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# Designing inclusive Interactive Oral Assessments: Practical learnings for educators

**Rowena Ditzell, Alex Sloane.**
University of Technology Sydney

**Richard Ingold**
The University of Sydney

As artificial intelligence continues to impact the higher education sector, Interactive Oral Assessments (IOAs) are increasingly used to assure assessment integrity. Whilst there are IOA best practice guidelines, there are concerns that the pace of implementation has compromised design, and considerations regarding student preparation, equity and inclusivity are being overlooked. This concise paper considers these issues through a case study of a postgraduate business subject and provides practical advice for how student preparation for oral tasks can be embedded within a curriculum without detracting from disciplinary knowledge and content. The design addressed five areas to support student IOA preparation: creating authentic scenarios; designing inclusive assessment practices for diverse cohorts; structured student preparation; balancing IOA preparation with course content coverage; and ensuring alignment between preparation activities and the actual IOA experience. Student feedback and educator observations suggest students felt increasingly prepared and supported throughout the semester. Recommendations are made for educators considering IOA including incorporation of low-stakes practice, creating classroom safety, setting clear expectations, preparing exemplars, focusing on student and educator preparation, and collaborating with others. This paper extends existing IOA literature by addressing inclusive practices for increasingly diverse student cohorts and contributes practical strategies for educators seeking to design IOA's that support inclusion while balancing curriculum time and disciplinary content requirements.

*Keywords:* inclusivity, Interactive Oral Assessments, Oral Assessments

## Introduction

The higher education assessment landscape continues to evolve in response to the seismic impact of artificial intelligence (AI). Interactive Oral Assessments (IOAs) have been introduced as a solution to assessment integrity; however, the pace of implementation has raised concerns that adequate and inclusive student preparation may be overlooked. This paper focuses on the design of inclusive and equitable IOA assessments, emphasising the important role of student preparation and scaffolding to support diverse student cohorts whilst also contributing to assessment integrity. It also discusses collaboration by an academic and education designer to prepare students for IOAs, with the aim of meeting subject learning objectives, strengthening communication skills, and enhancing employability. It contributes practical strategies for educators seeking to design IOAs that support inclusion while balancing curriculum time and disciplinary content requirements. We provide an overview of the context driving this work in the literature review, followed by background to the subject, then discuss our approach to developing inclusive assessments with recommendations for broader implementation. The paper aims to address the implementation challenge of designing IOAs that support inclusion while balancing curriculum time and disciplinary content requirements.

## Literature review

In this section we provide a brief overview of the increase in use of IOAs, discuss student concerns, and provide an overview of challenges regarding equity and inclusivity. We then consider a range of implementation considerations to mitigate these concerns and challenges.

It is recognised that AI poses challenges to the integrity and validity of assessment practice (Lodge, 2024; Sotiriadou et al., 2020; Stephenson et al., 2025). IOAs are increasingly regarded as pedagogically rigorous and academically credible approaches to mitigating these concerns (Lodge, 2024) whilst also enhancing student employability and communication capabilities (Ward et al., 2023). Research also suggests that students are less inclined to engage in academic misconduct when completing IOA tasks that are grounded in authentic, real-world contexts (Sotiriadou et al., 2020). Consequently, more institutions are using IOAs to assess students' understanding of their topic without the ability to use AI (Rae et al., 2025).

As IOAs gain momentum, it is worth considering concerns that have been raised from a student and inclusivity perspective. Oral presentations and assessments have been acknowledged to cause students stress and anxiety (Nash et al., 2016). These assessments take a range of formats such as in class presentations, group tasks or IOAs; each have different requirements but generally require students to speak individually or in groups with assessors. Students' concerns may include fear of judgment, topic uncertainty, and physiological symptoms associated with anxiety such as dry mouth, sweating, and breathing irregularity. These challenges may impact the overall university experience for students and suggest the potential for increased preparation and support (Grieve et al, 2021).

Questions have been raised as to whether IOAs can be equitable and inclusive. Criticism includes the male orientation of oral assessments combined with women reporting increased fear of public speaking and lower confidence levels (Rae et al., 2025). Other criticisms regarding oral assessment suggest they may present barriers to inclusive assessment, particularly for neurodiverse students and those with language or voice challenges (Waterfield and West, 2006). Finally, ESL students may be anxious about the impact of oral presentation on marks (Kaur et al., 2017). The most frequent source of anxiety is engaging with native speakers (Woodrow, 2006). Often language is not what is being assessed; however, an emphasis on high English-speaking language standards may disadvantage ESL speakers or those with language processing disabilities (Tai et al., 2023a). These challenges emphasise the importance of inclusive pedagogical practices in assessment design, enabling a diverse student cohort to demonstrate their ability to apply knowledge.

