

Video chat exams in an online general education linguistics course

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Abstract. Video chat exams are a potential solution in online, general education introductory linguistics courses that seek to promote academic integrity, differentiate instruction, center student language and rhetorical practices, and offer multiple assessment modalities. Instructors who try video chat exams will want to clearly communicate expectations, offer practice exams, take steps to mitigate bias, and be sure this strategy aligns with their student learning outcomes as well as logistical concerns, like class size.

Keywords. online learning; general education; alternative assessment; oral exam; student-centered teaching; universal design for learning

1. Introduction. This paper describes an online video chat exam technique designed for a general education introduction to linguistics course. I describe some advantages of this exam strategy, like being student-centered, but also review some challenges, like student anxiety, with tips on how to mitigate those challenges. Although video chat exams are not the right fit for every course, I hope this paper will highlight one more potential tool in the online linguistics instructor's toolbox (Akimova & Malin 2020).

2. About the course. The video chat exam technique I describe below was developed in an online, asynchronous introduction to linguistics course for non-majors, with a class size ranging from 20 to 25. The institutional context is a regional, public university of about 20,000 students in the U.S. Midwest.

The course design, including designing assessments, was done through the classic backward design technique to be sure that the learning outcomes, assessments, and class activities were effectively aligned (Reynolds & Kearns 2017; Fink 2007; Fink 2013). I asked myself, "What do we want members of society to know, be able to do, and value, in the context of linguistics?" Put another way, "What do we want every teacher, voter, hiring manager, neighbor, doctor, etc. to know about what language is and how it works?" In linguistics general education courses, we have an excellent opportunity to help students develop critical thinking skills in relation to evidence, explore what makes us human, and to counter harmful myths and misunderstandings about language. I organized my thoughts into five over-arching questions that mapped onto the course modules' Guiding Questions:

- What is language and how does it work?
- How do babies/children acquire language(s)?
- Why doesn't everyone speak and/or sign the same?
- How is animal communication different from human language?
- In what ways does language change over time?

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Instructors who wish to replicate this exam strategy will similarly want to be sure that their Guiding Questions are tied directly to their learning outcomes. Once I landed on these five topics as what I wanted students to know, I turned to what I wanted them to be able to do. While traditional research papers and projects are valuable in assessing student learning, I contemplated that many students' real-world applications for their general education may likely be less formal and may arise in spoken and/or spontaneous settings. I wanted students to be able to explain and apply the most important concepts from each module in their own words in real time, as they might in a conversation with a co-worker. To assess students' ability to do this, I developed the video chat exam technique; next, I'll explain the process of the exam.

3. Video chat exam process. Instructors will want to look into the policies and campus culture at their institution to know if the logistics that video chat exams require are appropriate. Once the instructor has verified their institution's policies for their modality, the next step of the exam process is to explain the exam logistics clearly in the syllabus and have a scheduling mechanism ready at the beginning of the course for students to sign up for the exam, around their schedule. I used the appointments function in Google Calendar which allowed students to sign themselves up for 25-minute time slots. Students were required to select two time slots—one for the exam and one for a back-up time in case of unforeseen issues. In the "Notes" section of the appointment calendar, students write which Guiding Question they want to answer.

The exam is divided into 3 Phases: initial answer to the Guiding Question, Q&A based on their initial answer, and Discussion of Novel Scenario. The goal for Phase 1 is to find out what basic information the student understands. In this phase, first I welcome the student and ask how their semester is shaping up. This is a valuable opportunity to connect in online asynchronous courses, and helps set students at ease. Next, I remind the students of the exam process and make any needed clarifications. When the student is ready to begin, I ask them their chosen Guiding Question, for example, "What is the difference between animal communication and human language?" Some students answer with a highly prepared statement, including an overview of what they learned, examples from course materials and their own experiences, and use terms from the course effectively. In this case, Phase 1 of the exam may last around 8 minutes. Other students respond briefly. In this case, Phase 2 generally lasts a little longer. It is important to note that both response strategies for Phase 1 are valid and can lead to a high score. Students who can answer their Guiding Question to some extent and are mostly correct have passed the exam with a D or above.

Phase 2 of the exam is guided by the notes I take during Phase 1. While students are speaking, I list terms they use, using marks to indicate which terms were used with facility, which seemed wobbly and will require follow up, and so on. Students who offer a longer answer in Phase 1 will now get a few questions in Phase 2 to clarify what they know and fill gaps. As I tell my students, my job in this exam is to find out what they know and help them earn as high as they can. I ask questions like, "You mentioned that there are some sophisticated examples of animal communication. Can you tell me about those?" Depending on how much ground still needs to be covered from Phase 1, this part of the exam takes 5-10 minutes. If students are generally able to elaborate with success, they have now earned a C or above on the exam.

