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FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT DURING THE PANDEMIC: THE EXPERIENCE OF ADMINISTERING AN ORAL ENGLISH EXAM REMOTELY

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The article presents a personal experience of preparation for and administering of the mock oral exam in English in an Israeli high school during the lockdown in January, 2021. The process and the challenges of teaching the speaking skills remotely are described. The structure of the oral exam in English is explained in detail. The format of the regular oral iTest and its modification from the classroom version to the remote version is discussed. The author also shares her personal opinion about benefits and drawbacks of remote assessment.

Key words: remote assessment, online exams, teaching remotely, speaking skills, oral iTest, computerized exam, social interaction in English

Covid-19 pandemic has challenged the system of education around the globe causing the teachers to face the new reality and to adapt to the "new" mode of instruction – remote teaching. After the first lockdown in Israel, which lasted for about two months including the Passover holidays, the students were brought back to school according to the "capsule principle": initially large classes composed of over thirty students were now divided into small groups arriving at different times of the day and never mixing up. This system allowed for face-to-face revision lessons and regular final examinations in all grades.

However, when the new academic year began in September 2020, a new wave of the epidemic hit the country leaving no choice for the government but to send all students home for remote learning. Following the second lockdown and the complexity of the restrictions imposed by the government on educational institutions, the school administration made an uneasy decision: the students would remain at home and learn remotely and only come back to school for the high-stakes exams in December-January. It was hardly possible to plan ahead, since the Ministry of Education kept postponing the dates of the winter oral matriculation exam, so we had to stay flexible and adjust the program in order to ensure sufficient and adequate practice for the 12th grade students in accordance with the English Curriculum [1, p.25-26] aligned with the CEFR [2].
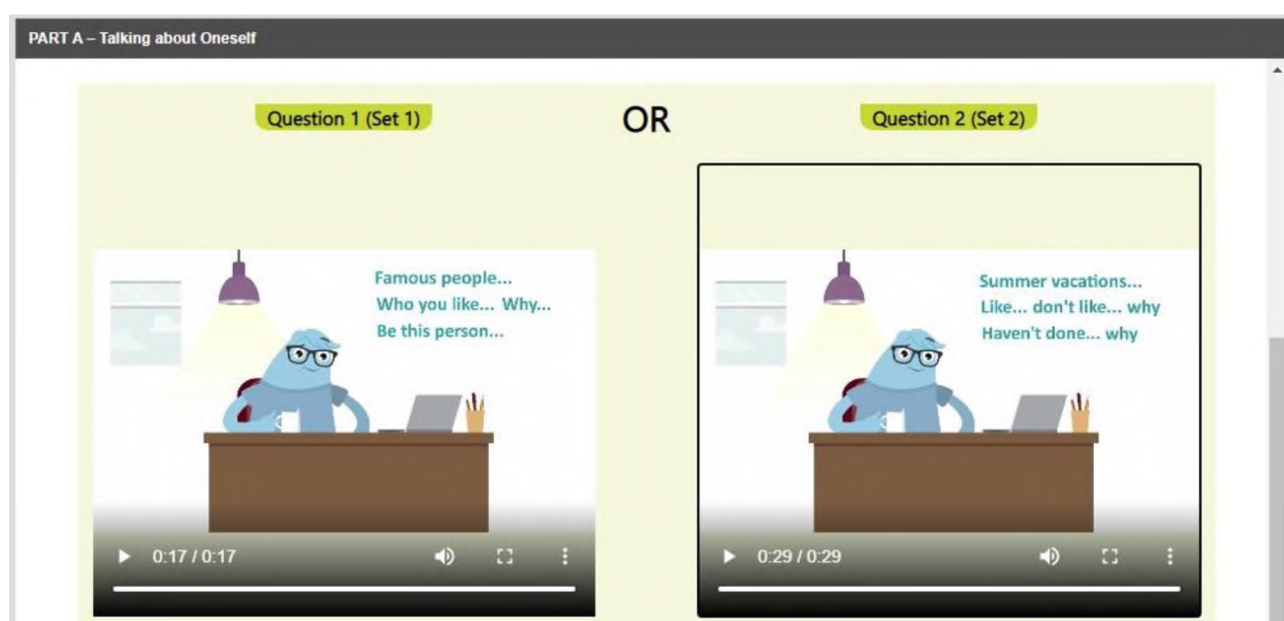
We hoped we would be able to use the oral iTest – the format our school had switched to several years ago. The oral iTest is a computerized oral exam that allows the students to be tested impartially, with no judgment or emotions from the part of the tester involved. This is a computer program designed so as to allow the student manage the exam on his own within thirty minutes while listening to the instructions and recording the answers to the questions using a standard headset with an external noise-cancelling type microphone. We used sample iTests and the exams from previ-