Sotiriadou and Fleming (2025) identify a range of characteristics to consider in designing effective and inclusive IOAs to drive student engagement, employability and maintain academic integrity. These include appropriate scaffolding and support, scenario-based assessments that are aligned to the subject and learning outcomes, and careful consideration regarding accessibility and equity. Similarly, Stephenson et al., (2025) identified contributors of student performance, namely structured in-class practice, prompt and constructive feedback from peers and educators, use of technology, and application of self-reflective strategies. Classroom safety and human connection to encourage questions is also important. Krautloher (2024) found that few students approached their educator for support in preparing for IOAs but when they did, they found it helpful. They also found that providing resources such as exemplars and practice activities helped mitigate concerns. Finally, equity in access to resources and clear instructions are important (Tai et al., 2023b). Limited class time remains a challenge which has constrained the extent to which preparation can be meaningfully integrated, and many educators feel that they must sacrifice content to accommodate practice opportunities for their students.

To address these concerns whilst capitalising on IOA benefits, a Business School academic and education designer collaborated to develop an inclusive IOA. The intent was to support student preparation whilst minimising the impact on educator workload and ensuring key subject content was delivered. The following sections provide background information, the IOA planning and implementation approach, and key learnings.

## Background information

The IOA was developed for a postgraduate management subject focused on career planning. The subject serves multiple master's programs and has a diverse cohort of approximately 100 students, with varying professional experience and a high percentage of international, ESL language students. Tutorials are delivered on campus, supported by asynchronous lectures and online learning content The subject is well suited to IOAs as the focus is to support student employability by strengthening their capacity to articulate knowledge, skills, attributes and experience (Daubney, 2022). The Subject Learning Objectives (SLOs) reflect these capabilities, requiring students to persuasively communicate their skills, knowledge and attributes to demonstrate

employability to a professional audience. Ethics approval was obtained in November 2025, ETH25-11181; however, due to approval delays the full design was not executed.

## Interactive oral assessment planning and implementation

Five considerations were addressed in the IOA design. First, developing authentic scenarios. Second, ensuring the assessment was inclusive for the diverse cohort. Third, supporting student preparation to mitigate anxiety. Fourth, adequately preparing students for the IOA whilst maintaining appropriate course content coverage. Finally, ensuring alignment between preparation activities and the actual IOA experience. These are discussed below.

### Authentic scenarios

A priority was developing options that would resonate with the diverse cohort. A set of scenarios was created based on student profiles allowing choice and relevance. Students could choose to pitch from one of four scenarios: First professional role, a lateral move, a promotion, or a career change.

### Inclusive assessment design

Inclusive assessment is a complex challenge, and our aim was to reduce barriers for as many students as possible, acknowledging that in some cases further adjustment may be required. Inclusive and equitable practices were embedded in preparation and delivery. The rubric focused on communication and students were explicitly reassured that assessment did not include pronunciation or accents. Students were coached in verbal and non-verbal communication to build confidence across different communication styles and personalities. The assessment itself was scheduled for the final exam period and students were given options across a six-day period including day, evening and weekend slots to accommodate schedules which included work, study and caring responsibilities. Adjustments were made for neurodiverse students and those with accessibility needs including the provision of quiet breakout spaces during practice and customised arrangements for the assessment itself.

### Embedding IOA preparation into course content

Initial review of the content covered in the course showed some opportunities for curriculum efficiency where we could reduce content and refocus our curriculum on what really matters for the overall learning outcomes and goals of the subject (Thornby et al., 2023). While reducing content freed up some time for class preparation, the most important step was planning how the preparation could complement conceptual content and skill development objectives. This included reviewing the other two assessments to ensure appropriate scaffolding, useful feedback opportunities, and connection to the IOA practice sessions. To integrate IOA preparation with the required course content we first mapped the student learning journey to align learning outcomes, assessment, content, and skill development without overloading class time. Each practice session was aligned to course content and key learning outcomes to serve dual purposes; final assessment preparation and consolidating content knowledge and skill development. Design was guided by principles of feedback, structured practice, self-reflection, and rubric integration. This model, where content is directly and intentionally connected to staged preparation activities, could be a useful framework for academics who want to achieve relevant, regular, practice opportunities, without detracting from core disciplinary knowledge and content aims.

