important thing was for them to go out of the room with a good feeling rather than going out feeling they’d failed...’

In a detailed analysis of transcripts of 12 of the teachers, 10 of them prompted with a request for more information and 11 of them used prompts that directed students in how to use the resource to answer the questions. For example:

Teacher: 'Which part of the world has the largest area of rainforest at present?'

Student: 'Um. Asia.'

Teacher: 'Have another look at the map. Just use the map.'

Student: 'Latin America.'

The teachers were not consistent unless they were giving no prompts at all. Although 10 of them prompted for more information, this was only done for 25 out of the 43 students involved. Sixty-eight percent of the teachers said they felt confident about the marks they then gave, although some clearly felt differently:

'...we are not experts at assessment.'

'I just wasn't happy with the marks I gave. You just can't get the level - I feel dubious about my marking...'

Seventy-four percent of teachers said that they tried to take into account the amount of prompting they had given when marking the orals. One teacher said:

'They would get higher marks if they had less help.'

Assessment by Teachers

Most of the teachers had no training in how to use a generic mark scheme, and were trying to combine its use to assess the task with their knowledge of the level of support they had given. Despite difficulties with the assessment and a lack of confidence in doing it, 91% of teachers said they wanted to carry on doing the assessment for the oral themselves and not have it conducted by external examiners.

Teachers have the advantage of knowing the student they are assessing. They know how much the student knows about the subject based on their performance throughout the course, so they know what to expect in the exam. If the student is unable to answer a question in the oral and the teacher knows that they should know the answer, the teacher can give prompts. An external examiner would not have the advantage of trying to elicit information that they know the student has. However, along with knowing the student comes a lack of objectivity. Teachers may assess students' performance based on their whole knowledge of that student, not on the student's performance in the oral alone. Can the teacher really separate their knowledge of what the student could have demonstrated in the exam from what they actually demonstrated during that ten minute period? What does the teacher do who knows that the student knows the answer but cannot get them to say it? There is a temptation to keep prompting until the right answer is reached, or to mark as if the right answer was reached.

If we are aiming to assess students' overall ability then we need not worry about teachers taking into account performance throughout the course, as long as all teachers do this consistently. However, if we are assessing the student's performance on the particular task then judgements must be made on the task alone. We have therefore to decide whether we want our measurement instrument to be the teacher or the task.

Cognitive Demands and Affect

Attention

There may be different cognitive processes occurring in students' minds when they are answering questions in oral and written exams. Apart from the lack of a need to translate thoughts into a string of written words, there are also different demands made on students in this kind of exam. One of these is associated with the attentional processes needed. In an oral exam the assessor is directing the student to the task by asking the question. Students do not have to control their own attention (as they would on a written paper) because it is externally directed by the assessor, who can direct them explicitly to the resources but also implicitly, using language, to the ideas they should be using. This results in what seems like less conscious effort for the student. As some of the students put it:

'You just answer the question and then go – it's easier than normal.'
'It didn't feel like an exam – there was no pressure – you just sit there.'

Because the students' attention is directed by the teacher, and because the teacher gives prompts, some students are able to achieve more than they would in a written test. As the teachers put it:

'Many of our candidates 'shone' in comparison to their written work.'
'The oral assessment gave candidates an opportunity to show what they knew only when I directed the questions in that direction- I had to squeeze it out of them.'

The problems with the oral assessment from the students' point of view were mostly to do with affective factors such as feeling nervous. Seventy-four percent of the teachers thought that most of their candidates preferred the oral assessment to written tests. For example:

'They like oral exams as CoA candidates tend to struggle with writing so are able to get a sense of achievement.'
'Some felt nervous but afterwards generally they were pleased to have demonstrated knowledge and understanding.'
'Whilst they found it hard, I feel that written assessments are harder for them. We need to embed oral work in our Scheme of Work to increase student familiarity.'

The last quote raises an important point which is that students do well in assessments with which they are familiar. They apply a schema to each task, which is a mental representation of how to tackle this sort of problem, and if they have not done an oral before they may not have a schema for coping with it. This illustrates the importance of having practice runs and mock orals.

Despite the differences discussed so far between written and oral assessments, a significant positive correlation ($r = 0.53$) was found between performance on the written coursework task and performance on the oral exam in an analysis of the results of 60 of the students. This does not necessarily indicate that the two tasks are assessing the same kinds of skills, but simply that those who did well on one tended also to do well on the other.

