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CHANGING PARADIGMS
IN EDUCATION AND SCIENCE

УНИВЕРЗИТЕТ У НОВОМ САДУ УЧИТЕЉСКИ ФАКУЛТЕТ НА МАЂАРСКОМ НАСТАВНОМ ЈЕЗИКУ У СУБОТИЦИ
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11. Међународна методичка конференција

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THE COMMUNICATIVE CHARACTERISTICS OF ONLINE ORAL EXAMS

Abstract

The aim of our presentation is to describe the consequences of the obligatory online transition suddenly introduced in spring 2020, in the middle of the semester due to the Covid-19 coronavirus epidemic, in relation to higher education focusing on oral examinations. The compulsory regulations of online assessment were applied to the organization of end-of-semester reports, oral exams, final exams and admission interviews. In spite of the fact that written assessment is becoming more common in higher education, oral exams still remained for the purpose of checking students' ways of thinking and a deeper general knowledge of the subject. The problem analysis investigates the communication strategies of online distance examination, i.e., to what extent the traditional characteristics of the oral examination have remained, and what measures have been taken to adapt to the online conditions. The presentation reviews the potential advantages and disadvantages of oral exams, as well as their changes in the online environment.

Keywords: *oral examination, online education*

1. Introduction

The emergency remote instruction instituted in March 2020 across universities around the world, due to the Covid-19 coronavirus pandemic, had a significant effect on the form of examinations. The compulsory regulations of online assessment were applied to the organization of all types of exams: end-of-semester reports, oral exams, final exams and admission interviews. Online oral examinations were a relatively new tool of assessment in spite of the long history of oral evaluation. However, written forms of assessment can be regarded as the dominant form of summative assessment in education, oral assessment still continues to form an important part of evaluation in tertiary education (Joughin, 1998).

Joughin (1998) identified six areas of assessment practices related to oral discourse and tries to give a universal typology of oral examinationsin a review of the literature. *Primary content type* focuses on knowledge and understanding, applied problem solving ability, recall of facts and concepts, however, this area also includes interpersonal competence (such as communicational competence) and intrapersonal characteristics (such as anxiety, self-awareness, self-confidence). The dimension of *interaction* describes the reciprocal nature of the exam, it can be a presentation without any questioning or an intensively interactive dialogue. The element of *authenticity* refers to the context whether the exam takes place in a professional context or totally decontextualized. The dimension of *structure* refers to the degree to which the oral exam is based on pre-fixed questions, in this way, the format can be closed or totally open. The factor of *examiners* emphasizes the role of the assessors, which can take the form of self-assessment, peer assessment, authority-based examiner or a boards of professional examiners. The last dimension of *orality* is related to the forms of medium, whether the oral assessment is combined with written or physical work or it is exclusively verbal by word-of-mouth. The strategies based on the selection of these dimensions are influenced by socio-cultural, pedagogical or technical conditions.

This framework is applied by Theobold (2021) when describing the six dimensions of summative online oral examinations:

1. content: focus on knowledge and understanding
2. interaction: dialogue with the instructor
3. authenticity: contextualization
4. structure: open structure
5. examiners: authority-based evaluation
6. orally: pure orality.

Each of these dimensions can be modified according to the goals and requirements of the exam.

2. More meaningful assessment

One of the most significant reasons why instructors choose oral examination is the abundance and depth of information about student understanding and a more complete picture of their knowledge. Oral exams give teachers more opportunities to test student thinking and they have to defend their explanations in a dynamic way. This type of assessment provides a more authentic experience and genuine conversations, even if it is an online dialogue.

Oral assessment is unique in that instructors can evaluate a combination of skills at the same time, such as presentation skills, critical thinking and logical reasoning, compared to their written counterpart. Especially the open format questions provide opportunities for students to show their proficiency in conceptual understanding.

