# Managing the Fear Factor (or how a Mini-Viva Assessment can Improve the Process of Learning for International Students)

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**Abstract:** This paper is about an exploration of international business students' learning through the use of mini-vivas as a form of assessment. It also includes an investigation of the meaning of a mini-viva for students who come from a wide range of nationalities. Pedagogical research has indicated that using this form of summative assessment for large cohorts of international students may be problematic (Carless 2002). However, experimentation with this model of assessment with MA business students in research methods has indicated that mini-vivas can enhance and consolidate the learning potential of international students. So in effect this paper is also about explaining why this has happened in relation to students' learning.

## 1. The Mini-Viva and research methods

### 1.1 Introduction

An exploration of international MA students' learning through using mini-vivas as a form of summative assessment is central to this research. Pedagogical research has indicated that using this form of assessment for large cohorts of international students may be problematic (Carless 2002). However, the researcher's experimentation with this model of assessment with a large cohort of international business MA students has indicated that mini-vivas can enhance the learning potential of international students.

Previous research into the mini-viva as a form of summative assessment indicated that students place great emphasis on gaining a mark rather than focusing on the process of learning (Greer 2001). There appears to be a shortfall in research about how a diverse group of international students perceive a spoken type of evaluation and how it influences their learning despite claims that the most influential element in promoting learning for students is the assessment (Boud et al 1999). Often it is how, and when, the student is assessed that will determine how they learn (Struyven et al 2005). However, having to aurally defend a piece of individual written work seemed to encourage more students to engage in more reading and understanding of the issues pertaining to research design. This is despite concerns over students' levels of anxiety in having to defend their ideas in a secondary language and the worry that less articulate students could be disadvantaged in learning through this type of summative assessment.

The mini-viva assessment in this research was linked to the teaching of research methods to postgraduate business students who are undertaking a MA courses in Administration and Marketing. These courses are designed for international students and have around sixty international students between them. However, this was the first time that many of these international students had done this type of spoken assessment so in order to understand teaching outcomes we had to understand how different international students interpret a mini-viva assessment and how it helps them to understand methodological issues. These concerns influenced the design of the research objectives which were; to conduct an investigation of the meaning that international students give to oral assessments, to explore how students overcome issues of language in verbal discussions and finally investigating how a written and verbal summative assessment impacted on students' learning.

### 1.2 Deep and surface learning

There has been in many universities a drive towards encouraging students to become more independent learners, to encourage students to take on a more active role within learning (Leathwood 2006). Adopting a deep approach to learning can shift responsibility for learning from the institution to the student, with the student taking control of their learning (Rust 1998:71). It has been shown that in order to facilitate this situation students need to adopt a more critical and questioning stance to their studies in order to adopt a more reflective deeper approach to learning (James 2000). Deep and surface learning originated in the 1970s and identified two different levels of processing knowledge. Those students who used surface-level processing focused on the text itself, memorising as much as possible while those who utilise a deep-level approach were aiming to understand the underlying meaning of that text (Case and Marshall 2004).

Concern has been raised with the rigid bipolar nature of these two categories in light of the increasing numbers of international students who have experienced different traditions in learning. It has been well documented that Asian students in particular are more likely to adopt a surface approach to learning. This has often been linked to their different educational experience where much teaching is by rote (Rust 1998). Trigwell and Prosser (1999: 169) address this issue, they argue that what is key to students' adoption of a particular learning style is not the method -such as learning by rote- but the intention behind the method that is important. They claim that it is this intention that influences students' adoption of their learning approach. For Trigwell and Prosser the key question in understanding students' learning approach is an understanding of <u>what</u> are the students' attitudes to learning as well as how they learn.

