



Measuring final-year nursing students' satisfaction with the viva assessment



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Accepted 18 September 2015

Keywords:

Nursing students
Assessment approaches
Viva
Psychometrics
Validity
Reliability
Academic performance
English as an additional language
Nursing
Nursing education

ABSTRACT

This paper reports a study conducted to develop and test the psychometric properties of a brief 5-item Satisfaction with the Oral Viva Assessment Scale. The viva has been increasingly used to gauge students' learning, beyond the traditional written assessments. This assessment approach may pose additional challenges to various student groups. Using a prospective, correlational design, this study surveyed 275 final year nursing students about their satisfaction with the viva as an assessment approach. The survey was administered to those who attended a revision session in an undergraduate high dependency unit. Descriptive and inferential statistical analyses, as well as exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses of the scale were computed. Exploratory factor analysis yielded a one-component structure that explained 51% of the total variance, which was supported by confirmatory factor analysis (standardised factor loadings: 0.54–0.73). Internal consistency as computed by a Cronbach's alpha was 0.8. The results also revealed that those who obtained higher grades in their viva performance (OR: 2.78, 95% CI: 1.58–4.90) and English-speaking only students (OR: 1.87, 95% CI: 1.07–3.27) were more satisfied with the viva assessment. These findings support the validity and reliability of this scale, and can be used to assess students' satisfaction with the viva.

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Introduction

Over the last two decades, there has been a rapid growth of student enrolments in higher education (Shin and Harman, 2009). A key factor that is driving this growth is the widening participation agenda (Leathwood, 2005; Osborne, 2003), of making higher education more accessible to students who would otherwise not consider, or be considered for, university admission (Jones and Lau, 2010; Wang, 2012). This shift, from a close, elite system to an open,

expanded system has provided an opportunity for students from non-traditional backgrounds (e.g. non-school leavers, low socio-economic status, English as an additional language (EAL) speakers and those who are undertaking paid work during term-time) to participate in higher education (Archer et al., 2003; Osborne, 2003).

In addition to the increasing student diversity, competitive market forces of university rankings have given renewed importance to improving teaching and learning (Bevitt, 2015). Assessment practices is fundamental quality improvement, nevertheless, there are still widespread student dissatisfaction with assessment, in part, due to a lack of relevance and transferability to professional practice (Ball et al., 2012). The viva, an oral examination conducted using an interview format usually contains a set of standardised questions to explore the student's knowledge, critical reasoning and problem-solving skills, while at the same time, evaluate the student's ability to verbally express their ideas (Downing and Yudkowsky, 2009; Roberts, 2013).

Although oral examinations have been used in the health professions for hundreds of years (Swanson et al., 1995), the resurgence of its use as an assessment approach in higher education,

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particularly across a range of undergraduate health professional programs (El Shallaly and Ali, 2004; Hecimovich et al., 2010; Levett-Jones et al., 2011). This is partly fuelled by an increased recognition of its strength to assess the student's knowledge and skills contextualised to the practice settings (Mårtensson and Löfmark, 2013; Swanson et al., 1995). Another advantage of the viva is that it provides the opportunity for discourse and genuine exchange that enables students to demonstrate their deep understanding that cannot be assessed as effectively by written assessment (Huxham et al., 2011). The distinguishing features of a face-to-face interaction between the student and the examiner in oral assessment are the opportunity for examiners to gauge understanding and to assess critical thinking and for students, to defend their ideas during this interaction (Huxham et al., 2011; Joughin, 1998). An oral viva also requires students to demonstrate their understanding in their own words, and hence lessen the likelihood of plagiarism (Davis and Karunathilake, 2005; Joughin, 1998).

