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# FEELINGS AND STRESS PERCEIVED BY STUDENTS BEFORE AND AFTER AN ORAL ASSESSMENT

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## Abstract

Whether it is in school, universities, or in everyday life (social assessment), the assessment process includes emotions, inter-human relationships, stress, satisfactions, indecisions, balance etc. All these unknowns are amplified when an assessment is developing in oral mode. This research proposes a view of feelings and emotions present in the assessment act of students (undergraduate level / bachelor) from different ages of students. We questioned students from West University of Timisoara, Romania (East Europe), from Educational Sciences Department, about the role of the oral assessment in the student life. The purpose of the survey is to identify similarities and differences between emotional feelings and stress before and after one oral examination. Also, this survey presents different points of view of students involved in one oral assessment act and proposes new possibilities to make oral assessments more comfortable for students, easy to promote and easy to control all the affective feelings in this case.

*Keywords:* Assessment, affective, oral tasks, students

## 1. Introduction

The oral assessment of the students' learning outcomes was and is a sensitive aspect when it comes to the emotional states that it entails. The paper below briefly details the main sources of stress perceived by students. Even though the research present a limited number of student opinions, what is interesting is highlighted by how they feel before and after they are evaluated orally.

## 2. Problem Statement

To improve an efficient oral assessment of students is a challenge for both teachers and students. The tasks formulation, the clarified form of questions, the relevant answer of student and the innovative possibilities to view new perspectives and points of view is a big instigation for all the subjects involved in the assessing act.

Unfortunately, there is limited number of studies and research aimed at the emotions and moods of students during an oral evaluation. Also: we see a depressing cycle of unimaginative teaching leading to poor assessment assignments which in turn produce limited student responses that involve teachers in the worst kind of marking response – the quick red pen that invokes no learning of value (Hughes, 2013, p. 12).

The assessment "is an inter-human relationship with multiple affective and moral connotation, an act of intercommunication and inter-knowledge which engage both teacher's personality and student's, the official norms and regulations, the informal representations and appreciations, the attitudes and mentalities" (Voiculescu, 2013, p. 120).

Furthermore, presenting is considered as the most prevalent fear that individuals experience in social situations (Smith & Sodano 2011, pp. 151–162). In this field of research, oral presentation competence is regularly defined as 'a combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to speak in public in order to inform, self-express, relate, or to persuade' (Grez De, 2009).

Oral assessment and oral answer for specific tasks are more subjective and more emotional living by the students, comparative with written and practical tasks, projects, experiments, or tests. One characteristic is the type of the assessment. "Different results may be gained when using quizzes, essays or presentations. Often the type of an assessment is decided by the learning goals a teacher wants to assess: so called constructive alignment" (Biggs, 1996, pp. 347–364).

Effective teaching (and supervision, assessment, planning and so on) has to be predicated on an understanding of how students learn; the objective of the activities is to bring about learning, and there has to be insight and knowledge about learners' needs for teaching to be successful (Fry et al., 2009, p. 3).

There are assessment systems which promote a balance between practical, written and oral assessment of students and there are educational systems which promote one type of assessment mostly written, oral or practice.

So, the main (research) question is: What are the attitudes of university students towards oral assessments? It is possible to have one balance between practical, written and oral assessment or not!

While large-scale testing systems in some countries emphasize multiple-choice items that evaluate recall and recognition of discrete facts, in many countries there is a growing use of more sophisticated

approaches, including not only more analytical selected-response items but also open-ended items and curriculum-embedded tasks that require students to analyse, apply knowledge, and communicate more extensively, both orally and in writing (Darling-Hammond, 2012, p. 316).

As Gordon Joughin (2006) say, "an analysis of the literature on oral assessment in higher education has identified six dimensions of oral assessment: primary content type; interaction; authenticity; structure; examiners and orality" (p. 367).

"If the assessment calls for a large number of students to be tested at once, the paper-and-pencil medium still remains the likely choice" (Griffin et al., 2013, p. 111).

This research sustains interaction between examiners in oral assessment act, based on the knowledge of the feelings of students before and after an oral exam, or an oral task assessment.

Because "a school that communicates must give special priority to both the capacity for self-expression, oral and written, and the ability to understand written and oral messages" (Touraine, 2000, p. 279), the self-expression is a necessary condition for a good assessment practice.

