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The Told and the Untold in Viva Voce: The Rude Examiner Syndrome

المروي وغير المروي في المناقشات : متلازمة المناقش الفظ

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Abstract

Examining student's theses in higher education is a process of paramount importance that requires professionalism. Much have been told and written about examining Vivas. However, too much is still to be told because untold so far, and this is exactly what characterizes the hidden curriculum. Our purpose is to tell that untold covert story about the Rude Examiner Syndrome (R.E.S). The implications might serve all the stakeholders concerned with vivas. Tackling such an intricate issue required the use of observational research and namely content analysis. The results have shown a serious deficit in some teachers' perception of non-verbal communicational facet of human language in academic context. Informing and training viva examiners and chairmen/ chairwomen would probably solve that communicational issue.

ملخص

الكلمات المفتاحية:

دراسة أطروحات الطلاب في التعليم العالي عملية ذات أهمية قصوى تتطلب الاحتراف. لقد قيل و كتب الكثير عن الإشراف و مناقشة الأطروحات و مع ذلك لا يزال هناك الكثير مما يجب إخبارنا به لأنه لم يتم سرده حتى الآن، و هذا هو بالضبط ما يميز المناهج الخفية بحكم التعريف. هدفنا هو أن نكشف عن تلك القصة السرية التي متلازمة المناقش الفظ. لا توصف. الآثار قد تخدم جميع أصحاب المصلحة المعنيين بمناقشة الأطروحات. تتطلب معالجة مثل هذه المشكلة التواصلية المعقدة استخدام البحوث الرصدية و تحديدا تحليل المحتوى. أظهرت النتائج وجود عجز خطير في تصور الأساتذة للوجه التواصلية الخفية غير الشفهية للغة البشرية في السياق الأكاديمي.

المناقشات،
مواقف المواجهة،
التعليم العالي،
المناهج الخفية،
متلازمة المناقش الفظ.

1. Introduction

Teachers' amateurism (Clarke & Menter, 2016), arrogance (Gabriel, 2005), neuroticism (Kyriacou, 2000), and duplication of unsuccessful teaching / assessing procedures have always been one of the biggest educational issues. Students' apprehension of vivas is probably related to the "horror" viva stories (Silverman, 2013) shared by those who succeeded to survive some crude and rude examiners and surprisingly even chairpersons' -who were supposed to be neutral- violent remarks and behaviors. Is facing a rude examiner / chairperson an unpreventable situation in tertiary schools? One can hypothesize that some teachers' Verbal and Nonverbal Communicational Deficiency (V.N.C.D) might be the cause of their verbal and nonverbal violence during viva voce or what I coined as R.E.S.

Let's imagine that you are a student candidate during a viva voce facing three "grumpy" faces who would tell you this: « Your dissertation is a non sense. Your wordy sentences need a diet, your lexical choice is erroneous, your punctuation marks are chaotically placed, and your pronunciation sounds extraterrestrial. A real fiasco... and by the way your shoes are ugly". Nobody wants to hear those rude crude words that are closer to an inquisitive police investigation. And I am sure; you would not like to be in the shoes (no pun intended) of that student during maybe the most humiliating minutes of his/her entire academic life.

Let us now decrypt the fictitious lie above that unfortunately tells the sour truth and the saddening reality in our universities, and even beyond. When decoded, the text above hides a subtext that can be interpreted this way:

"I am Mr/Ms know it all. I am perfect. I don't make mistakes. I am a teacher. I am somebody. My style, grammar, and thoughts are flawless. You are nothing but another loser. You are the unluckiest student on this planet. Your supervisor is the worst teacher in this universe. You should have chosen somebody else (me implied). I am better than any other supervisor. And this is just the beginning of your nightmare..." Welcome to the modern inquisition, uh... the viva voce.

Hidden subtexts (Jones, 1983) are present everywhere

there is a communicational, interactional, transactional situations. Observing examiners before, during and after viva voces can be highly precious, incredibly informative, and shockingly revealing. With a well designed check list, every word, every move, every breath, every wink, and every object can be observed, noted to be finally observed by the researchers about the disserted issues of viva voce and even by the examiners (including the rest of the panel) themselves in a action research based approach.

In a mirror like procedure, schools and mainly viva voces stakeholders can be sensitized. They would see themselves, and look shamelessly to their "dark" dehumanized faces, hear and listen to their "nasty" words, and "read" their wordless discourse like in a "talking Brothers Grimm mirror" (1812), always speaking the truth". The similitude between The Brothers Grimm fairy tale and viva voces is strikingly evoking and provoking.