Nevertheless, the need to use the spoken word is a requirement for oral examinations, which may be an added challenge for students for whom English is an additional language (EAL), and for those less experienced or proficient in oral communication (Carter, 2011; Sayce, 2007). Beyond verbal language proficiency, this mode of assessment may be better suited for certain students groups, for example, those with more life experience (e.g. mature age students), and those with work experience. This work-related training and experience may not only assist students in increasing their employability skills (Barron and Anastasiadou, 2009), but also enable them to feel more comfortable when interacting with examiners. It is likely that male students may also prefer a verbal method of assessment, as they have been reported to be more confident in their academic performance, thus more likely to use risk-taking strategies (e.g. of only concentrating on a few topics instead of the whole unit content) when revising for their examinations (Furnham et al., 2007; Mellanby et al., 2000).

Increasingly, the viva is being used as an assessment approach in the health sciences disciplines in higher education, which has partly stemmed from the recognition that assessments need to be contextualised within the clinical setting (Hungerford et al., 2015). However, the challenge remains for those who are less confident with communicating orally, in English as this may result in lower academic performance, reduced student satisfaction, and ultimately, affect quality teaching and learning. Hence, it is timely to study group differences in preferences for this assessment approach, as well as group differences in academic performance with different assessment approaches.

The study

Aims

The aims of this paper were: a) to report on the development, validity and psychometric testing of the 5-item Satisfaction with the Oral Viva Assessment Scale (SOVAS); and b) to examine the relationship between students' satisfaction of oral viva as an assessment method and their academic performance.

Study design

A quantitative survey design was utilised to investigate the relationship between students' characteristics, satisfaction with the oral viva assessment and academic performance in the high dependency nursing course within the Bachelor of Nursing (BN) program.

Study setting and participants

The study was undertaken in 2010 in a multi-campus university situated in a large metropolitan university in New South Wales, Australia. Located in one of the most culturally and linguistically diverse regions in Australia, approximately 40% of nursing students enrolled at this university have been reported to speak another language other than English at home (Salamonson et al., 2008).

All final year nursing students who were enrolled in a high dependency course are required to undertake a viva assessment that was conducted by their course tutor. During this assessment, students were given a clinical scenario of a deteriorating patient, with abnormal clinical parameters. Using the viva assessment format, students were required to respond to questions related to this scenario based on their assessment and management of the patient.

Of the total of 677 students who undertook the high dependency course, 300 (44%) students who attended a revision session before the final examination at the end of the semester completed the study survey. Only 25 students did not give consent for collection of their academic grades; the other 275 (41% of all students enrolled) consented for the linkage of their academic grades to their completed survey. Although there was no significant age difference among participants and non-participants (28.6 versus 27.6, $p = 0.111$), there was a higher percentage of males among non-participants (12% versus 19%, $p = 0.014$).

Instrument and item generation

We used the key points highlighted by Brown (2004) as the framework for developing the items of the SOVAS. These points were that the viva assessment approach: a) assisted learning; b) provided useful feedback; and c) was 'fit-for-purpose' – that is, the structure and format was appropriate for the high dependency unit. Based on these three key points, we selected and adapted items for the SOVAS from the item bank of the university Student's Feedback of Unit (SFU) survey, a university-approved instrument, and the Students' Evaluation of Educational Quality (SEQ) survey item bank, that had been previously tested and validated (Richardson, 2005). An example of one of these items was: "I was able to learn from the feedback I received from the oral viva assessment". The response format ranged from 0 (strongly disagree), to 10 (strongly agree). Aggregated scores of SOVAS ranged from 0 to 50, with higher total scores reflecting higher satisfaction with the viva assessment. The other standardised instrument that was used was the English language acculturation scale (ELAS), a previously validated tool used to assess the level of English language use (Salamonson et al., 2013).

Data collection

The survey, containing items related to students' sociodemographic characteristics and the SOVAS was administered during a revision session; a non-compulsory activity held towards the end of the semester. Students were provided with an information sheet as well as briefed about the purpose of the study. We also sought written consent to link their academic grades to their completed survey. Ethics clearance was obtained from the University Human Research Ethics Committee in 2010 (Approval No.: H8271) for the study. Students were invited and informed of the purpose of the study. The voluntary nature of participation and the independence to the academic assessment process was highlighted to the students. All students who were invited were given an information sheet and written consent was obtained to link their academic grades to their completed survey.

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