"Authentic assessments help students experience real life (or close to real life) situations where they need to apply their skills. For that, "teachers can optimize their courses by checking which characteristics align with their goals, and combining these characteristics in such a way that students can achieve the educational learning goals more easily and perform better" (Day et al., 2018, p. 924).

## 3.    Purpose of the Study

This research will discover different opinions of students from Romania (an ex-communist country) regarding oral assessment and what they feel before and after an oral assessment.

The main objective of the survey is to provide the opinions and perceptions of students regarding their affective feelings before and after an assessment examination. In this case, the students who have been questioned are from the Educational Sciences programme studies, bachelor level.

Another objective is to find different perceptions among students, to make a few assumptions for a good practice in oral assessment.

Hypothesis of this research: the students from bachelor degree can identified with good accuracy all the affective moods, before and after one representation in an oral assessment task.

The completion of research:  we want to propose an attitude scale towards oral assessments.

### 3.1.   The research question (as we have written before) is: What are the attitudes of university students towards oral assessments? And also:

Is it possible that an oral assessment or an oral answer for a task to be impregnated by affective moods?

The purpose of the study is to discover different opinions of students regarding oral assessment and what they feel before and after an oral assessment. This purpose is even more important because the students included in the target group – students from educational sciences field – are the ones that will be future teachers.

## 4. Research Methods

The basic research tool was the questionnaire, applied to students before the exam session and after the exam session.

This questionnaire was applied and capitalized for 159 students in the first year of the tertiary education cycle (Communication and Thought at the University of the Sunshine Coast, Australia) by Nash et al. (2015). Details about the article at: http://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2015.1032212, title of the article: If first-year students are afraid of public speaking assessments what can teachers do to alleviate such anxiety?

The present research resumes the most important aspects of the questionnaire and capitalizes on students from Eastern Europe, Romania. The period in which the questionnaires were applied to undergraduate students was between December 2021 - March 2022.

The group of subjects included 144 students, from the undergraduate level, the Department of Education Sciences, West University of Timisoara, Romania, full-time education programme, who participated in completing the questionnaires voluntarily.

The questionnaire involved two parts: "before giving an oral presentation" and "after giving an oral presentation". The instruction provided to the students stated that the answers to the questions should focus on how they feel before completing a graded oral task / oral exam and after a graded task / oral exam, but also how they think they will behave in the future, in an oral task.

Part I, before and after an oral presentation, comprised 20 items, with four answer options (not at all, little, enough, very much), which the students completed, voluntarily, without any conditioning.

Part II, after an oral presentation, contained 10 items with 10 answer options from 1 (impossible) to 10 (I am absolutely convinced that I can). In this case, the students had to think and anticipate how they would react and behave in the future in an oral task.

Therefore, the questionnaire was employed to validate and collect evidence of student's emotions, perceptions of their learning engagement and public speaking assessment experience.

The survey was used to elicit student perceptions of their emotions and experience of engaging in a public speaking assessment task.

## 5. Findings

In Part I (before and after an oral presentation) several statistically significant results were identified.

The answers to the first question (I feel calm) showed that the students had a different psychological answer after delivering an oral presentation. The biggest changes were in the "I feel a little calm" option, which dropped from 43.8% before giving an oral presentation to 16% after giving a presentation. There are statistically significant differences between the two analysed categories: $\chi^2$ (3, N = 288) = 73.89; p <0.01. In other words, the students felt calmer after giving an oral presentation than before.

For the second statement, the students stated that they felt safe only after delivering the oral presentation. Until then large percentages were registered at the negative pole of the scale. The biggest

changes were in the answer "a little", which was 47.9% before the oral presentation, but which dropped to 15.3% after the students delivered the oral presentation. There are statistically significant differences between the extent to which students feel safe before and after giving an oral presentation: $\chi 2$ (3, N = 288) = 71.50; p <0.01. In other words, after giving an oral presentation, students feel safer than before an oral presentation.

Regarding the tension felt by the students, we notice that they are more tense before giving an oral presentation than after. There were big differences in the "I feel pretty tense" option. While the percentage on this variant was 37.5% before an oral presentation, it reached 16% after the presentation. There are statistically relevant differences between the two moments of applying the questionnaire: $\chi 2$ (3, N = 288) = 42.77; p <0.01. Thus, we can say that before giving an oral presentation, the students feel quite tense, even very tense, the tension decreasing after the oral presentation.