Let's come back to the 21st century now. "If you have a rude examiner, stay friendly and professional" advised Muller (2016). So the probability to have a "rude" examiner unfortunately exists. Sometimes in the majority of the cases. The one million dollar question is thus: What is a student chance to have a "rude" examiner? One out of five? One out of two? What is your chance -statistically speaking- to have a "freshly appointed" probably untrained teacher as examiner? What is your chance to have your "bête noir" as examiner? And finally what is the probability to have a neurotic vindictive former teacher as examiner. You would probably tell yourself that day: ous, I am in the wrong place, the wrong time, with the wrong crowd". Welcome to the viva hell.

"Parroted" (Kohn, 1993) teaching style is maybe that other face of teachers amateurism (Wardle, 1970). Teachers often teach the way they have been taught, assess the way they have been assessed, supervise the way they have been supervised, and obviously examine the way they have been tortured - ous, I mean examined. Amateurism? Vindictive behavior? (Williams, Richardson, 2010), Neuroticism? (Kyriacou, 1997), Academic arrogance? (Duke, Osborne, Wilson, 2013), or simply social reproduction (Fitz, Davies, Evans, 2006) of verbal and non verbal violence? To answer this, we need to conduct a

thorough investigation about the psycho-social profile of teachers during all those tasks.

Teachers should be aware -or made aware- of their apparent and often hidden behaviors through analyzing the respectively listed duties they are paid for. Wait a minute. How can we be paid to use our academic status to torture somebody else in the name of the “imported” pseudo academic rigor? To err is human. To acknowledge ones errors is almost divine. The rigidity of the writing styles -like the APA/MLA/Chicago styles- is maybe the unsuspected hidden guilty.

The worst teachers, however, would be those who would “bullyssess” (bully while assessing) or put it simply “hurt” students during vivas the way they have been “hurt”. Academic violence in vivas might be justified as a “necessary evil”, a “challenge to endure”, a “positive pressure”, and a “good stress” (Frogatt, 1997) by those who prefer to maintain this arrogant assessment procedure -“bullyssessment”- after being sensitized by articles about conducting a (re)humanized viva.

The present paper has a double objective. It might be considered as a data driven paper as it might be considered as a consciousness raising one. This paper will inform the readers, diagnose the problems, sensitize the different stakeholders and decision makers, and finally offer solutions and alternatives to consider and reconsider (re)humanizing the already dehumanized profession of teaching, assessing and examining during vivas chiefly. The language of teachers, their paralinguistic, their buccal style, and their clothing styles have been observed and scrutinized through an observational study.

2. Method and procedure

We have used an in vivo observational method. Vivas were randomly selected to insure an unbiased treatment of the issue. We attended the viva voces at different periods of the day, 9.00 am, 11.00 am, 13.00 am, and 15.00 am to see if the presentation time could influence the behaviors selected to be observed. We tried to randomly choose the working days as well by picking out the 1st, 3rd, and 5th days of the week following the (EPS) Equal Probability of Selection approach (epsem sampling) (Weisberg, 2009). From

the list of vivas scheduled we selected 27 vivas during the same academic year. A total of 81 teachers were observed during those vivas.

Observations were made by a male researcher and a female research assistant (post-graduate student) who was trained to observe. Interrater reliability was moderate ($\kappa=0.41-0.60$). Three disagreements were noticed related to posture, buccalics and vocalics which is neglectable and were resolved by showing the cases to a third observer (a PhD student teacher).

Data were finally collected by the two observers to be interpreted. We decided to observe the following 5 items (channels):

1. Language (oral text),
2. Paralinguistic (tone mainly),
3. Buccalics (cheerfulness vs. grumpiness),
4. Objectics (teachers' attire).

We have made a checklist marking how frequently a certain behavior occurs, and how long it lasts (Kerig, 2004). Chronemics -which is the study of the role of time in communication- was an excellent tool to reach valuable information about the students (examinee candidates) and teachers (examiners). To record all the four communicational aspects, language (1), paralinguistic (2), buccalics (3), and Objectics (4) as nonverbal channels, we have used two different video cameras (smartphones) from two different angles. The first camera took close up details with a zoom on the examiner and the other camera a larger perspective where the panel of examiners and the examinee (candidate) could appear.