## 1.3  The relationship between learning and assessment

An increasing emphasis on students' learning is driving research into an evaluation of the relationship between assessment and students' learning. This has led to recognition that students are often more focused on attaining a grade than learning gains (Carless 2002). It has been suggested that the assessment system can drive students into coping strategies and elicit a surface approach to learning, which may impact on the way in which a student approaches future learning. Argris and Schon's model of single and double loop learning outlines two approaches to learning which share some similarities with surface and deep learning. A homeostatic or single loop of learning is similar to surface learning. Students' adoption of this process means that their learning entails giving the right answer for favourable results; this usually results in people usually taking a similar strategy time after time (Yorke 2003). Double loop learning shares more characteristics with deep learning because this is about individuals reflecting on their practice and experiences, challenging existing ideas and letting other approaches emerge (Brooks 2003).

Boud (2000) and Struyven et al (2005) point out that assessment practices in higher education often do not equip students for learning even though it is how, and when, the student is assessed that helps determine how they learn. Boud (1995) argues that summative assessment should not be predominantly about evaluation but also should be about learning because poor assessment can result in students losing confidence in their abilities and skills thereby undermining learning. Ramsden (1992) argues that if we understood how students learnt we would recognise that uniformity of methods may not permit the student to display their knowledge and originality. He claims that what is needed is more variety in assessment in order to promote greater responsibility for self-direction in learning (1992:192).

In terms of assessment, student learning is a function of the intrinsic quality of the form of assessment. Case and Marshall (2004:606) consider that 'how students perceive the course is an important determinant of the choice of approach'. Another key component here is the students' interpretation of the task and the assessment's context (Boud 1995, Ramsden 1992). Learning interpretations by students are also strategically influenced by the context of learning as well as the content, so if the student has a range of assessments to complete at the same time they may have less time to focus on something they consider to be meaningful. Often this result in students appearing only to focus on the grade they achieve through their assessment than on the process of learning (Greer 2001). Often the experience of learning for many students is not reflected upon once the assessment is completed and there is no strategy beyond the task where the focus is exclusively on the words or text needed to complete the assignment (Ashcroft and Foreman-Peck 2002, James 2000).

## 1.4  The Mini-Viva assessment and learning

The mini-viva assessment was conceived as an experimental summative assessment. Its aim was to prepare students for conceiving, designing and planning an international MA dissertation project, to recognise how different methodological elements needed to be fitted together. In order to facilitate this, the assessment was constructed in two parts. Firstly, the students wrote a short paper outlining a potential dissertation project justifying their theoretical and methodological choices. Two weeks later they had a ten minute mini-viva with their research methods tutor. The focus of the session was on exploring what they had written and questions were asked to help the student overcome design weaknesses and methodological inconsistencies thereby increasing or decreasing (depending on their mini-viva) their grade. If in terms of assessment, student learning is a function of the intrinsic quality of the form of assessment (Boud 1995, Ramsden 1992). Then in this case the intrinsic element is talking through a written design to enhance student learning, to give the student immediate feedback on their understanding of their own individual research design. This was considered to be particularly desirable in relation to research methods as the

tutors were also trying to get the students to engage with the topic of research design so when they did their individual dissertations they felt more confident about making methodological decisions.

Surface learning appears undesirable in relation to understanding research methods because students are required to apply and justify methodological knowledge in designing and implementing their own specific dissertation project. A deeper approach permits the students to reflect on their own interpretation of research methodology and permits them to extract understanding of the key concepts they need to discuss in their later proposal and dissertation. Thus they need to have an awareness of how theoretical interpretations around research methodology can be applied to different contexts including previous work and learning (Ramsden 1992, Prosser and Trigwell 1999)

Encouraging deep approaches to learning is important but there was also a concern to recognise that students also have 'the skills and capacities to assess themselves' (Boud 1995: 39). In this research, this is not so much about evaluating marks but in reflecting on, and acknowledging, their own strengths and weaknesses in planning their research design and designing their own individual research methodology. Carless (2002) reasons that when students explain and justify their ideas verbally in assessments such as a mini-viva it can help consolidate students' learning. It also permitted us to explore their understanding of research methods because students needed to understand methodological issues before they engaged with writing their dissertation research proposal.