Important key competences for lifelong learning recommended by the European Commission (2019) are critical thinking, analytical skills, creativity and problem solving. Having a conversation with a proficient examiner about concepts learnt is a creative way torequire the student to organize their knowledge and process information more in depth. During online oral exams, students' critical thinking and problem-solving skills are assessed in a digital environment, which may prepare them for later real professional challenges. Therefore, online oral exams tend to facilitate communication and workplaceskills through student-instructor interaction. The findings of a student survey on oral exams (Sabin, Jin and Smith, 2021) indicate that students appreciated the personalized, interactive environment of the online oral exam and reported on the improvement of their learning and communication skills.

During an oral exam, students are usually in an active one-on-one dialogue with the instructor. Students' misunderstandings and misconceptions can be corrected immediately, the instructor can intervene or initiate student reasoning. Students are not left alone as in a written exam; they can always rely on the instructor. In this way, formative assessment is also possible as feedback is given to students' performance and it can also further facilitate learning. However, in online education, the dominant form of assessment is still the summative form focusing on what students have learnt at the end of the course or module (Farkas, 2019). Formative assessment seems to be neglected in spite of its important role in supporting learning and developing effective learning strategies.

3. Ethical considerations

The possibility of plagiarism during online exams including oral exams may be reduced or ideally eliminated by various ways of online invigilation done by artificial intelligence (AI) algorithms or human online proctoring.There is a slighter chance for plagiarism in oral exams, as students have to articulate their ideas in their own words face-to-face with the web-camera switched on during the viva. Coghlan, Miller and Paterson (2021) draw attention to the fact that there are special platforms, which offer safe and flexible online proctoring e.g., Examity or Proctorio, which are able to detect unauthorized individuals in the candidate's room when turning the examinee's web-camera around 360°to avoid cheating.There are programs that can scan IT devices, monitor body, face including eye movements which can signal suspicious behaviour, that is some form of cheating attempt. The highest level of accuracy and reliability during online oral exams may be achieved by a combination of human and IA invigilation.

Table 1: *Cheating in online exams, methods and prevention (Bakala and Bakala, 2020, p. 40)*

Cheating method	Description	Prevention
Screen sharing	enabling e.g. a friend to access the exam questions simultaneously and answer the questions	Using secure browsers and a proctoring software
Use of advanced electronic devices	Involving cameras and some Bluetooth devices of tiny-sizes, practically undetectable	Live proctoring, auto proctoring, recording the entire session for later analysis
Use of mobile phones	Connecting via smartphones, storing answers and sharing them with friends during the exam	Proctoring service, advanced image recognition technology to identify these devices
Impersonation, false identities	Making someone else take the exam	Multi-level, biometric online authentication methods
Use of external devices	Using hard drives, USBs, Micro SDs, etc.	Safe exam browser not allowing to use any cable, hard drive, or external devices
Third party assistance in the room	Help of a family member or friend staying around, to quickly find the answers.	Software identifying suspicious behavior, either through video or sound
Copying-pasting and other keyboard shortcut	Copying-pasting the responses from documents or notepads, kept ready before the exam	Disabling pasting anything to or from the keyboard through online proctoring service
Intentional logging out of the exam	Pretending intermittent internet connectivity or power cuts	Setting limited number of times a student is allowed to log back onto the system.

Bakala and Bakala (2020) detected the most common modes of cheating during online exams along with recommendations on how to prevent these types of exam misbehaviour. In oral exams screen with employing creativity and good communication strategies and skills all of the listed methods are applied by students.

When considering ethical issues,it must be noted on the positive side, that offering the students the choice between a written and oral exam or a combination of the two can have beneficial effects. For example,the oral exam provides opportunities for students with advanced communication skills focusing on articulating their own thinking and logical reasoning. It can be considered a more equitable space for students with dyslexia or non-native Englishspeakers with limited fluency as students can clarify questions or phrases during the oral interaction with the instructor (Theobold, 2021).