### Student preparation to mitigate anxiety

Student preparation included structured tutorial activities complemented by online resources, exemplar videos, and AI preparation tools. In-class activities were designed to reduce anxiety through structured and supported practice. Four in-class practice sessions were embedded throughout the semester, spaced around other assessment deadlines and based on relevant subject content. Each practice session had a clear development focus and relevance for IOA preparation was explained. Practice 1 focused on building classroom safety, introducing feedback skills, and supporting early assessment work. Practice 2 consolidated content, enhanced engagement, and built on prior reflection. Practice 3 prioritised rubric understanding, response

techniques, and deeper content integration. Practice 4 refined answering unseen questions, conversational delivery, and overall IOA structure. Class discussions clarified IOA guardrails; for example, no translation devices, while reinforcing the focus on communication to reassure students concerned about pronunciation. Assessment criteria were progressively introduced and applied through guided activities to build understanding and confidence of the rubric. Feedback was frequent and multi-modal, with students trained to give constructive peer feedback. Self-reflection was embedded after practice activities to consolidate learning.

A range of supporting resources complemented these activities. A dedicated Canvas page provided preparation guidance, including communication strategies and techniques to manage nerves. Video exemplars were used and deconstructed in class, and an AI-based LinkedIn tool supported independent practice. Clear communication via Canvas announcements helped manage logistics and reinforce expectations.

### Alignment between preparation and IOA experience

The IOA experience was intentionally designed to align with preparation and reinforce a human-centred, relational approach. The aim was to create a consistent and supportive environment. This included attention to room setup to minimise power dynamics, a warm welcome and closing for each student, the use of patience, probing questions, and appropriate silence to support performance. Assessment processes were structured to ensure consistency. Preparation included marking sheets, a question bank, and recording of sessions (with consent) to support integrity. Markers had short intervals between students to refresh and complete evaluations. A continuous improvement approach was adopted, with peer review of early sessions leading to refinements such as adjustments to room setup, question bank, and marking sheet design.

## Results achieved

As expected, many students felt anxious about the IOAs, primarily due to concerns about their English-speaking skills, unfamiliar questions, and difficulty in speaking with others. By the final class, we were reassured that nearly all students felt the in-class activities had supported IOA preparation. We observed an increase in class engagement during the practice sessions, and a review of Canvas analytics supported this showing uplifts for weeks associated with practices and assessments. Students built classroom connections and relationships with peers and their educator through the learning activities.

We did receive ethics approval to run a survey at the end of semester; unfortunately, it was too late to get representative survey data; however, the following student quotations stand out. Recognising our efforts to build human-centered and relational classroom safety students wrote "*I felt comfortable to share with examiner"* and *"Nice conversation during peak period for final assignments*." Finally, recognising IOA anxiety and the benefit in terms of employability skills, another student wrote *"Although I was a bit nervous, I think it is very good and helpful to practice things like this. Sometimes you have to step out of your comfort zone*...*we all need a job and need to have practiced with this*."

## Suggested strategies to develop inclusive IOAs

We identified the following recommendations to design inclusive IOA that meet SLOs and assure assessment integrity. First, map learning outcomes, content, and assessments to help understand how and where student preparation tasks could fit into your curriculum. Second, embed low stakes in-class practice opportunities to build students' ability and provide constructive peer feedback. Third, build student-student and student-educator relationships to create classroom safety. Fourth, set clear expectations around requirements and guardrails e.g., use of translation devices. Fifth, create exemplars to clarify performance expectations. Sixth, encourage students to focus on understanding and applying core concepts, and using active listening skills versus memorised scripts. Finally, ensure the teaching team is prepared to deliver a consistent IOA student experience that aligns with practice sessions and is empathetic to student anxiety.

## Discussion and conclusion

The impact of AI on assessment integrity is a real concern for students, educators and employers (Lodge, 2024). As institutions seek to assure assessments, it is important that academics and education designers are mindful of student anxieties and concerns and apply inclusive pedagogical practices in IOA design (Krautloher, 2024; Rae et al., 2025). Embedding IOA skills development to support subject content as part of regular class time provides an opportunity for educators to better prepare students for these assessments, enhance overall student experience, and better prepare them for authentic workplace situations (Sotiriadou & Logan-Fleming, 2025). This paper demonstrates that with intentional design IOA preparation can be embedded into a curriculum to avoid overloading class time and create a more supportive and inclusive learning journey for students. By addressing the needs of diverse student cohorts and providing educators with practical design strategies that support inclusion while complementing existing curriculum activities, it extends the IOA literature beyond assessment implementation to inclusive assessment practice.

### Generative AI use statement

Microsoft Copilot was used for feedback and refinement of the text for clarity. The authors take full responsibility for the content and accuracy of the article.

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