The study took place at a University during viva voces. Participants were female and male university teachers who have been charged to examine graduate and Master students. They have -to our knowledge since colleagues taught in the same university- never been trained to examine dissertations. They have though learnt how to examine through observing and imitating their own examiners and their professors and gained a certain confidence by examining during several years. Some of them are freshly appointed teachers with no experience or expertise in viva examination. Their ages range between 25 to 54 years old. The participants are teaching different disciplines

with different social and academic background. All of them are white North Africans. For the sake of complete anonymousness, the departments' identity, the name of the university and the name of the city were not divulged in concordance with academic ethical principles (Wysocki, 2008).

3. Results and discussion

During the 27 viva voces the observers obtained these key results:

3.1 The language

Teachers were supposed to use appropriate and non abusive language based on the ethical principles policing communication and interactions. However, the language used by the examiner was focused on the examinee mistakes and faults. With an overuse of "you" (when speaking with the student) at a frequency that ranges between 17 and 38 times and thus at an average frequency of 27.5. The use of the dry "you" is symptomatic of a certain disdain if over-repeated without precisising the civility of the candidate as a sign of courteousness from their interlocutors. The dry "you" reminds us of the language used in police stations when police officers interrogate suspects.

11.11% only of the remarks were preceded by an introduction about the topics of the dissertations. Other examiners preferred to present their remarks and reservations. The remarks were focused on the items shown in table 1.

Table 1: Examiners' focus

Item	Focus	%
	Grammar	74%
	Lexis/vocabulary	71%
	Punctuation	26%
	Methodology	37%
	Content	07%
	Pronunciation	02%

When speaking with the students, the examiners were usually scrutinizing every single page where the mistake (s)/ fault(s) could be found using the usual: "in page x you used/said/wrote...". Direct criticism was used by teachers. We have selected these sentences that could be interesting to analyse and decode using the subtext analysis approach based on the transactionists' theory (Transactional Analysis) or TA (Clarkson, 1992):

1. "Your dissertation is mined with grammar mistakes and errors!"
2. "You did not respect the methodology (of research)"
3. "Punctuation is an issue here"
4. "How can you make such mistakes, you have shown carelessness!"
5. "Are you kidding me?"
6. "Where are you here? What I can see is only your references!"
7. "Common man, how would you use such a concept?"
8. "We don't say (mispronounced word) we rather say (correction)"
9. "Do you call this a sentence? Really?"
10. "My secondary school students could write better paragraphs than yours"

And the list is not exhaustive.

3.2 Paralanguage

Paralanguage is defined as the vocal features that accompany speech and contribute to communication but are not generally considered to be part of the language system (Dictionary.com). The Mehrabian rule of communication considers that 7% of our speech is verbal (i.e., words), 38% of our speech is paraverbal, and the rest (55%) is nonverbal. When speaking, teachers use a large variety of paralinguistic styles. Their tones betray different emotions and behaviors like: friendliness, satisfaction, deception, sarcasm, anger, dissatisfaction, bossiness, and arrogance and so on. The main observed tones that we focused on were as shown below.

Table 2:

Teachers' tones

Tone	Frequency			Total %
	Type	Male T	Female T	
Sympathetic	+	6	9	28.84 %
Cold	-	3	2	9.61 %
Mocking	-	2	0	3.84 %
Sarcastic	-	2	1	5.76 %
Provocative	-	0	0	0.00 %
Sharp	-	3	4	13.46 %
Judgmental	-	0	0	0.00 %
Sincere	+	0	3	7.69 %
Threatening	-	1	0	01.92 %
Condescending	-	5	7	23.07 %
Respectful	+	8	12	38.46 %

3.3 Buccalics

The striking remark was the quasi grumpiness of teachers' faces. Pursed lips were apparent during all the vivas. It was difficult to understand the dynamics of smiling during viva voces mainly for intrinsic factors pertaining to non academic requirements (psycho-physiological characteristic) or having a relation with misconceptions like the absolute disapproval of "showing teeth before Christmas".

Two female teachers (examiners) were particularly smiley during all the vivas with an almost 100% calculated time span (1 hours /45 minutes and 1hour/13 minutes) which is the whole viva time and even beyond after the end of the viva. Laughs were inexistent in viva for viva were supposed be a serious business.