Students' responses to the statement "I feel tense" are different. As we can see in the table above, the biggest differences were identified at the level of the answer variant "not at all", where the percentage increased from 11.1% before the presentation to 36.8% after the presentation. Therefore, there were statistically significant differences between students' responses received before and after an oral presentation: $\chi 2$ (3, N = 288) = 31.13; p <0.01. We can say that after the oral presentation, a larger number of students stopped being tense than before the presentation.

Regarding the extent to which students feel at ease before and after giving an oral presentation, we notice that they had a different response. Thus, within the "enough" option, the biggest changes were identified. If before giving the presentation 17.4% of the students felt at ease, after giving the number of students increased to 38.9%. The differences between the answers received before and after the presentation are statistically confirmed: $\chi 2$ (3, N = 288) = 47.32; p <0.01. It seems that before the presentation of the presentation, the students felt at ease to a lesser extent than after the presentation.

44.5% of the students stated that before an oral presentation they are worried about the appearance of possible inconveniences, while after the percentage decreased, reaching 36.8%. When it comes to answer "enough" we can see that there were the biggest changes: if before the presentation the percentage was 38.9%, after that the percentage dropped to 25%. There were statistically significant differences between the answers received before and after the oral presentation: $\chi 2$ (3, N = 288) = 8.80; p <0.05. In other words, after the presentation, the students started to feel less and less worried.

Regarding the extent to which students feel satisfied, the number of students who feel satisfied increased considerably from 33.3% before the presentation to 62.5%. Between the answers received from the students in the two moments, before and after the presentation, statistically relevant differences were noticed: $\chi 2$ (3, N = 288) = 24.71; p <0.01. In other words, after completing the presentation, the number of satisfied students increased, as opposed to their number before the presentation.

Before the oral presentation, only 56.2% were not scared or were a little scared, while after the presentation 84.7% of the students stated that they were a little or not at all scared. The biggest changes were in the "I don't feel scared" option, where the percentage increased from 22.2% before the presentation to 59% after the presentation. These differences were statistically confirmed: $\chi 2$ (3, N = 288) = 45.54; p <0.01. We can say that before the presentation the students felt more scared than after it ended.

In terms of comfort, 50% of students say they feel comfortable before giving an oral presentation, the other half say they feel uncomfortable. However, there are differences between the answers received from the students at the two moments of the application of the questionnaire. We note that the biggest changes took place in the "not at all uncomfortable" option, where the percentage increased from 13.2% before the presentation to 51.4% after the presentation. There were statistically significant differences between the number of comfort levels before the oral presentation and the degree of comfort after the presentation: $\chi 2$ (3, N = 288) = 50.40; p <0.01. In other words, before the presentation, a smaller number of students stated that they felt comfortable than after the presentation.

The responses received for the statement "I feel confident" showed that the students had a different psychological response after an oral presentation. The biggest changes were in the 'I feel less confident' option, which fell from 41.7% before the oral presentation to 20.1% after the oral presentation. There were statistically significant differences between the responses received before the presentation and those received after the presentation: $\chi 2$ (3, N = 288) = 19.51; p <0.01. We can say that after an oral presentation, the students felt more confident than before.

Regarding the extent to which students feel nervous, we notice that most of them place themselves at the negative pole of the scale, regardless of the moment of applying the questionnaire. However, the biggest change was the "not at all nervous" response. Thus, if before the presentation only 35.4% stated that they are not nervous at all, after the presentation this percentage increases, reaching up to 55.6%. The existence of differences between the two stages of the application of the questionnaire is statistically confirmed by means of the significance test: $\chi 2$ (3, N = 288) = 21.63; p <0.01. It seems that after giving a presentation, a larger number of students become less and less nervous.

Analysing the students' answers regarding the extent to which they feel agitated, we noticed that after the presentation, a larger number of students stated that they were not agitated at all or slightly agitated, than before the presentation. Large differences in percentages were noticed on the "not at all" answer variant, where from a percentage of 21.5% as it was before the presentation, it reached a percentage of 61.1% after the presentation. These differences were also confirmed statistically: $\chi 2$ (3, N = 288) = 48.20; p <0.01. After the presentation, a larger number of students stated that they are not agitated at all than before.

