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Finding voice and validity: Interactive oral assessment in graduate teacher education

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In response to the challenges of academic integrity and the rise of generative AI in higher education, this study explores how Interactive Oral Assessment (IOA) can be used alongside traditional written assessments to better evaluate a capstone action research project in graduate teacher education. The study was conducted in the Master of Teaching program at Universiti Brunei Darussalam, where student teachers complete a 12,000-word Research Exercise in their final semester. Conducted in three phases, the study involved two pilot stages to refine the assessment design and support structures, followed by full implementation. This study presents preliminary findings from Phase 3 (full implementation) and survey data from Phase 2 (formative IOA pilot). Across both phases, student teachers reported that the IOA process was engaging and authentic, providing enhanced opportunities for critical reflection and meaningful communication. Initial insights suggest that IOA not only supports student voice but also strengthens the validity of assessment through its alignment with real-world teaching competencies. While further analysis is ongoing, these early results highlight IOA's potential as an authentic, responsive, and future-focused assessment strategy in teacher preparation.

Keywords: Academic Integrity, Authentic Assessment, Interactive Oral Assessment, Teacher Education, Pre-service teachers, Action Research, Mixed Methods

Introduction

Assessment in teacher education is pivotal in shaping the pedagogical skills and evaluative competencies of future educators. Traditional approaches, particularly written assessments, have often been critiqued for their limited engagement and inability to fully capture the complexities of student learning, especially in an era marked by rapid technological change and the rise of artificial intelligence (Swiecki et al., 2022). In teacher education, such assessments overlook the complex and context-specific nature of teaching. Instead, a natural context in teacher education for authentic assessment is demonstrating skills and dispositions used in real teaching situations and what students will encounter in the workplace (Darling-Hammond & Snyder, 2000). Interactive Oral Assessment (IOA) has emerged as a robust alternative, characterised by authentic, unscripted dialogue between assessors and students within realistic professional scenarios (Ward et al., 2023). This assessment approach not only promotes academic integrity by reducing opportunities for misconduct but also fosters critical reflection, adaptability, and effective communication—skills that are essential for teachers.

An IOA is an authentic and unscripted dialogue that occurs between an academic and a participant that is centred on a genuine professional scenario (Sotiriadou et al., 2019). Newell (2023) reported that IOA is a viable method for mitigating academic dishonesty and improving the integrity of the assessment process. Conventional assessment methods, especially written reports or exams, often provide opportunities for cheating, as students can readily collaborate or use unauthorised resources without detection (Harper, Bretag, & Rundle, 2020). In contrast, IOA fosters real-time dialogue between assessors and students, enabling immediate verification of students' understanding and ownership of their work (Yung et al., 2024). The interactive format of the IOA encourages students to articulate their thoughts and reasoning, allowing assessors to explore their knowledge and skills (Ward et al., 2023). By engaging in discussions about students' work, students are better able to demonstrate their understanding and critical thinking skills, which are difficult to replicate through dishonest means. Consequently, the use of IOA provides an effective strategy and alternative assessment method for educators to enhance academic integrity while simultaneously enriching the assessment experience for both students and assessors.

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The adoption of IOA in higher education has been documented across diverse disciplines, including aviation, business, computing, criminal justice, education, finance, health sciences, hospitality, tourism, and psychology, highlighting its versatility and effectiveness in promoting engagement, employability, and authentic assessment experiences (Colvin & Hartley, 2024; Kitchingman, 2024; Lin, 2023; Norman et al., 2024; Tan et al., 2021; Yung et al., 2023). However, empirical research specifically examining student teachers' experiences with IOA remains limited. This study aimed to explore the experiences and perceptions of student teachers who participated in the newly introduced IOA as part of a capstone action research project in a graduate-level teacher education program. Specifically, this study aims to evaluate how IOA, implemented alongside traditional written assessments, supports authentic assessment, fosters academic integrity in the context of generative AI, and develops key professional skills among future educators.

Context of the study

The Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah Institute of Education (SHBIE) at Universiti Brunei Darussalam is Brunei's primary institution for teacher training and education. SHBIE offers graduate programs, including the Master of Teaching (MTeach), Master of Education (MEd), and PhD in Education. This study focused on student teachers enrolled in the 18-month full-time MTeach program. The MTeach program provides five specialisations: early childhood, primary, secondary, vocational and technical, and higher education. The curriculum combines academic coursework with school placements, enabling student teachers to integrate theory and practice across three terms.