ous years to prepare the students for the simulation at school and for the matriculation exam.
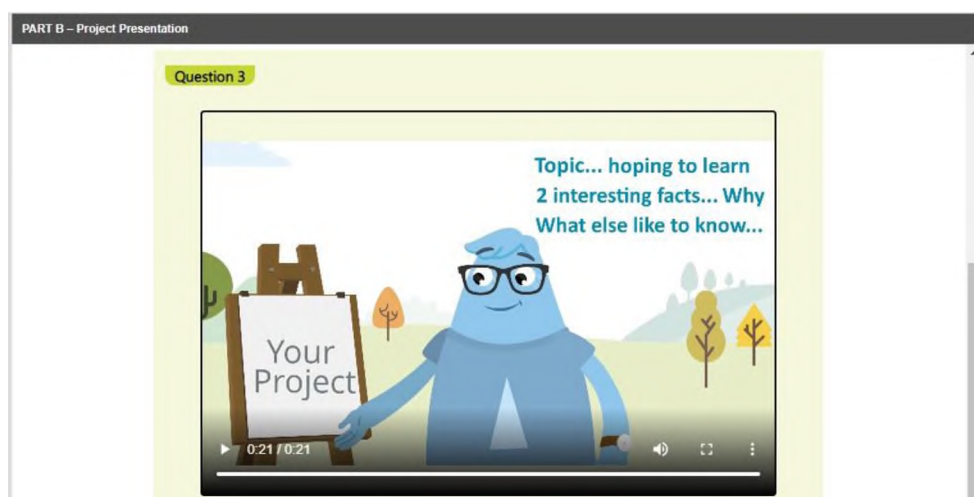
The oral iTest consists of three parts:

Part A: Talking about oneself. This part tests the students' ability to understand key information and questions presented to them, enter unprepared into conversation on familiar topics, express personal opinions, exchange information on topics that are familiar, of personal interest or pertinent to everyday life, describe plans and arrangements, habits and routines, past activities, personal experiences and situations, real or imagined.

There are two sets of questions to choose from, which are presented by a character – an Avatar – in two separate windows with visual prompts. The students can listen to the questions multiple times. After recording the answers to the chosen set, the students proceed to the next part.

Pic. 1. Part A of the iTest. Sample question sets with the visual prompts.

Part B: Talking about the project. In this part, the students have to demonstrate their knowledge of the project they did in English by answering the questions presented to them and explaining the main points; report on and reflect on what they learned from a range of sources, express and explain their choices, opinions, plans and actions, and draw conclusions. This is the only part one can actually be prepared for, as the student is the only person who knows best the project he or she has done, so he can provide detailed information about and explanation of every stage of the project no matter what question he would get.

Pic. 2. Part B of the iTest. Sample question set with the visual prompts.

Part C: Response to an audio-visual prompt, or talking about the clip. In this part, the students are tested at two levels: a) the level of basic understanding, when they are expected to understand the most important information contained in the clip, to express and elaborate on opinions, plans and actions, to describe events, real or imagined, relating to feelings and reactions, to narrate a story; b) the level of interpretation, when they can explain why something is a problem, discuss what to do next, compare and contrast alternatives, discussing possibilities, and describe their reactions to the clip.

Unlike in Part A, both question sets in this part are mandatory, thus making Part C worth 50% of the exam, the other parts being 25% each.

Pic. 3. Part C of the iTest. Sample question sets with the visual prompts.

Due to numerous technical difficulties a lot of students encountered since the beginning of the academic year, we had to find ways to ensure that the students practice speaking and recording themselves while staying at home. It was crucial to monitor each student's level of readiness for the exam in those circumstances, so the following methods were used across the English board.

1. Explicit introduction of the Table of Specifications for the oral iTest, together with the grading Rubric, to the students during a Zoom session. This included the de-

scription of the exam, the time frame, the objectives, as well as possible themes and questions.