Before giving a presentation, only 35.4% of students stated that they were relaxed, while after delivering a presentation, more than half of the students (66%) said that they were relaxed. The biggest changes are found in the "very much" answer option, where from a percentage of only 9% (initially) it reached to a percentage of 29.2% after the presentation. These differences between the responses received before and after the presentation were also statistically confirmed using the significance test: $\chi 2$ (3, N = 288) = 31.65; p <0.01. After the presentation, the students feel more relaxed than before the presentation.

While only 38.8% of students were satisfied before a presentation, after delivering it the percentage increased considerably, reaching the majority, namely 72.8%. Major changes took place on the "enough" option, where the percentage increased from 31.9% before the presentation to 52.8% after the presentation. The existence of significant differences were statistically confirmed: $\chi 2$ (3, N = 288) = 36.09; p <0.01. After the presentation, the degree of satisfaction of the students was higher than before the presentation.

While only 44.4% of the students stated that they felt good before the presentation, after the presentation the percentage increased, this being 65.3%. Major changes have taken place under the "not at all" option. If before the presentation, there were several students with this option, they stated that they were not in a good mood at all (27.8%), after the presentation their percentage decreases to 5.6%. There were statistically significant differences between the answers received from students before and after the presentation: $\chi 2$ (3, N = 288) = 35.40; p <0.01. In other words, after the presentation, the students felt better than before the presentation.

In part II, after giving an oral presentation, students had to answer 10 items with 10 answer options for each item. Students were asked to indicate confidence in the ability to complete the tasks described (in the table), circling the answer that will match how they would behave in the future before an oral task and after an oral assessment task. Thus, they were asked to think and anticipate confidence in their ability to complete the tasks described in the questionnaire.

They provided several values, from 1 (impossible) to 10 (I am absolutely convinced that I can). The centralized data are in the table 1.

**Table 1.** How you think you will feel before and after an oral exam/presentation

| Questionnaire part II | | Average | SD | Student (n) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. To control my impulses. | Before | 6,75 | 2,47 | 144 |
| | After | 7,67 | 2,25 | 144 |
| 2. To maintain eye contact with those in front of whom I speak. | Before | 7,24 | 2,46 | 144 |
| | After | 8,18 | 1,96 | 144 |
| 3. To control my facial expressions. | Before | 6,82 | 2,49 | 144 |
| | After | 7,61 | 2,08 | 144 |
| 4. To express myself, using gestures. | Before | 7,56 | 1,91 | 144 |
| | After | 7,79 | 1,93 | 144 |
| 5. To adapt different characteristics of the voice (tone, volume, inflection). | Before | 6,84 | 2,44 | 144 |
| | After | 7,53 | 2,20 | 144 |
| 6. To express myself through physical gestures (movement during the presentation). | Before | 7,08 | 2,26 | 144 |
| | After | 7,31 | 2,31 | 144 |
| 7. To feel comfortable speaking in front of a group of 3 people. | Before | 6,16 | 2,66 | 144 |
| | After | 7,76 | 2,19 | 144 |
| 8. To feel comfortable when speaking in front of a group of 10 people. | Before | 5,48 | 2,57 | 144 |
| | After | 6,97 | 2,24 | 144 |
| 9. To feel comfortable speaking in front of a group of 25 people. | Before | 4,88 | 2,66 | 144 |
| | After | 6,31 | 2,46 | 144 |
| 10. To feel comfortable speaking in front of a group of 50 people. | Before | 4,34 | 2,56 | 144 |
| | After | 5,74 | 2,61 | 144 |

Regarding students' confidence that they can control their impulses, their responses received before giving an oral presentation generated an average of 6.75 (SD = 2.47), and those received after

giving presentations generated a higher average, 7.67 (SD = 2.25). There were statistically relevant differences between the answers received from students in the two stages of the application of the questionnaire: t (286) = 3.31; p <0.01. In other words, after the presentation, students felt more confident in their ability to control their impulses than before the presentation.