At the end of their term, student teachers complete a 12 modular credit capstone project, which constitutes an independent action research project (Research Exercise) within their area of specialisation. In the Research Exercise (RE), each student teacher investigates and implements a targeted intervention within their classroom context. The RE is intended to foster professional inquiry, deepen understanding of pedagogical strategies, and encourage critical engagement with evidence-based practices. Since 2009, the RE has been assessed solely through a 12,000-word written report by two appointed faculty examiners. To address academic integrity concerns and diversify assessment approaches in the context of generative AI, the faculty recently introduced IOA as a complementary component to the traditional written report. Consequently, the assessment weighting was revised from a 100% written report to a distribution of 70% for the written report and 30% for the IOA.

Methods

The research design incorporated two distinct pilot phases prior to the full implementation of the summative IOA. Ethical approval for all phases of the study was obtained from the research ethics committee of the university. The initial pilot involved four student teachers from the 2023-2024 cohort. They participated in an IOA and were subsequently interviewed in January 2025 to obtain feedback on their experiences. Insights from this phase guided the refinement of the IOA rubric and the development of briefing materials for both student teachers and faculty. These resources were then introduced to the 2024-2025 cohort during the formative pilot phase in February 2025. The phase aimed to provide student teachers with familiarity with the IOA process, early engagement through scheduled practice sessions with their supervisors, and clarification of expectations ahead of the summative IOA. A digital survey was administered to the student teachers during this phase to gather additional feedback anonymously. The sequential approach ensured that each phase informed and strengthened the next, facilitating a smooth transition to the summative IOA by the end of May 2025. Prior to the summative IOA, a final briefing session was held with the student teachers to review key information and provide an opportunity for them to ask questions about the process. After submitting their RE at the end of April 2025, student teachers participated in the summative IOA three weeks later and were given a final digital survey to complete.

During the IOA, the examiners used scenarios to facilitate a free-flowing, unscripted conversation with each student teacher. These examiners were faculty members who marked the student teachers' RE. Student teachers were given the possibility of either a specialist or a non-specialist scenario before their IOA session. Each scenario was assigned randomly to ensure fairness and evaluate student teachers' ability to adapt their

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communication across multiple audiences. The examiners selected and agreed upon a specific scenario before calling the student teacher to enter the room. Each IOA session was scheduled for 15 minutes, with an additional 5 minutes allocated for calling in the student teacher, conducting verification checks, setting the scenario, debriefing, and providing feedback to the student teachers. All Phase 2 IOA sessions were conducted in person. In Phase 3, all IOA sessions were conducted face-to-face, with four student teachers completing their IOA online because of scheduling constraints.

Table 1

Examples of scenarios used in the summative IOA

Scenario	Description	Authenticity Link	Implications for AI-proofing
Parent–Teacher Meeting (Non-Specialist)	Explain their research findings to a “parent” with limited technical knowledge.	Mirrors real-world communication with diverse stakeholders.	Requires spontaneous simplification and analogies.
Colleague-to-Colleague Dialogue (Non-Specialist)	Discuss intervention with a “peer teacher,” focusing on collaboration and practical challenges.	Represents professional learning communities in schools.	Encourages adaptive reasoning, unscripted reflection, and critical analysis.
Curriculum board panel (Specialist)	Explain intervention to a curriculum review panel.	Mirrors professional accountability where teachers justify pedagogical interventions to policy bodies.	Requires nuanced, context-specific reflections and acknowledgement of challenges.
Faculty Research Seminar (Specialist)	Describe and discuss their intervention to faculty members at a faculty seminar.	Reflects authentic professional contexts where teachers present evidence-based practice to peers and defend conclusions.	Demands real-time reasoning about methodology, data interpretation, and literature connections.

Findings

This study explored the experiences and perceptions of student teachers who completed their RE and participated in the newly introduced IOA as part of their overall final evaluation of the module. The research involved a two-phase pilot study, followed by the implementation of a summative IOA. Preliminary findings were analysed using thematic analysis to identify key patterns in the qualitative survey responses, while quantitative data were summarised descriptively to capture student teachers’ engagement, motivation, perceptions of the scaffolded activities, and the summative IOA. The findings presented here are based on survey responses from Phase 2 Pilot (n=59) with a response rate of 55.9% and Phase 3, with a response rate of 81%. The survey, administered three weeks after RE submission, included both closed and open-ended questions to gather student teachers’ experiences and perceptions.

