

## **PERECPECTIVE ON THE STRUCTURED ORAL EXAMINATION**

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### **Introduction**

Oral examination, sometimes called viva which is a Spanish word means alive or vital, should be considered seriously because it gives a clear and direct impression about the student's level of education, and how to behave when facing difficult situation.

Considerable number of students feels very unhappy about oral examination and probably prefers the written ones. Oral examination also gives an idea about the personality, the behavior, the way of communication, and the response of the student to a difficult situation. Napoleon the French commander said: it is easier for hire to participate thousand times in a battle field than to site once in the examination hall.

Oral examination is one of the oldest methods of student's evaluation, and probably it was the only way to examine in the ancient days.

In oral examination, the students rights should come on the top of everything and the benefit of doubt should be on the student's side always. Unfortunately, sometimes mix up occurs between under and post graduate students and even between different levels of post graduate students, the same question may be given to all levels for that reason a clear cut sharp line should be drawn between the different levels of students, and specifications in the questions for each level in mandatory.

Almost all students are anxious during oral examination, this anxiety is usually associated with lower oral score, therefore sympathy and empathy is necessary from the examiners side.

To perform oral examination, four corner stones are mandatory which consist of students, examiners, questions and examination hall. Perils and pitfalls may arise in any of the above.

The author is putting down his perspective on the structured oral examination which consist of giving mark for each separate questions in addition to separate and secret score from each member of the examination committee, and how ideally should be performed to reduce or to avoid pitfalls and achieve justice as much as possible.

### **The students**

They are supported to be well informed about the nature and requirement to pass this type of evaluation. It is a good practice for the student to examine each other prior to attending oral examination; this will reduce to a great extent the difficulties in facing oral examiners.

The students are supposed to be clean, tidy, impressive, with a steady personality, frank and capable of saying "I don't Know", they should avoid procrastination and pass pointing, respecting the examiners and the limited time, avoiding the masked answer which usually tease the examiner, though the examiner should not be teased under any condition, so the students should learn how to behave in a diplomatic way.

Hesitation, reluctance, anxiety and worries though unavoidable at the time of oral examination, but it should be reduced to the minimum possible. Examiners tend to be more sensitive and friendly to students who show excessive nervousness. This may be unfair as some anxious students may show less anxiety reactions than others.

### **The examiners:**

Idealism cannot be easily achieved by the examiners, but he is supposed to be calm, stable on his chair, quiet, helpful, his attitudes should be as friendly as possible. Their objective is to assess the student's medical competence and practical safety; examiners should look for the depth of knowledge in the student's brain and not for the reverse.

Examiners should try to show respect by standing, smiling or shaking the student's hand. This approach makes the students less anxious and with better performance. The same approach should be applied with every student even at the end of the day when the examiner becomes tired.

Eye communication is useful between the candidate and all members of examination committee; this will reduce the incidence of side way talks and joking between the members of the committee. Also joking with the students is not preferable because of possible misinterpretation by anxious students.

Side way talks or any remarks not related to the examination are prohibited because it has very bad reflection on the student performance. Strict and rigid handling should be avoided, it is always better to avoid teasing the student so that his performance in the following examinations will not be affected

At the beginning of the discussion, the examiners need to allow the students to speak uninterrupted. This could ease their excessive anxiety and improve their performance as most will feel better after the initial few minutes of the discussion.

Examination time is basically for the student to prove himself, so it should not be wasted by the examiners but whoever some remarks and interruption is useful to keep contact with the examinee.

It is always better to avoid premonition whether good or bad, because it was already counted on the student.

Difficult situation may be faced by the examiners, like:

1. The answer is very bad (shocking answer).
2. The answer is against the examiners feeling (special personal view).
3. The answer is not up to the examiners knowledge, not sure if correct or wrong.
4. Handling a problematic student (repeated failure)<sup>1</sup>.
5. The outcome of the answer is mortality or morbidity.

The solution to the above problems depend solely on the experience of the examiners keeping in mind that the benefit of doubt is usually given to the student.

Examination fear and anxiety may lead to real confusion, sometimes the examiners feels that the answer is well known to the student but he cannot express it properly, or the answer is mixed up, or it is half way answer, in this situation it is preferable to give the student some sort of leading or help and to see his performance again.