4. Anxiety and stress

As oral examinations are relatively rare at universities and online oral exams had been really sporadic in previous years, students might feel an unusual and uncomfortable deal of anxiety.A large-scale Danish mixed-design study (Ting Graf, Rasmussen and Ruge, 2021) found that online oral exams were regarded as beneficial both by students and examiners, still ambiguous perceptions are related to online platform oral exams in particular related to different forms of anxiety. On the one hand, compared to traditional oral exams approximately one third of the participants experienced a higher level of nervousness online, which can be due to several factors, e.g., personality, exam anxiety and lack of proper computer literacy. On the other hand, it was found that most of the participants benefited from the safe home environment, which made the exam preparation more effectivewhile one third of them missed the complex traditional oral exam environment: the atmosphere and the company of other examinees.A most important finding is that an underlying source of anxiety was the possibility of malfunctioning technology during virtual oral exam situations. The study also revealed that teachers had to cope with serious emotional challenges during online exams, that is students crying and sensitive emotional reactions.

It is claimed that in exam situations self-efficacy can make an impact on the level of stress rooted in affective and physiological factors. Ringeisen et al (2019) focused on how stress reactions operate and change on the day of an exam (as well as on a control day one week prior and subsequent to the exam day) and how self-efficacy, threat appraisals, stress responses and performance are interrelated. Their results are based on salivary cortisol samples gathered from the examinees on these occasions. The ultimate finding of this investigation is that high levels of self-efficacy can supress threat appraisals along with anxiety approaching an exam parallel with a decrease of apprehension on the exam day. The

more intense the decrease of anxiety is, the more positive effects it may have on exam performance. Furthermore, Strack and Esteves (2014) carried out their research during a ten-day span leading up to 103 undergraduate students' exams based on the participants' self-assessment related to their apprehension level, emotional exhaustion and stress. It was revealed that a stressful period before an exam can be perceived as incentive as opposed to being menacing and emotionally demanding. As a result, students can experience facilitating anxiety which can result in better exam performance, which can explain why there are individual differences regarding the appraisal of the same exam-stressor.

5. Mode of preparation

The possible anxiety due to the personal encounter may also influence the way how students prepare for an exam. The above described stress may be not necessarily negative as it could contribute to a more thorough preparation for the exam (Joughin, 1998).

Another important aspect of consideration is that students should be given opportunities to practice communicating their ideas during the semester. It can take a variety of forms, for instance individual or group presentation, group discussion or mock exams (Sabin, Jin and Smith, 2021).

Based on university students' self-evaluation Ting Graf, Rasmussen and Ruge (2021) revealed that only 22% of the participating students perceived that regarding the academic side they were better prepared for online oral exams compared to in-person ones, while 42% was undecided about this issue.It is an important finding that only a minority of the students missed peer interaction and the special mood to prepare mentally for the forthcoming exam while the majority was satisfied with the home environment during the exam preparation span.Nevertheless, a vast majority of the teachers (75%) claimed that they devoted more time to prepare their students for emergency online oral exams than to traditional ones.

As far as the exam preparation aids are concerned, among various online available written educational contents uploaded online videos to university learning-support platforms emerged as a most popular tool during the Covid online education period ((Bernhardt et al., 2021). Finely-selected short online videos created for specifically educational and non-educational purposes lend themselves for effective autonomous online exam preparation as they are audio-visual and permanently available (Molnár, 2020; Sinka, Szaszkó and Kisné Bernhardt, 2017).

6. Implementation of online oral exams

The possible anxiety due to the personal encounter may also influence the way how students prepare for an exam. In traditional oral exams in Hungary, a certain amount of time (usually between 5 to 20 minutes) is provided students in the exam room to write some notes and prepare for the oral examination. In online exams, this time is usually more limited (usually to 5 minutes maximum) or students need to answer on the fly. In online exams, the use of applications with special waiting rooms (Zoom, Teams) makes it possible to separate students preparing for the exam and the examinee (Theobold, 2021).