Time-Management

Another factor that differs between written and oral exams is the amount of time students have to answer the questions. The time pressures in an oral are quite different from those in a written paper. There are usually time guidelines for an oral but no strict rule. This takes away the pressure from the student of managing time and spending the correct amount of time on each question or group of questions. However, there are different time-related pressures in an oral exam. The student has to answer questions on the spot, without time to stop and think for longer

than the teacher allows, and often without a chance to leave a question they cannot do and then come back to it later. The time is managed not by the student in an oral but by the teacher. It is the teacher who decides when the student is ready to move on to the next question, and it is the teacher who sets the pace for the exam.

The issue of not being able to go back and change a previous answer is one that the students mentioned:

‘You can’t go back to questions – you can’t stop and think’

‘In an oral when it’s done you should get a chance to go over it again. You should be able to write it down and then if you are stuck on it go through the rest of the exam and then come back to that question.’

‘You can take your time, but you can’t go back. There’s no second chance.’

In written exams students have to organise their own time and can go back to questions they miss out or think they might have got wrong. In an oral exam they cannot ‘leave a blank’ as they have little choice but to reply to the teacher with some sort of answer, and once they have said it they are more committed to it than they would be in a written exam where they could go back and change it.

The way in which time is managed in an oral exam may prove beneficial to low-achieving candidates such as those taking the CoA. By eliminating the need for them to manage their own time, it allows them to allocate more of their attentional resources to higher order skills necessary to answer the questions. We can describe the task in any exam as consisting of forming a strategy to answer questions, managing time, meeting the cognitive demands of the task, and an affective dimension. In the case of an oral exam the teacher removes the need for the students to form a strategy and apply it, and the need for time-management. This leaves the student freer to cope with affective aspects and to meet the cognitive demands of the task. The affective nature of the task in many exams includes the stress of writing and spelling, especially for low-achieving students. The oral exam removes this stress but it adds others. Although some aspects of the oral free up attentional processing for the demands of the task, others such as stress may have a negative affect on cognitive processing. The student-teacher relationship becomes more important in an oral exam, as does the confidence of the student.

Confidence

There appear to be large individual differences in confidence amongst students in an oral exam. The more confident students will be better able to show the examiner what they know in an oral exam than the less confident students, whereas we would not expect to see such large discrepancies in a written exam. The questionnaires and interviews with teachers indicated that boys seemed more confident than girls in the oral exam.

‘Some were very confident, others very shy.’

‘Boys are more confident in oral than girls.’

‘Males are more confident.’

‘Girls were shy.’

‘Boys were more confident.’

Sixty-five percent of the teachers felt that many of their candidates had been nervous or shy. One of the teachers remarked:

‘The assessment gave the opportunity but my candidates certainly did not show what they knew.’

This highlights the issue of the opportunities this kind of assessment provides for students. If students are able to take advantage of the opportunities given in the questions then the oral assessment allows them to show what they know. However, if they are nervous they may be unable to recognise the cognitive opportunities in the questions, and will not be able to demonstrate their level of knowledge of Geography.

In some contexts, particularly the assessment of English as a Foreign Language, students are assessed orally in pairs in the belief that this helps those students who are too shy to talk to the teacher or assessor alone. There are complex issues involved in deciding who should be paired with whom and how this affects the assessment, but it is a possible method that the Geography teachers could use in a practice run or mock oral. Another way to reduce the affects of stress in an oral exam is for the teacher to use encouraging and reassuring language. In a detailed analysis of transcripts of 12 teachers' oral exams we found that 11 of them used reassuring language throughout the assessment of their students.

The Use of Language

Conversational Implicature

The characteristics of the discourse in an oral exam are very different from those of ordinary language. Grice's notion of conversational implicatures is useful here. Grice described our use of language as following a Cooperative Principle consisting of four maxims: Quality, Quantity, Relevance and Manner (see Levinson, 1983). The maxim of quality is that what we say is what we believe to be true, we say nothing that we believe to be false or for which we lack evidence. According to the maxims of quantity and relevance what we say is no more or less informative than necessary, and is relevant to the conversation. The maxim of manner states that we are brief and orderly in our conversation, without being ambiguous or obscure. According to these maxims, our conversation is efficient, rational and cooperative. The important point is that we assume that the other person in the conversation is also following the principle, so we make inferences about what they say, and these are conversational implicatures. The implicature of an utterance is the meaning intended by the speaker that is over and above the literal meaning.

