2021 VCE Russian oral external assessment report

General comments

The Russian 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.

It should be noted that during the oral examination:

* students may be asked a variety of questions of 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.

Students are reminded that they must be prepared to use language spontaneously in unrehearsed situations. 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 subtopic, but I think …’, ‘I don’t know, but I feel …’ and ‘I am not sure about this question, but I know …’

Students will be assessed in both the conversation and the discussion in communication, content and language. The criteria 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.

Section 1 – Conversation

Section 1 consists of a general conversation about the student’s personal world, for example, school and home life, family and friends, interests and aspirations. It is an organic conversation about the student’s personal world. These examples provide students with a basis for preparing a range of interesting and engaging ideas about their personal world, so that they can engage in a spontaneous discussion with the assessors about things that interest them.

Overall, students performed well in Section 1 – they understood the assessors well and responded to questions readily and confidently. Pronunciation and intonation were the strengths of most students.

Conversations that scored highly demonstrated a good command of Russian language, employing sophisticated sentence structures and a broad range of vocabulary which incorporated idiomatic expressions and even metaphors (на седьмом небе от счастья, on cloud nine; пускать пыль в глаза, to show off; вкусовая палитра, taste palette; глаза горят, eyes light up). These students were able to elaborate in their answers, showing a capacity to compare, analyse and be creative (‘what would happen if …’).

Conversations that did not score well included short factual answers, often requiring assessors’ support or prompting to elicit greater detail. These responses were often restricted to simple sentence structures with a limited range of vocabulary and expression. Common vocabulary errors included:

* calques, such as иметь персону (to have a personality), разные от друг друга (different from each other) and слышится лучше (sounds better)
* anglicisms, such as китайская кузина (Chinese cuisine), реальный ивент (real event) and презентовать русских как … (to present Russians as …)
* word formation, such as экпериментация instead of эксперимент (experiment), ревноствовал instead of ревновал (was jealous), дисциплинные instead of дисциплинарные (disciplinary)
* wrong choice of vocabulary such as рукодельная бабушка instead of бабушка-рукодельница (my grandma is crafty / a needlewoman), тратить время с семьёй instead of проводить время с семьёй (spend time with the family), проводить время на пиаре instead of уделять время пиару (to dedicate time to PR), дедовщина насмехалась instead of «деды» насмехались/издевались (hazers mock).

In relation to the communication criteria, the most common challenge for students was an inability to advance the conversation flow spontaneously or without additional support. Students should, therefore, be prepared to extrapolate on subtopics, for example: commencing with facts about their family and then graduating to the importance of family support in difficult situations; or from describing their future career choice to evaluating different pathways to achieving that career.

Although rehearsed responses are easily identified, preparation in relevant areas is encouraged. Students will then be able to navigate to their strengths or areas of familiarity, where they can confidently elaborate on their responses by providing opinions, comparisons and examples.

Section 2 – Discussion

Following the conversation, the student indicates to the assessors the subtopic chosen for detailed study and, in no more than one minute, briefly introduces 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 Russian 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 subtopic that motivates students to become familiar with the content and vocabulary needed, and to 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 Russian so that students can become aware of key vocabulary related to their subtopic. 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 Russian-speaking community.

Successful subtopics chosen by students this year included, but were not limited to, controversial Russian public figures (current or past), historical events and traditional music, art and literature. It was apparent that genuine interest in a subtopic aided the students’ ability to engage in deeper discussion. Using a diverse range of audio and written texts in their research served students well, especially where contrasting resources were used to fully explore competing narratives. This in turn allowed students to better explain and elaborate on their ideas and opinions, as they could provide examples based on their texts.

Some subtopics were either too vague, too narrow in their focus or not conducive to discussion. Students were unable to elaborate on their ideas and opinions, or explore aspects of the language.

In this section of the examination, students generally used broader, more sophisticated vocabulary and more complicated sentence structures.

Common grammatical errors included:

* noun-adjective/pronoun agreement (твой мысль, в обоих странах, в каждой рассказе)
* case endings (для писателях, получать диплому, один из трудных годах)
* verbal government (я их разговариваю, скучал за друзей, прилететь на Марсе).

It was noted that few students took advantage of the option to include props and/or images in support of their subtopic presentation. Use of these supporting materials could showcase students’ descriptive language skills and additionally direct the assessors’ attention towards areas of student preference within their chosen subtopic. It is recommended that students consider the use of supporting material.

While preparing for the oral examination, students are also encouraged to practise responding to questions that might include analysis (e.g. ‘How can you justify …?’), evaluation (e.g. ‘Why do you agree with …?’) or creativity (e.g. ‘What could be done …?’).