If we look at examples of how European universities deal with online oral exams, we can see similar patterns with slight differences. They provide information about the technicality and procedures of their virtual oral exams and formulate their regulations and recommendations. As a first examples the University of Groningen (the Netherlands)created an online site for its teaching staff to introduce their online oral exam approach and system with a special focus on exam validity and reliability. The recommend teachers the application of Nestor's Blackboard Collaborate. The online oral exam can be done via a group with or without the waiting room method or individual call, and this exam can be purely oral or a supplement of a written one. Minimum five days prior to the online oral exam the teacher has to register to get the template exam course. Groningen University lays emphasis on the advantages of virtual oral exams, that is these exams can be less time-consuming as the grading time can be shortened by for instance filling in a rubric, with the proper use of camera authenticity is ensured and they are suitable to test individual students or small groups. On the negative side, they mention that it is a challenge for the teacher to be consistent in grading and students can cheat in various ways during an oral exam session (University of Groningen, 2020). Next, Oxford University(the UK) uses Inspera, which is an online digital interface for assessment and there is an online video guide on how to take an online exam. In order to be able to see the contents of the video the candidate has to sign in Microsoft Stream. They also provide a written Inspera User Guide for Students (2021), which presents how to access and use Inspera, how to start your exam, how you get, check and submit your exam responses

(Oxford University). Finally, Cambridge University (the UK) provides information on video conference research degree exams. The platform is chosen by the Internal Examiner and it should be tested minimum one day prior to the exam and if time zones are different, it should be taken into consideration. The validation of the candidate is essential and it is done by the supervisor. In case of any technical problems (connectivity, sound, camera etc.) the exam session, which cannot be recorded, has to be halted until the problem is solved. During the assessment period the candidate has to wait in the virtual waiting room (Cambridge University).

7. Conclusions

The present paper investigated the nature of university students' online oral exams introduced during the obligatory online transition with the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. In higher education online written and oral exams can be considered essential to assess students' performances during and at the end of courses, at final exams and thesis defences as well as at suitability tests and entrance interviews. Although online written tests tend to be dominant, still oral exams are regarded as necessary to get deeper insights into students' content knowledge, ways of thinking and communication strategies. Our aim was to explore the similarities and differences between traditional and online oral exams and how certain elements of the traditional can be adapted to the virtual one. Also, the possible benefits and challenges of online oral exams were highlighted.

Reviewing the literature, it can be found that an oral exam can be considered as a more meaningful tool to assess various skills and competences, e.g., academic performance, presentation skills, logical reasoning, critical thinking in a complex way both in traditional in-person and online form

It was found that the ethical considerations of oral exams are more relevant in the case of online oral examissues of students' false authentication (which can also be a risk during in person oral exams e.g., with large groups, when the examiner does not know the candidates), plagiarism (for which there are more limited modes during an in-person exam), and various further modes of cheating are regarded as threats to the validity and reliability of the online oral exam.When discussing ethical issues, it must be mentioned that teachers have ensure equal assessment criteria (e.g., applying a rubric) for all the candidates during online oral exams, too. Also prohibited audio-video recording and print-screen photoshoots raise ethical issues on virtual exam platforms compared to classroom oral exams.

It was also detected that anxiety and stress may characterise both traditional and virtual oral exams. The intensity of any type of oral exam anxiety and whether it is inhibiting of facilitating depends on many factors including personality, self-efficacy and emotion. The modes of oral exam preparation for both in person and online exams are similar, e.g., the use of online videos uploaded into a learning support digital interface by the teacher. A characteristic difference is that some of the students prepare more isolated without less support by the teacher and peers for online oral exams. On the other hand, the majority of the teachers tend to spend more time on online exams compared to traditional ones. Finally, it was found that the implementation of university online exams seems to show a universal nature with minor differences in Europe. Universities specify or recommend various platforms for online oral exams (Microsoft Teams, Skype, Zoom, Nestor's Blackboard Collaborate, Inspera), different viva sessions (group with/without a virtual waiting room, individual), timing and preparation time, modes of asking the candidate (presentation, question and answer etc.).

In sum, university online oral exams have benefited a lot from traditional in-person on-campus oral exams regarding the issue of validity and reliability, preparation, exam procedure and structure, timing, method, assessment and emotional factors e.g.,teachers' empathy and support since students' emotions tend to be more intensive and vulnerable during virtual oral exams. Okada and Scott's findings (2015) summarise main essential components of beneficial online viva from the perspective of both examiners and candidates: reliability of the exam, credible technology, authentic assessment, interactive e-viva, proper well-structured process and efficiency involving time effort complemented with efficient communication strategies, skills and competences.

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