Regarding the extent to which students consider that they are able to maintain eye contact with the audience during a presentation, the average obtained after the presentation is higher (M = 8.18; SD = 1.96) than the average obtained before the presentation (M = 7.24; SD = 2.46). There are statistically significant differences between the answers received during the two moments of the application of the questionnaire: t (272) = 3.57; p <0.01. In other words, after the presentation, the students stated that they felt more confident in their ability to maintain eye contact with the public than before the presentation.

Regarding the students' confidence in the ability to control their facial expressions, we notice that the average obtained based on the answers received before the presentation is lower (M = 6.82; SD = 2.49) than the average obtained based on the answers received. after presentation (M = 7.61; SD = 2.08). There are statistically significant differences between the responses received in the two stages of the questionnaire application: t (277) = 2.92; p <0.01. We can say, statistically speaking, that after the presentation the students felt able to control their facial expressions only before giving it.

Both before and after a presentation, students feel confident in their ability to express themselves using gestures; the averages obtained in the two stages of the application of the questionnaire being close (M = 7.56; SD = 1.91, respectively M = 7.79; SD = 1.93). There is a similarity between these answers, this being statistically confirmed: t (286) = 1.04; p> 0.05.

Regarding the extent to which students felt confident that they can adapt different features of the voice, we notice that the average obtained before giving a presentation is lower (M = 6.84; SD = 2.44) than the average obtained after giving the presentation (M = 7.53; SD = 2.20). These differences between answers are statistically significant: t (282) = 2.53; p <0.01. In other words, before the presentation, the students felt less confident that they could adapt the characteristics of the voice than after the presentation.

Regarding the extent to which students consider that they can express themselves through physical gestures during a presentation, we notice that the averages obtained are close: M = 7.08; SD = 2.26 for responses received before a presentation and M = 7.31; SD = 2.31 after the presentation. The similarity of the answers is statistically confirmed by the t test: t (286) = 0.82; p> 0.05.

Looking through the table above, we can see that of all the statements about comfort when students speak in front of an audience, we see that the smaller the group, the more comfortable the students feel. Thus, before the presentation, the students' answers generated an average of 6.16 (SD = 2.66), and after the presentation, the answers generated an average of 7.76 (SD = 2.19). There are relevant statistical differences between the answers received from the students before and after the oral presentation: t (275) = 5.55; p <0.01. After giving the oral presentation, students felt more comfortable than before.

On a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 means impossible and 10 means absolutely convinced that they can, before taking the presentation, the students obtained an average of 5.48 (SD = 2.57), and after delivering it the average increased reaching 6.97 (SD = 2.24). There were statistically significant

differences between the answers received before the oral presentation and the answers received after the presentation, as evidenced by the value of the test t: t (280) = 5.22; p <0.01. Before giving the presentation, the students felt less confident that they could feel comfortable speaking in front of 10 people than after giving the presentation.

Regarding how comfortable students feel when they have to speak in front of 25 people, we notice that they do not feel very comfortable. The average obtained based on the answers received before the oral presentation of a presentation is 4.88 (SD = 2.66), and the average obtained based on the answers received after the presentation is 6.31 (SD = 2.46). There were statistically significant differences between the answers collected during the two moments of the application of the questionnaire: t (286) = 4.72; p <0.01. In other words, after the presentation, the students stated that they felt a little more comfortable than before the presentation.

Regarding the extent to which students felt that they can be comfortable speaking in front of a group of 50 people, we notice that they are at the neutral pole of the scale, both before the presentation (M = 4.34; SD = 2,56), as well as after (M = 5.74; SD = 2.61). There are statistically significant differences in the extent to which students considered themselves capable of this before and after the presentation: t (286) = 4.59; p <0.01.

## 6.   Conclusions

Some of the limitations of this research are worth mentioning. These are represented by the application of the questionnaire for a single level of studies - bachelors; the application of the questionnaires in a single university, the lack of a comparison with another faculty, respectively university.

The research was applied during the pandemic period, during which the university courses were exclusively online, and the practice of public speaking has decreased slightly. However, teachers should be aware of the resilience and emotional state of the students being assessed.

A previously conducted quasi-experimental study (van Ginkel et al., 2017) revealed that the development of students' presentation skills depended on the particular feedback source, where students who received teacher feedback outperformed students receiving feedback from other sources. Fast, relevant, and effective feedback would be one of the solutions through which students could perceive the oral exams in a more comfortable and efficient way, in order to obtain the desired results.

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