According to this principle when someone asks a question this has the implicature that they do not know the answer and that they want to know the answer. If not, they would be violating the maxim of *quality*, so they would not be cooperating. One of the difficulties with the kind of conversation that is occurring in the Geography oral exam is that one of the participants – the teacher – is not adhering to the Cooperative Principle. The teacher is asking questions to which he or she *does* know the answer.

Young and He (1998) analysed Language Proficiency Interviews (LPIs) and found that the maxim of *quality* was present to a greater degree than that of *quantity*, the maxim of *relevance* was hardly used at all and the maxim of *manner* was causing the conversation to become verbose rather than clear. The LPI involves a conversation between a teacher and a student in a foreign language that the student is learning. The issues here are quite different from those in a Geography interview where it is not the conversation itself that is being assessed but the information conveyed in the conversation. If the Geography student is trying to convey everything that they know about the topic to the teacher in a short space of time during the interview then the nature of the discourse will differ considerably from ordinary language.

Quality is likely to be present in an oral interview as the student is trying to tell the teacher what they know and so will endeavour to say nothing false. However, another aspect of *quality* is that we say nothing for which we lack evidence, and this may be violated in an exam situation in which students are unsure of an answer. Some students may be more inclined to risk saying something for which they have little evidence in an exam than they would in ordinary

language, in order to try to get the mark. However, there will be individual differences here, and other students may be less likely to take such risks in an exam situation than they would in ordinary language because the exam makes them nervous. The way that 'exam stress' affects cognitive processing and discourse in oral exams is an issue that merits further investigation.

The fact that there is a 'right' answer in the teacher's mind during the oral has a considerable effect on the way that both the teacher and student use language. If the teacher indicates that the student has not given the answer expected, the student may be more likely to say something they are not sure about. The teachers on the other hand are starting by reading questions aloud, but are then moving on to elaborate on these questions, and this is when they are doing most of their talking. In most cases the teachers do more talking than the students during the oral.

The way in which the maxim of *quantity* is adhered to in the oral exam is also different from ordinary language. Some students offer more information than necessary in an attempt to 'hit on' the answer that is in the teacher's mind. However, most do not give any extra information and give very staccato responses. If they do give any extra information they often get a negative response from the teacher who tells them 'we will get to that later'. For example:

Student: 'But the main one's in Africa.'

Teacher: 'That was going to be my next question. Which part of the world has the largest area of rainforest at present?'

Student: 'South America. Er Africa, sorry.'

In this case the student gave extra but incorrect information in answer to the first question. The teacher then said that was the next question and went on to ask it. The student started by answering this one correctly but then reverted to the incorrect answer he gave earlier.

The students very rarely say that they do not know the answer to a question. This would be a possible response in ordinary language, but it is less likely to occur in the oral exam in which the students want to try to gain credit. Again this is linked to the issue of *quality* – they will try to say something for which they lack evidence, whereas ordinarily they may say 'I don't know'. The students who do not wish to attempt a response tend to stay silent rather than say they don't know the answer. Silence would not be a socially acceptable response to a question in ordinary language but it occurs in the oral exam and is again linked to the students being nervous.

Relevance appeared to be almost non-existent in Young and He's (1998) analysis of LPIs. However, in the context of the Geography oral, most of the utterances are relevant. The students are not talking about other issues, but are trying to answer the question. The teachers read the question, and then perhaps repeat or re-phrase it, with the goal of getting the students to answer the questions and complete the oral.

The maxim of *manner* is also affected by the exam situation. When the teachers are reading the printed questions they are not speaking in a natural manner as some of the question wordings are vague and unclear. When the teachers go on to prompt students they often become verbose and start using complicated vocabulary to try to communicate the same question in a different way. For example:

Student: 'They're between the two tropics, along the Equator.'

Teacher: 'Right. Anywhere else? Any other descriptor you can give me?'

Student: 'Er, no.'

The teachers are trying to elicit as much information as possible from the students in answer to the questions, so they often repeat or re-phrase questions, and this, as well as lacking in brevity, often results in ambiguous questions and disorderly speech. Dickson (1981) showed that children respond more to the social implications of language than adults do, but as they become

older and more educated they are able to differentiate the literal meaning of a statement from its implications. The students are therefore likely to be more sensitive than the teachers to the non-real language nature of the oral exam.