The characters of teachers and their training played a significant role in vivas since it affects the student candidate and even the whole audience. We could feel the tenseness of the teachers, the candidate and even their parents. The majority of teachers have decided not to smile until coffee and sweets were served. Who said that vivas must be sad moments?

The sense of professionalism has probably influenced the teachers' buccal styles. Sadness, seductively polished as professionalism, has replaced cheerfulness and has even negatively impacted the candidates depriving them to express themselves in a less ceremonial way. The absence of smiles implies

unfriendliness. When teachers show their pursed lips to students, the latter get generally a negative impression of the interlocutor and are encouraged to get rid of that embarrassing situation as soon as possible. Moreover, joy, assurance and self confidence can easily be ruined in such stressful situations. Teachers' grumpiness is a real problem (Bash, 1995) in Algerian Schools.

3.4 Objectics

Teachers' attire has long been seen as a touchy topic. For schools officials regulating teachers' dress is a mere dream. No one could play out the role of fashion police. Still, in some U.S states and counties, official tried to prohibits sexually provocative/ suggestive items. Male teachers in other US schools must wear ties. A fashion war began against those teachers who chose relaxedness, sloppiness, trendiness and casualness.

Most often we cannot distinguish trendy young teachers from their students. Neophyte teachers often seek a social desirability in schools. Dressing up is considered by some conservative teachers as the right way to earn respect from students and above all to stand out from them. Excessively tight clothing, see-through-tops, jeans, revealing necklines shirts and blouses, clothes and items with offensive explicit and/or implicit messages are examples of definite no-nos in some U.S schools whose objective is to establish respectability and respectfulness. Teachers must set the example. The term example can be debatable since culture bound. In terms of clothing, comfort and style are not contradictory, however, being extremely dressed down is not professional.

In Algerian schools, no one, no institution -including the Minister- could dare and talk about or criticize male or female teachers' attire. During my ten years experience, I have never heard that a student, a teacher, a non-teaching staff, a school official has been dress coded or sent home for his/her inappropriate attire. Teachers can wear whatever they want. Jeans, baseball caps, tee-shirts, tight clothes, sloppy attire, provocative items, and revealing dresses have never been disallowed. The hair length for male teachers is not an issue as well. To put it simply, there is no dress code for teachers be it for male or female.

The exception is the quasi obligation to wear pinafores for teachers in primary and middle schools only. Young teachers in tertiary schools can hardly be recognized as such especially when they come with jeans, caps, loose bags, and snickers. Isn't this clothing style for teenagers? Things are not different in big days like school ceremonies and viva voces. How can teachers be taken seriously if they are dressed down? How can a teacher take his job seriously if he/she dressed down? Being cool at school could not be expressed with extreme expressions like emulating youth attire trendiness (Emdin, 2016). In the same vein, respectfulness cannot be earned by an extreme conservatism (suit and tie) at the limit of arrogance.

Many issues are related to pleasing or respecting the others. Still, pleasing everyone is a myth. Between that dichotomous situation, i.e., being dressed down and dressed up, there is probably a safety zone and a compromise. There are days when you should be dressed up, and there are other circumstances where one should be dressed down. Dress and context are closely related. Things can be more complicated when talking about teachers' age, experience, gender, background and philosophy. Understanding dress code in Algerian schools is not very hard; there is simply no dress code there.

U.s schools seem to be more conservative than Algerian schools when it comes to dress code enforcement and/or updating regulations. The following table will summarize teachers' attire styles during vivas in terms of dress code, number of teachers (male and female) with specific attire and finally percentages:

Table 3:

Teachers' dress codes

Teachers	Number	Dress code			
		Sloppy	casual	Business casual	Business informal
Male	41	4	29	7	1
Female	40	0	0	40	0
Total	81	4	29	47	1
%	100%	4.93%	35.80%	58.02	1.23%

Clothes and clothing styles can be a valuable indicator of care or carelessness (Taylor, 1913), happiness or sadness, enthusiasm or boredom. The obtained results, even if we are not sure it would be perfectly duplicable, are closer to our predictions. However, we have been surprised by female behaviors. Female teachers have shown arrogance too. Female teachers were supposed to be cheerful, smiley, less arrogant and less bossy than their male counterparts. Both male and female teachers' language was direct, dry, and somehow rude. Both of them were staring defiantly at the examinees.

When speaking we could feel that bossy, angry tone in the voice of the majority of teachers. Grumpy faces were displayed for different reasons that could be the chosen teaching style (1), emotional issues (2), fatigue (3), burn-out syndrome (4), and age (5). The emotions and behaviors we observed created a tense moments and insecure situations to both the examinees and the audience.

