

## A PEEK BEHIND THE CURTAINS

# The english language oral examiner

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**At this time of year, you'll be getting lots of different advice from various sources about the forthcoming language oral exams. But what are things really like viewed from the other side? Stephen Platt recalls his experience of over 15 years as an examiner and running the orals.**

**L**et me start with a health warning on this article, since I didn't just want to write yet another piece on how to approach the language orals. What the article aims to do is to give you a view from the other side – a bit of inside information from somebody who over the years met thousands of candidates just like you 'on the day'. I also spent the best part of my last 10 years in a business school managing the organization of the exam and the examiners themselves, learning to understand who they are and how they function. And I've a pretty good idea of how you'll actually react on the day, having spent hundreds of hours with candidates, helping them combat energy lows with chocolate marshmallow bears, dealing with the most amazing stress-induced nose bleeds, and setting-up improvised last-minute coaching sessions for the ultra-nervous!

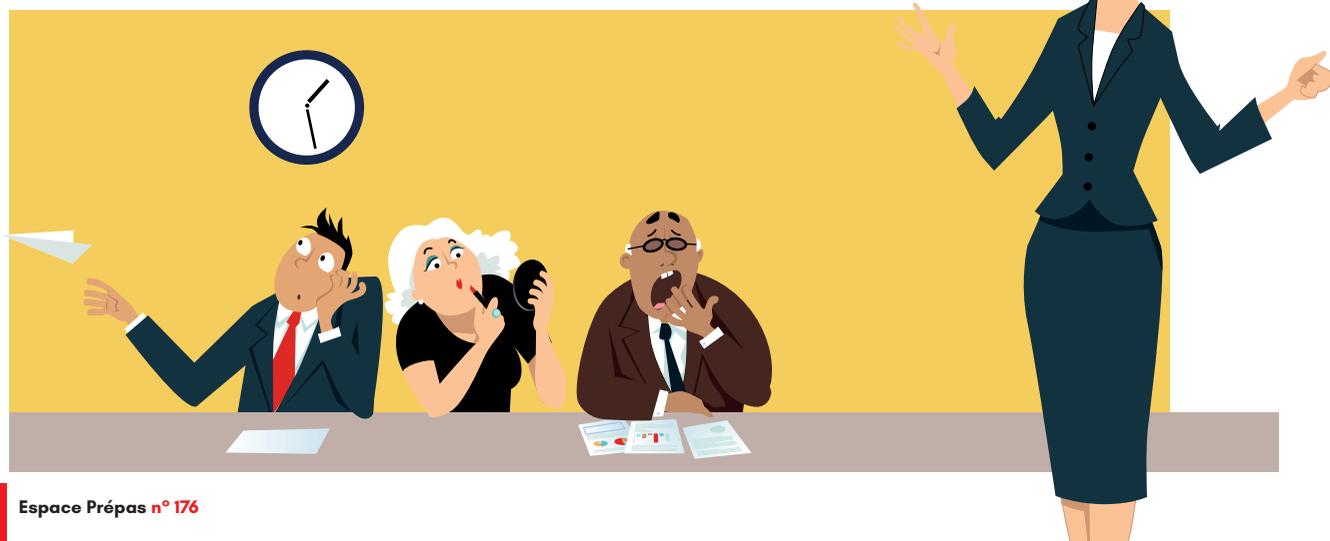
My apologies go out to the teachers of 'other' languages (they probably won't read this anyway), but this article focuses on the English language examiner – it's inside information 007 style, aiming to give candidates a secret psychological advantage in the exam room. And as much as your English teacher loved you and you loved them, it's not necessarily the sort of thing they might have wanted to let you in on!

## Who is your examiner?

Examiners worked in pairs when I first started doing orals back in 1999, which meant candidates could get a real mix. Nowadays they're alone, meaning you'll be confronted with one of *three* very different types. So, who are the examiners and what can you expect?

**1** **The preparatory school teacher** is generally good news as they'll be a **carbon copy** of what you've experienced over the last two years. They'll look the same, dress the same and most importantly, speak English exactly like your own teacher did. You're playing at home, and since the summer holidays are coming and they're already starting to reminisce and worry about their own pupils, you may even be on the receiving end of an unexpected gesture of kindness, a smile, or at least some other form of empathy. Prep school teachers will also follow the rules to the letter. So, as long as you stick to your game plan, you haven't got a lot to worry about and you can pretty much expect to get around the same mark as throughout the year.