Phase 2 Pilot

In Phase 2, the student teachers responded positively to the preparatory materials designed to support their initial IOA experience (Table 2). These materials included the provision of a formative IOA rubric, recorded IOA exemplars, briefing sessions, and scheduled practice with their supervisor. Early exposure of the IOA format also made them less anxious about the summative IOA, as one student teacher commented, ‘It made me feel less worried about it, as in my head I was overthinking things to be difficult.’ A significant majority of student teachers (78%) found the overall experience of the formative IOA engaging, highlighting the value of the support used in preparing them for the summative IOA. Student teachers found this format engaging, as they had to adapt to the scenario and reflect on how they should present their ideas in different scenarios. For instance, one student teacher expressed, ‘It gave me the chance to practice thinking on the spot and communicating my research ideas in a clear and accessible way, depending on the audience.’ In my case, the

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scenario was a parent-teacher meeting, which required me to explain complex scientific concepts using simpler language and everyday examples.’ Student teachers found receiving feedback after the IOA valuable, as it enabled them to know what and how to improve, as one student teacher described, ‘The feedback I received ... during the formative IOA was valuable. It helped me improve the clarity of my responses, adjust my tone, and become more confident when speaking.’ Overall, in Phase 2, the student teachers expressed that the formative IOA provided a valuable opportunity for them to reflect on their experiences in conducting their RE. They reported that the interactive nature of the assessment allowed them to critically analyse their work, identifying both their strengths and areas for improvement. Feedback gathered from this phase was used to further refine the summative IOA rubric and IOA documentation for the faculty prior to the summative IOA assessment.

Table 2

Scaffolded activities for Summative IOA

Survey Item	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Formative IOA rubric supported preparation for formative IOA	33%	47%	17%	3%	0%
Use of recorded examples supported preparation for formative IOA	30%	50%	20%	2%	0%
IOA briefing supported preparation of formative IOA	43%	37%	17%	3%	0%
Formative IOA session with supervisor supported preparation of summative IOA	43%	50%	3%	3%	0%

Phase 3 Summative IOA

The student teachers reported high levels of engagement and motivation during the summative IOA, with 84% indicating active participation throughout the assessment process (Table 3). One student teacher remarked, ‘I had fun implementing my RE, so it felt nice to think back and talk about what I did.’ The interactive format encouraged critical and creative thinking, as 82% of respondents noted that the IOA required them to thoughtfully address examiners’ questions related to their research. Another student teacher highlighted the value of the format: ‘The interaction with the examiners! Showcasing my passion in real life as opposed to in written form.’ The dynamic nature of the assessment fostered meaningful involvement, with 83% affirming that the IOA had promoted sustained engagement. Several respondents appreciated the informal yet rigorous nature of the IOA, noting, ‘I like that I could ask questions, like if the examiners required clarification or not. That puts me at ease a little bit,’ and ‘It was enjoyable—I was able to share my experiences and difficulties about the RE; it felt like counselling.’

Table 3

Engagement and Motivation during IOA

Survey Item	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I felt actively involved and motivated throughout the IOA process	31%	54%	8%	6%	0%
The IOA encouraged me to think critically and creatively	46%	46%	6%	2%	0%

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The interactive nature of the IOA helped me stay focused and engaged	33%	50%	10%	0%	0%
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The majority of the student teachers (88%) perceived the IOA as a realistic and authentic form of assessment because of the scenarios given (Table 4). Student teachers agreed that the IOA required them to apply practical and relevant skills (83%) and provided them with an opportunity to demonstrate adaptability, critical thinking, reflection, and effective communication. One student teacher shared, ‘I like how it made me become a critical thinker. I am surprised at how I was able to articulate my understanding of my written RE verbally’. Another noted, ‘Being able to talk about aspects of our research that cannot be seen in the written research exercise—such as our reflections and challenges—feels more personal, while the report is more formal.’ While the survey did not include questions specifically focused on the use of artificial intelligence, a few student teachers highlighted that IOA provided an authentic way to demonstrate ownership of their work and allowed examiners to identify misconduct in the written RE. One student teacher described, ‘It (IOA) proves that the RE report was genuinely written by ourselves, and not AI.’

Table 4
Authentic Communication, Engagement and Reflection during IOA

Survey Item	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
The IOA reflected real-world teaching and workplace scenarios I am likely to encounter	42%	46%	13%	0%	0%
The tasks in the IOA required me to apply practical and relevant skills	29%	54%	13%	4%	0%
The IOA felt like a meaningful and authentic way to assess my abilities in talking about my RE	33%	50%	10%	0%	0%

Conclusion

While the findings are preliminary, a key contribution of this study is demonstrating the value of using IOA as an authentic and engaging complement to traditional written assessments, such as the capstone RE, by student teachers within graduate-level teacher education. The dialogic and interactive nature of IOA provided student teachers with a platform to find their voice through authentic dialogue about their RE and enhanced the validity of the assessment by capturing real-time adaptability, critical thinking, and communication skills. The student teachers in this study welcomed IOA as an engaging and motivating form of assessment that served as a valuable addition to the assessment of their RE. The integration of IOA and written RE offered a more holistic evaluation of student capabilities, with the formative pilot phase playing a crucial role in preparing participants for the summative assessment. By integrating IOA alongside traditional assessments, teacher education programs can better support and prepare student teachers for the communicative, adaptive, and reflective demands of the profession while simultaneously responding directly to the challenges and opportunities presented by generative AI.

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