2. Introduction of a sample iTest on the Zoom for the second time (the first introduction was done in the first week of school in class) to make sure each student is familiarized with it. This involved the demonstration of the actual sample exam to the class during the Zoom session (see pictures above). The students had an opportunity to ask questions about every part of the exam and received an explanation.

3. A series of Zoom session dedicated to Part A practice in answering personal interview questions (see Appendix 1 for the topics covered), during which the students listened to two different sets of questions each time, while looking at the visual prompts typed and shared on the Zoom screen. Those wishing to receive immediate feedback spoke, while the other students listened and took notes.

4. A series of non-consecutive Zoom sessions dedicated to clip practice – Part C of the exam. The students were shown a clip and then asked questions about it, which they had to answer immediately. I gave feedback on the answers using the Rubric and explained what to pay attention to not to lose points at the exam.

5. In order to have the students record their answers for feedback and grades, recorded questions were sent via the WhatsApp class chat, together with the visual prompts similar to those provided in the above pictures. When the task was to be graded, the students received clear instructions about the time limit for sending in the recorded answer back to the teacher.

6. Asynchronous assignments were sometimes posted on Google Classroom. They included a detailed description of the task and a link to the clip – if it were a clip, with the grading Rubric attached and the due time specified. The students did the assignment and uploaded their answers to the page so the teacher had all the answers in one place, which made it comfortable to mark and leave comments.

7. On finishing the project as part of the English Curriculum, the students were to fill out a personal reflection – a Google Form which contained questions about the challenges of the work, their personal achievement and feelings, the skills they improved, etc. The same questions were used for practice during the Zoom sessions when preparing for Part B of the exam (see Appendix 2).

8. The Project Interaction Task across the 12th grade classes was administered on a chosen day via the WhatsApp. The organized recorded instructions were sent to all groups, together with the questions, which the students had to answer and send recordings of by the specified time.

On the day of the simulation the students were allowed to arrive at school to try out the computer program and test the equipment – their personal headsets they had to purchase to use at the exam, following the Ministry of Health Covid-19 safety recommendations. Unfortunately, after the day of the mock exam had been scheduled, the third lockdown was imposed, making it impossible to bring the students to school for the exam physically. Having some experience of administering the oral iTest from previous years, we understood it would be impossible to organize one remotely due to unavoidable technical issues that students always encounter during computerized exams. However, when the students are at school, there is always an invigilator in the

room they could turn to if any problem occurs, while there is no one at home to assist, which could ruin the whole exam.

The decision was made to administer the mock exam in the format which was already familiar to the students and extensively practiced during the semester. But first and foremost, organizational matters had to be addressed so as to enable a stress-free online environment allowing the students to complete the oral tasks while being visible to their teachers. To achieve that goal the classes were divided into two parts making half of the students take the exam in the first lesson and the other half right after them. That way, all students of each group – up to twenty participants – could be seen on the Zoom gallery at once through their camera which they were not allowed to turn off till the end of the exam.

The second issue we had to envisage was possible cheating: the students of the first group could pass the questions on to their friends in the group that followed. To reduce that risk, the members of the English staff prepared two versions of the same exam: chose four different topics – two sets per group to choose from – and recorded questions about each one; recorded two different project question sets – one per group; recorded four question sets about the chosen clip – two mandatory sets per group.

The students were notified which exam group they were assigned to on the eve of the exam via the invitation to join a corresponding WhatsApp group. Each group received the instructions and the exam questions via that WhatsApp group. The recorded answers had to be uploaded to the exam page on Google Classroom by the specified time (the overall time allotted for the oral exam is 30 minutes). The students had several options for recording their answers: they could do it on the cell phone and send to the page directly from the phone, or by using the Vocaroo online service, saving it on their laptop and then uploading, or by using any other recorder which they were familiar with, had experience using and which was time saving.

The oral mock exam finally took place on January 15th, 2021 in an online format. The groups received their questions[2] and the following visual prompts:

Group 1	Exam began at: 8 a.m.
Part A: Talking about oneself.	
1. Suggesting community change If you had … money what … donate ….? Explain. If you did not … money to donate, how … contribute … community? Explain.	2. Friendship What makes … friend …? Explain. What could … do … result in … ending … friendship? Explain.
Part B: Project.	
1. Which skill … develop … project … English? Explain. 2. How … skill … help … future? Explain.	
Part C: Watch the clip https://youtu.be/JSGftZKrL7M and answer the questions.	
First question set about the clip: 1. Describe … events … after Sophia … store. 2. What two reasons … Sophia … choosing	Second question set about the clip: 1. What … learn … Sophia's question? Explain. 2. Why … Sophia's mother …

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[2] The questions were sent as MP3 files via the WhatsApp before each visual prompt.