That tenseness reinforce the myths created and shared among students who end up imagining facing the jury as the most horrifying moments, and the worst scholastic experience ever where public humiliation is a norm. Grumpy teachers cannot mirror confidence (Schmidt, 2011). If confidence is missing in assessment, examinees brains can switch off and thus lose any control over the voice, breath and the information they wanted to convey to the audience. Clothing style can reinforce that feeling as well. Students can decode that nonverbal message (Richmond, McCroskey, Mottet, 2015).

So, professional teachers are those who would assess themselves before assessing the others using a simple diagnostic procedure. That procedure can simply be a well designed check list of the behaviors to show, of the sentences to choose, of the tone that should be used to convey messages, of the appropriate nonverbal language. The success of vivas is closely related to the teachers' behaviors, verbal and nonverbal language. Teachers should thus think of avoiding any behavior that would contribute in shaming, confusing, embarrassing

or emotionally torturing students. And after all, they are simply students who are here at schools to make mistakes and fail, but with dignity.

4. Conclusion

The viva voce is supposed to be the happiest day in a student academic life. Unfortunately, this is not always the case. Some “viva survivors” can confirm that. They can tell their horrific experiences with those rude examiners who usually don’t know why they are rude. They are simply the victim of the R.E.S or the Rude Examiner Syndrome.

Many reasons could explain their inappropriate behaviors like their inappropriate teaching style, the burn out syndrome, inexperience, fatigue, and their emotional issues. Bullyssessment can be sometimes caused by a non verbal communicational deficiency, and thus the teachers’ unprofessionalism. Who said that viva voces must be ceremonial and closely similar to a sad burial day? I suppose no one. So, why do some teachers excel in emotionally torturing “their” own students? That’s a one million dollar question. Grumpiness and the inappropriate teachers verbal style is a real issue.

When a teacher chooses to bombard a student with a series of often humiliating remarks, his/her subtext is simply saying: “I am your worst nightmares today”. Professionalism or exhibitionism? In the majority of the cases it’s rather exhibitionism seductively polished as professionalism. Through the four verbal and non verbal communication channels (language, paralanguage, buccalics, and objectics) we have tried to demystify the supposedly unintentional rude behaviors a teacher may display during a viva. It is never too late to change one’s attitude and behavior in vivas. It is never too late to learn from our failures as teachers. What we call expertise is simply a series of failures.

If you feel -when reading these lines- that you are a rude examiner so, don’t worry. Following a series of recommendations addressing the art of communication will certainly change your life into a respectful and cheerful teacher. So, soften your

language, be selective when choosing your lexis- words can kill-, soften your tone, keep smiling even when you don’t agree with the students, assess your facial expressions, don’t be dressed down, and finally be respectful if you want to earn the students esteem. In one word: respect.

Teachers often think that they cannot go back to school and learn about good manners and ethics in communication. Being an examiner is not a right to “torture” people who do not possess then same status. There are excellent references about how to supervise, how to assess, how to examine a thesis or how to chair a viva.

Furthermore, learning about verbal and nonverbal communication in schools and classroom can be of a great benefit for both experienced and neophyte teachers who might be charged to supervise, assess or chair vivas. Three totally different tasks to be performed with professionalism but not perfectness. Perfectness is a myth. Of course, one work like the one you are reading right now might not be sufficient to do a perfect job.

However, we would recommend any teacher to learn about nonverbal communication (N.V.C). Learning about proxemics (use and perception of distances), chronemics (use and perception of time), haptics (use and perception of touch), buccalics (use and perception of the buccal area including lips, tongue, teeth), occulesics (use and perception of eyes), vocalics (use and perception of the voice including the quality of the voice, pace, speed, rhythm, tone, intonation), objectics (use and perception of artifacts/ objects) is more than necessary, it is urgent.

Comfort, temperature, lighting, furniture, the members of the jury mood, and other factors like the relationship between the student candidate and some teachers (Reynolds & Miller, 2003) or the relationship between the members of the viva jury themselves can affect the whole assessment process as well.

So, the linguistic (what is said)), the para-linguistic (how it is said) and the extra-linguistic (context) parameters can play a paramount role in the success

or the failure of any communicational situation in a modern world. New York: Routledge.

classroom or beyond (Poyatos, 2002).

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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