Interrogations

The Geography CoA oral exam appears to have nine of the twelve characteristics of interrogations listed by Low (1991). These nine characteristics are: a disproportionately large number of questions; questions are repeated often identically; there are certain desired or correct responses; conversational request sequences are not adhered to i.e. there are no apologies for the questions; there are fewer than the expected number of politeness formulae; the questioner changes topic without consulting the person questioned; the person being questioned is unable to change topic or control the direction of the interaction; there are punishments for failures to answer correctly; and answers are formally recorded in writing or on tape.

There will be individual differences in how people respond to feeling they are being interrogated. Low (1991) suggests that those questioned are likely to avoid telling the questioner what they want to know if they feel they are being interrogated. They may also give vague rather than precise answers and even ignore certain questions entirely or respond only to one part of a question.

Although both participants in this sort of conversation tend to 'wear a mask', this can be dropped if the student feels that the teacher is on their side. If the teachers succeed in reassuring students and keep in sight the common goal, then the oral will not become an interrogation. Furthermore, as Low (1991) suggests, the teacher can lower the student's workload by recycling important information and marking it as important, thus reducing the density of the questions.

Conclusions

The oral exam in the Geography CoA has some distinct advantages over traditional written tests. Students who are unable to read or write well are given an opportunity to show what they know by another means. Teachers are able to interact with their students during the assessment, prompting them to answer to the best of their ability, and removing some of the strategic demands of the exam. Some of the students who do not do well on written tests are able to show what they know and gain a sense of positive achievement in the oral exam.

Cognitive and Affective Factors

The disadvantages of the oral exam are also clear. Some students are under more stress than they would be in a written exam because they are nervous of speaking to their teacher in a taped exam situation. This can have an effect on their cognitive processing, causing them to devote attentional resources to coping with the stress. Any resulting incorrect processing of the questions or information in the resources can cause students to under-perform. Nerves seem to have affected the girls more than the boys in this study, but overall there will be individual differences in the level of stress experienced in oral exams. The issue of stress may be more of a problem for students taking the CoA than it would for other students if oral exams were to be used more widely. Teachers felt that students taking the CoA, who are low-achievers, are often very quiet in class, and lacking in confidence in comparison with other students. If oral exams were to be used at different levels we might find that the affective dimension of the task influences the cognitive demands in different ways.

The Model for Assessment

The method of asking questions and then prompting to help the student or to ask for more information results in decreased reliability of the assessment. The teachers were not able to be consistent in the prompts that they gave to different students, as different students answered the questions in different ways and some needed more support than others. The issue here is whether we are intending to assess these students according to the hurdles they overcome in the task or according to the level of support they need to complete the task. Problems are inevitable if we fail to separate these two methods.

Linguistic Issues

A further problem is associated with language use in the orals. Because there is a right answer in the teacher's mind that the student has to arrive at, the language differs from ordinary conversation, and the situation takes on aspects of an interrogation which can result in the student becoming disaffected. The teacher must ensure that the student feels they are on the same side, with a common goal.

Computer Based Assessment

One way of overcoming the problems of oral assessment without losing the benefits could be the use of a computer to present the questions. Students could answer questions on a computer, and the computer could prompt students according to their needs. In this way there can be rules for prompting, but questions can also be adapted and tailored for the particular student. This could remove the problems of confidence some students have in an oral test, and could also avoid the problem of assessing students in a linguistically unnatural conversation. If students could speak their answers into voice-recognition software, and the computer could speak the questions then the need for reading, writing and spelling would also be avoided. This may not be a natural situation for some people, but students are increasingly becoming used to interacting with computers in their learning, so it is plausible that this could be extended to assessment.

For students taking the CoA, the oral exam provides an opportunity for positive achievement which many of them may not find in traditional written exams. It also allows us to gain a clearer idea of students' understanding of a subject, although there are some students who are under too much stress to perform to their best ability. Oral exams have the potential for wider use, provided we develop a clear framework for how teachers should guide the students by prompting, and how this should be assessed. Students in the CoA do benefit from the teacher's prompts during the oral, and leave the exam with a sense of positive achievement. This prompting should be reflected in the marking criteria with a scheme of credit based on the amount of support needed.

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