... doll?	anything ... cashier ... question? Explain.

Group 2	Exam began at: 8:50 a.m.
Part A: Talking about oneself.	
1. Advertising Describe ... product ... because ... ... advertised. Explain whether ... ... expectations.	2. Technology If ... give ... electronic ... 1 month, which ... ? Explain why. Explain ... text messaging ... ... affected ... communicate.
Part B: Project.	
1. What two things ... learn ... English? Explain. 2. How ... two things ... future? Explain.	
Part C: Watch the clip https://youtu.be/JSGftZKrL7M and answer the questions.	
First question set about the clip: 1. Describe ... events ... clip before Sophia went ... mother ... store. 2. Explain two ways ... Sophia likes ... time.	Second question set about the clip: 1.If ... Sophia's mother, how ... reacted ... cashier's behavior? Explain. 2.After ... Facebook ..., how ... ... manager ... react? Explain.

It should be mentioned that the students who didn't wake up on time and were late for the exam were not allowed to take it. If a student had technical problems or an unstable Internet connection, he was supposed to report that to the teacher immediately in a private WhatsApp message. The answers uploaded late were not graded: the student who failed to complete the exam within the allotted time limit got zero credit. Besides, the instructions had to be followed precisely for the answer to get full credit. The students' answers were graded strictly according to the same rubric that was used for practice during the Zoom sessions, so the students were familiar with it and were not surprised to see their grades afterwards.

Looking back at the unprecedented experience of preparation for and administering of an oral English exam remotely, there are several important things I would like to point out. First of all, the current pandemic has proven that we have to be flexible with teaching methods and even adapt our final exams for the remote teaching environment simply because there may be no choice. Not only do we have to adapt to change, but we must do it quickly and rationally, using different approaches to teaching and testing the same skills, adjusting to the challenging environment and using a variety of tools which enable the students to do the assigned work. Secondly, since planning ahead is extremely ineffective and sometimes even useless nowadays, we must integrate the same topics and themes in teaching multiple skills and competencies. Thirdly, we might have to revise the format of traditional language exams and switch to solely computerized exams or online exams, which seem to be a cure-all solution to formative assessment in times of uncertainty.

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https://vocaroo.com/ WhatsApp Messenger: https://www.whatsapp.com/?lang=en Zoom: https://zoom.us/education

APPENDIX 1: List of Topics used for practicing 'Talking about Oneself' during Zoom sessions

Advertising
Animals
Education
Fame and celebrities
Favorite books and movies
Food
Free time activities
Friendship
Future plans
Games
Health
Hobbies and habits / routines
Holidays and customs
Hometown
Languages
Music
Personal belongings
Personal strengths and weaknesses
Professional ambitions
Reflection on personal experiences
Respect
Role models
School
Sports
Suggesting individual/ community change
Technology
Transportation
Vacations
Volunteering

APPENDIX 2: List of Project Questions used for practice during Zoom sessions

1. What was the topic you chose to research? Explain why you chose it. Provide supporting information. Name the sources you used in your project.
2. What were you hoping to learn while doing the project? What did you actually learn about the topic?
3. List two interesting facts you learned from your project and which learning skills you by doing the project. Explain how you improved.

4. Which surprising information did you find out about your topic? Explain. Provide an example. How can you envision using this information in the future? Explain.

5. If you could redo this project, what would you do differently? Explain. What was the topic that you researched and how was it connected to the play Twelve Angry Men? Explain.

6. How did doing this project influence you? Explain. How did this project help you understand the play Twelve Angry Men better? Be specific, explain and provide an example.

7. How did doing this project enhance your learning skills? Explain providing an example. Explain the sense of personal achievement you had doing this project and how you felt before, during and after finishing it. Give examples.

8. What part of the project was the easiest for you? Why? Explain what you had to do and how you did it.

9. What were the challenges of doing the English project remotely? How did you overcome them? Explain, providing details to support your answer.

10. How did doing this project in English improve your writing in English? Which was the source that you used that influenced you the most? Explain how and why.