Phase 3 is the pinnacle of the exam because it is tied most closely to the original vision for what students can do by the end of this course—relate basic linguistics concepts to a novel scenario in real time. I cycle through a repository of scenarios to mitigate the risk of students sharing with each other after the exam. One scenario example is included here: (summarized for brevity): "Your friend tells you about an interesting news story. A research team has invented

‘sign language gloves’ that translate ‘sign language’ into English in real time. What questions does this raise for you? Are you skeptical about these gloves? What problems would they solve? What concerns do you think they might raise?” Students are encouraged to write notes and collect their thoughts before responding. Phase 3 is iterative, as students share their initial response and I ask them to clarify or explain what they mean in a conversation. There are multiple ways to be “right” and earn a high score in this exam phase. If students are able to apply what they know to this scenario, they have now earned a B on the exam and can earn up to an A. A typical “B” performance is characterized by understanding which course ideas relate, but not always being able to apply them. An “A” performance is characterized by facility with the application of terms and specific examples. Phase 3 usually takes 5-10 minutes.

I grade the exam in real time using a prepared sheet with the three phases, terms and concepts I expect to come up, and lots of white space for notes. With students’ permission, I record our conversation in case I need to refer back later. Although I arrive at the exam score by the end of our 25-minute video chat, I do not share the score immediately. I let students know that I have a good sense of how they performed and that I will review my notes before posting the grade.

4. Advantages to the video chat exam. The most important advantage of the video chat exam is that it is student-centered. This strategy is consistent with a “plus one” approach in Universal Design for Learning (Galkiene & Monkeviciene 2021). In an online asynchronous course, much of students’ work is heavily text-based—multiple choice exams, discussion posts, etc. The video chat exam offers an opportunity for students to show what they know in a different modality. This exam also gives students an opportunity to relate learning to their lives. Students often bring in examples from their family, memories, and what they’ve learned in other courses. This exam also centers students’ linguistics choices and rhetorical strategies because they are free to respond to the prompts in their own way.

This exam strategy also has benefits for scaffolding students to meet the learning outcomes. For example, students have the ability to revise and repair answers. If a student says something that is incorrect or incomplete, I can ask them to clarify. If students do not use the “correct” terminology, but I can understand what they mean, they can still earn credit. The video chat exam strategy offers the opportunity to correct any lingering misconceptions before they leave the class. Furthermore, students can play to their own strengths not only by choosing which Guiding Question to respond to, but by selecting the examples and elaborations from the class that they feel most confident about. Finally, this strategy supports differentiated instruction because I can push students who are performing well even further while I scaffold students who are still working on the basics.

This video chat exam strategy can also promote academic integrity by removing much of the possibility and incentive to cheat (Lang 2013). Logistically, it is almost impossible to cheat on this exam. Students are allowed to use notes, but do not have time to stop and read from them extensively, or to navigate online to do last-minute research. If students cannot elaborate beyond reading notes, I know that they do not know the material well, and their grade reflects that.

Perhaps one of the most surprising advantages of the video chat exam is that students enjoy it. As we end the conversation, many students express gratitude for the experience. While I have focused on advantages for online teaching, many of these advantages hold in any modality.

5. Challenges of the video chat exam. There are important challenges to video chat exams. Perhaps most importantly, there is opportunity for instructor bias. Instructors may observe behaviors that they interpret as the student being off task, consulting sources, or filling up time.

However, these same behaviors, like pausing or frequently looking down, can be attributed to students' personal mannerisms, nervous behavior, discomfort with eye contact, or many other reasons. To mitigate potential bias, instructors will want to develop the following skills: ability to establish rapport, awareness of bias, ability to recognize normal variation in student language/body language, a commitment to giving students the benefit of the doubt, and the ability to communicate instructions clearly.

Another important challenge is that some students have test anxiety, which can be heightened in an oral exam. There are ways to mitigate this challenge. First, the students know the questions and the exam process in advance. I also allow students to use notes and to pause and take notes to organize their thoughts. I also have a policy that students can use the back-up exam time for a re-take if they get a D or below on the first attempt. Clear instructions that are reiterated are also key. Before the exam begins, I repeat the expectations, structure, and intention of the exam and remind them that my job is to find out what they know so that they can earn as high as they can. When students indicate a high level of anxiety, I offer a practice exam in which the student completes a run-through exactly as if they were taking the exam. In these cases so far, the student has performed so well that I share with them what their score would have been as we close the exam. I then give the student the option of accepting that score as their exam score, or taking the "real" exam at their originally scheduled date. In all cases so far, these students have done well enough in their practice exam to happily accept that initial score.

Finally, the time commitment for a video chat exam is a challenge and makes this strategy prohibitive for large lecture classes. Instructors who still want to try could innovate with group discussion exams, spread the exams throughout the semester, or other strategies.

6. Conclusion. Video chat exams provide students with another modality to show what they know, engage them by centering their linguistic strategies and backgrounds, promote academic integrity, allow for differentiated instruction during the exam, and are aligned with the learning outcomes of a general education introduction to linguistics course. However, it can be time consuming, and make some students feel anxious. The challenges are not insurmountable for courses that otherwise would be a good fit for this strategy. My aim is to help instructors assess whether video chat exams are right for their students and their courses. Finally, I hope this article promotes further creativity as we all continue to strive for innovation in our assessments to keep up with the needs of teaching linguistics today.

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