2020 VCE Portuguese oral examination report

General comments

The Portuguese oral examination assesses students’ knowledge and skills in using spoken language. The examination has two sections – a conversation of approximately 7 minutes, during which students converse with the assessors about their personal world, and a discussion of approximately 8 minutes.

Following the conversation, the student will indicate to the assessor/s the subtopic chosen for detailed study and, in no more than one minute, briefly introduce the main focus of their subtopic, alerting assessors to any objects brought to support the discussion. Suitable objects include photographs, maps or diagrams and should include no text or very little text. The support material must have minimal writing, which includes only a heading, name or title.

The one-minute introduction should give assessors an indication of the area of discussion. The purpose is for students to briefly introduce their chosen subtopic; it is not an opportunity for students to list all their information or texts.

The focus of the discussion is to explore aspects of the language and culture of communities in which Portuguese is spoken, with the student being expected to make reference to the texts studied.

The choice of subtopic for the detailed study is very important. It should be an engaging topic that motivates students to become familiar with the content and vocabulary needed, and thus be more skilled to support and elaborate on information, ideas and opinions. It is important that students and teachers select materials for the detailed study carefully so that students are exposed to a variety of views. The type of texts used by students should vary in complexity and be in Portuguese so that students can become aware of key vocabulary related to their subtopic. Students are reminded that they must be prepared to use language spontaneously in unrehearsed situations. Students should be able to draw on the texts they have studied and make links between the texts to support, expand on and explore opinions and ideas on the subtopic and different aspects of the texts. Students should be able to relate this to the Portuguese-speaking community.

Students are not expected to be ‘experts’; they are expected to have learnt strategies in order to respond to unexpected questions. It would be valuable for students to learn phrases such as, ‘I have not studied this aspect of the topic, but I think …’, ‘I don’t know, but I feel …’ and ‘I am not sure about this question but I know …’

It should be noted that during the oral examination:

* Students may be asked a variety of questions with varying levels of difficulty. Questions may also be asked in a different order from the one students anticipate.
* Assessors may interrupt students to ask questions during either section of the examination; this should be regarded as a normal process in a discussion.
* Assessors may also repeat or rephrase questions.
* Normal variation in assessor body language is acceptable.

Three criteria are used in assessing both the conversation and the discussion: communication, content and language. Details of the assessment criteria and descriptors are published on the VCAA website. It is important that all teachers and students be familiar with the criteria and descriptors and that students use them as part of their examination preparation. This will help students to engage in a lively and interesting exchange with assessors. Although there are similarities between the assessment criteria for the conversation and discussion sections of the examination, the criteria assess two very different aspects of performance. Students who are well prepared are generally able to demonstrate their abilities and proficiency in the language.

Overall, students showed a reasonable level of confidence, generally remaining composed and relaxed throughout the examination.

Students should be aware of the five criteria for both components of the oral examination and have a clear understanding that both sections are an exchange and not merely a question-and-answer session.

Section 1 – Conversation

Students who received high scores demonstrated the capacity to use sophisticated Portuguese vocabulary and structures accurately and appropriately to discuss familiar topics related to their personal world. These students were able to express themselves in detail and interact well with the assessors. Other students did not demonstrate the same level of competence in the language, struggling with basic concepts and showing a lack of knowledge of language use.

Most students showed a very good level of understanding, communicated well and effectively and had the ability to carry the conversation forward. However, some students provided short answers and waited for the assessors’ questions rather than being able to contribute information beyond what was being asked.

Students who received high scores presented detailed information, stated opinions and confidently expanded on their ideas. Others were not able to expand and mainly provided short answers.

Overall, students performed well in vocabulary and grammar. Students who received high scores used accurate vocabulary and grammar. Most grammatical errors were related to verb conjugations, subject–verb agreement, and use of pronouns and prepositions. Most vocabulary errors were related to ‘false friends’.

Most students showed a good range of vocabulary structures and expressions. Some students were able to use sophisticated vocabulary and complex grammar structures; others used basic vocabulary and poor sentence structure.

Overall, most students had a high level of pronunciation and use of intonation, stress and tempo.

Section 2 – Discussion

Overall, students did not perform as well in the discussion. Some students made a good effort in preparing their subtopic well. However, some students did not have sufficient information on their subtopic and were not able to provide a range of information, ideas and opinions. Students are reminded that the detailed study should involve the study of a range of texts that is sufficiently broad to accommodate a range of information and perspectives, so that they are able to explore and compare aspects of the language and culture of the Portuguese-speaking community relevant to the subtopic they have chosen. They should also be able to use relevant information to clarify, elaborate on and defend their opinions and ideas.

The biggest issue for all students was a heavy reliance on the objects they had brought with them to support the discussion. They were not able to engage with the assessors because they focused on their objects rather than the discussion. They had information about the objects but not so much about the subtopic itself. Students are reminded that it is not their objects that are being assessed – it is the quality of the discussion. Students are reminded to select objects that adequately enable them to use those objects to support a discussion about their selected subtopic. Objects that were used effectively provided sufficient stimulus for students to be able to tell a story or clarify a point they were making about an aspect of their subtopic.

Some students were unable to deal with questions they did not have an answer for. Students are encouraged to have strategies in place to deal with a possible scenario in which they do not know or have forgotten an answer.

Teachers are encouraged to let students choose an aspect of the subtopic that they can engage with. It is important to select a subtopic that is sufficiently broad to accommodate a range of interests and perspectives, so that each student can provide an individual response during the examination. Using a range of oral and written texts related to the selected subtopic will also give students scope to draw on information and ideas that they can comfortably use to carry the conversation forward in a direction that is comfortable for them.

Students generally produced confident responses during the discussion, effectively presenting their opinions and ideas. Students who received high scores were able to carry the discussion forward. Some were less able to defend their ideas and opinions, were only able to discuss the subtopic at a superficial level and waited for the next question.

Students who scored highly were able to elaborate, extend on ideas, and provide opinions that displayed some depth of information. Some students lacked the linguistic capacity and/or knowledge of the subtopic and did not do as well.