**2** **The university lecturer** is the major unknown entity. Apart from the male version dressing like Nicolas Hulot, they're not easy to identify initially. It's only when they start to speak that you can actually pick up on the clues. Firstly, don't be surprised if they use your last name. You've got to remember that these guys have been teaching English all year to huge groups of totally disinterested 1<sup>st</sup> year Law students in lecture theatres. They've got literally dozens of Pierres and Sophies to live with. When you're teaching to these sort of numbers, first names just don't mean anything anymore. They even call their



own children by their last name. Given their working conditions, university lecturers also speak English more loudly than the average person. It's like a **switch**; French = normal volume, English = max volume – they're just used to projecting their voices across wide open spaces to people who aren't listening. You must forgive them. On the plus side, given the level of the average 1<sup>st</sup> year university student, they'll be very pleasantly surprised by your hard-earned English language skills. So, if you like listening to loud music, are a member of Greenpeace and don't mind being called by your last name, you could be on to a winner!

**3** The **native language teacher** is surprisingly the most, as quite often it's the first time they've ever spoken to a 'real' English (or other) person. But believe me, they are the **pussycats** out of the three. So please, don't panic if you get a Glaswegian or a Texan. What you do need to know is that examiners in this category have spent at least part of their career dressed as Mr. Colourful juggling circus balls to three-year olds at the local MJC ("Red, blue, green. Red, blue, green." – you get the picture), or teaching huge groups of half-deaf 75-year olds at the local Université du Temps Libre. This means two important things for you:

**a)** you're a gift from heaven – never before in their careers have they met such polite, disciplined and structured individuals;

**b)** they're used to making themselves understood to just about anybody.

### Three tricky situations you might come up against

Now you know a little bit more about your examiners, here's some advice on how to deal with 3 **commonly occurring** situations that often upset candidates.

**1** You **take one language oral immediately after another**. This happens quite a lot because timetabling is left to either a member of the admin staff, the admissions team or an algorithm. None of those three have ever taught a language, but any expert knows that asking stressed-out candidates to jump from one foreign language to another within the space of 20 minutes is simply not a good idea. So, what can you do? Answer – nothing! The best thing to do is to accept the situation, relax and

get on with it. Even if you start **drifting** into another language for a few seconds, it shouldn't make the **blindest bit of difference** to your final mark. Examiners are human, they are language experts and you'll be just fine if you adopt a positive attitude.

**2** Your examiner **dozes off or doesn't seem to be listening**. Oral exams take place in the height of summer and not all schools have air-conditioning in every room. There are also times of day known as "death slots", such as 1 hour after lunch, when middle-aged examiners generally do not do a good job of digesting their food without **having a nap**. This is a difficult one, but you should just keep going. Teachers who **nod off** for a couple of seconds are still listening. In fact, they have a separate section in their brain that records everything students say while they sleep. You can't fight that, and if you stop talking you'll wake them up and get the blame, which is not good. Never interrupt an examiner's sleep pattern. If your examiner doesn't seem to be listening to you, same again. Teachers have had years of experience developing a unique skill that involves not listening to their students but having **seemingly** understood everything they said. Keep going – they might not be listening but that mysterious part of the teacher's brain is still recording.

**3** You **come unstuck on a really hard listening text**. Despite the **examination boards'** efforts to harmonize listening texts, some recordings seem to cause more problems than others. All I can say in this case is to stay positive. This is where 2 years of hard work (hopefully) and practice will pay off. You've developed **ingrained** skills and reflexes that will come good under pressure. And the **likelihood** of you seriously underperforming is pretty slim. In addition, very few examiners really spend hours beforehand listening to each text taking copious notes on vocabulary and grammar. The vast majority are quite happy to get an overview, listening to each text and reading through the transcripts to make sure that they've understood everything. They actually have a more empathetic approach than a microscopic "I'm going to **catch them out**" one. And that's probably a nice note to finish on, since success in languages is all about attitude, communication and confidence. Your 2 years of hard work will be more than enough to overcome any issues. In the end, you have to believe in yourself and in your English teacher, who deep down loved you all along. ●



### Vocabulary

#### A carbon copy

If you say that one person or thing is a carbon copy of another,

you mean that they look or behave exactly like them.

#### A switch

A switch is a small control for an electrical device which you use to turn the device on or off.

#### To be a pussycat

If you describe someone as a pussycat, you think that they are kind and gentle.

#### Commonly occurring

If something is commonly occurring, it means it is something that happens usually or ordinarily

#### To drift

If you drift, you move away from somewhere or something, or move towards somewhere or something different.

#### Blindest bit of difference

If you say something doesn't make the blindest bit of difference, you mean it will have no effect or it won't matter.

#### To doze off

If you doze off, you fall into a light sleep, especially during the daytime.

#### To have a nap

If you have a nap, you have a short sleep, usually during the day.

#### To nod off

If you nod off, you fall asleep, especially when you had not intended to.

#### Seemingly

You use seemingly when you want to say that something seems to be true.

#### To come unstuck

To come unstuck means to fail.

#### Examination board

An organization that sets and corrects exams.

#### Ingrained

Ingrained habits and beliefs are difficult to change or remove.

#### Likelihood

The likelihood of something happening is how likely it is to happen.

#### To catch somebody out

To catch someone out means to cause them to make a mistake that reveals that they are lying about something, do not know something, or cannot do something.