In other situation the student is far away from the correct answer and moreover he is not realizing or telling truth in this case a shift to another question is required with a negative effect on his score.

It is preferable to avoid asking or re-discussing a question raised by a colleague in the same committee.

### **The questions**

It is always preferable to have all the questions prepared and agreed upon by the department written on paper with fixed numbers equal to the number of the students to be examined. The questions are almost in the same scientific level. It should be clear, short, multiple and better without repetition.

The question should carry practical clinical points, which is directly related to his supposed future position as a house officer, registrar, senior registrar or consultant. Also the questions should leave an effect on learning and on vital practical points, which is very necessary for the future carrier<sup>2</sup>. It is necessary to have a relation between the examiners interest and the question offered by him. The question should be delivered gently in a scientific way and in a uniform language which is agreed upon by the department. The examiners should not stress on weak points unless it is vital and serious like emergency conditions.

To make an ideal use of the time it is always better to avoid questions with long answers which are usually left for the written paper. The examiners should not forget to ask why for any answer because learning and practicing medicine based on understanding rather than memorizing. Starting with easier and general questions and then proceeding to more difficult and specific ones could lead to a smother performance and therefore more accurate overall evaluation.

Asking one question at a time is much better than asking several questions at asking the same time which usually confuse the student.

An anxious student may misunderstand the question or miss part of its component. So no harm in rephrasing or redirecting the question to be sure that he did understand the question before concluding that the student did not know the answer. Indirect, vague, or trap question like giving a hint towards a wrong answer is not allowed particularly for the undergraduate student.

Teaching at the examination is not only a time wasting but also affect the student self-confidence, correction answer or giving any sort of impression about it should be avoided too<sup>3</sup>. Giving the student time to think before answering is a very good practice.

### **The environment (examination room)**

The environment has some effect on the student performance, in a positive or negative way. Better to have a delighted color, beautiful furniture, ordinary lighting, convenient weather, totally away from outside noise, quite and lighting, comfortable for the examination committee and the student alike, outside interference for personal or any other reasons should be delayed after the examination. Stop watch is mandatory on the table because it is unfair to give unequal time for the candidate. Also data show, slide projector, specimen, instruments or overhead projector should be available and to be switched on before the students entrance to reduce wasting of the very limited time.

### **Rating:**

At the end of examination, the examiner show his good facial expression and his good facial expression and good wishes, irrespective of the student performance; it is better to hide the real feeling though many students try to get something from the examiner.

The objectives of the examiners are not to fail the students but rather to assess their clinical competence and practical safety<sup>4</sup>. The rating should be based on a model answer or well accepted medical practice for consistent rating.

Certain points should be considered before fixing the final score:

1. Was he capable of interviewing, performing proper physical examination, solving emergency situation<sup>5</sup>
2. Very familiar with local and common medical problems.
3. Well aware of referred and communication technique.
4. Serious consideration should be given to his competence and practical safety.
5. Mistakes are not equal, taking into consideration the fatal mistakes.
6. Rough evaluation must be replaced by analytic or structured evaluation which is based on giving separate mark for each question independent of the others. To avoid positive or negative influence on the individual rating each examiner should give a secret, independent score before discussing the final rating with other members of the committee.

The final rating should be discussed thoroughly by all examiners particularly when there are discrepancies in marking. The final mark is the mean of the separate marks given by the examiners.

7. It is safer and better to give a pass or failure score than to give a borderline score. It is important to remember that the objective is not to help the student to pass the examination if he is not fit, and also not to be against him if his performance was good.
8. All biases should be avoided which consist of the last student's effect (a tendency to rate a student in relation to the last examined one). The effect of gender, age, size, looks, religion, ethnic origin, and the dress<sup>6</sup>.

Other factors that should have little influence include: style, personality, aggressiveness and general attitude.

To avoid all the biases and personal differences examiners should adhere to a consistent rating guideline.

### **Conclusion:**

1. The structured oral examination, which depends on precise and analytic evaluation of each answer separately, is superior to the rough evaluation (all in all attitude).
2. All forms of biases should be avoided.
3. Differentiation for the questions and students level is mandatory.
4. Mistakes are not equal, and each should be considered separately.
5. The objectives of the examiners are not to fail or to pass the students but to be precise and accurate in the evaluation of competence and safety of the candidate.

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