While the above clearly outlines the direction the tutors want the students to move towards, the key question here is what messages are we transmitting to the students in our mini-viva assessment? Good assessment entails finding an appropriate method and using it sensibly in relation to the subject matter. However, there will always be unintended consequences in assessment that results in students choosing to reject or adopt a more conceptual approach to learning. Case and Marshall (2004:606) consider that 'how students perceive the course is an important determinant of the choice of approach'. This suggests that we need to know what approach to learning the students are themselves choosing if we are to understand the students' experience of the mini-viva. However, the interpretation and perceptions of the students are not always predictable. Indeed for international students from different background this could be problematic because learning is an act, which can result in students exploring ideas and seeing the world in new ways (Boud 1995:43). Thus for this research a key component is the students' interpretation of the task and the assessment's context.

## 2. Methodology

Interpretative philosophy is fundamentally concerned with exploring the complexity of human sense making. Thus interpretative studies focus on understanding phenomena through the meanings that people give to them (Flick 2004). In interpretative qualitative studies the aim is to reveal the embedded holistic inter-connected nature of human experiences in an attempt to extract the significance of this interaction (Bryman and Bell 2003). The adoption of the methodological paradigm helps determine the research methodology, which in this instance was qualitative. A qualitative approach seemed better suited to an investigation of the different meanings and interpretations that different international students, using their own frames of reference, give to a mini-viva (Collis and Hussey 2003).

The research consisted of semi-structured interviews with eighteen international MA business students as they progressed to working on their MA dissertations. Subsequent to a pilot round of exploratory interviews with three international students an agenda was drawn up for the semi-structured interviews. A performance criteria was considered at this stage but it was decided to interview the students at a later stage in the dissertation process and thereby let the student outline (or not) whether the grade they received was still influential in relation to their experience of doing a mini-viva. Semi-structured interviews were chosen as they provide a useful means of access to exploring sense-making of human events (Berg 2004). It also gave space for the researcher to follow up views that related to individual differences and experience of learning styles.

Quota sampling was used to pick equal numbers from students studying International Business Administration and International Marketing Management, a third of the cohort. The gender balance of the sample reflected the gender balance of the two courses. The students chosen were also deliberately picked so that voices from Burkina Faso to Indonesia, from Venezuela to Jordan could be heard. There were no native English speakers in these cohorts so all students were speaking in a secondary language. The sample included students from Europe, Asia, Africa and South America. However, because of the variety of nationalities and the smaller sample it was decided not to group the students according to national

characteristics about students' abilities and learning. For example, if we had had a European group this would have included one Norwegian, two Turkish students, one Cypriot student, one Russian and Spanish student who all could have had a very different experience of teaching and learning. Thus each student was treated as an individual case study to explore the creation of meaning that students give to spoken assessments. Thus the research was about investigating students' viewpoints for similarities and differences between them as individual international students rather than confirming or denying national stereotypes about learning (Neuman 2003). The students' Programme leader was also included in the interviews to draw in a wider range of student feedback. The interviews were then subject to content analysis in which the researcher strove to listen to the text, the manner in which they stated their views to improve understanding of how the students constructed their perspective on assessment and learning in relation to the mini-viva.

## 3. Mini-Viva research findings: The fear factor

Anxiety is an important component in this type of spoken marked assessment.

Ashcroft and Foreman-Peck (2002) make the point that in order to move towards a deeper learning approach anxiety needs to be contained. At the beginning their was the concern that different categories of nationalities would find this easier than others that those from a European background would be less apprehensive than those from South Asian countries that were more used to learning by rote. However, these divisions were not supported by the students' responses, in all the interviews all nationalities made the point that they were nervous about speaking in a secondary language, they were all conscious of the shortfalls in their English language ability whether they were Thai, Indian, Spanish or Jordanian. All of the students regardless of nationality commented that they had little experience of this type of summative assessment in relation to explaining and justifying their own decision-making processes in research design and interestingly enough it was a European student albeit from Uzbekistan who found this aspect the most difficult. However, two students from South Asia, one from Thailand and one from Taiwan did comment that grammatically that this type of assignment was easier for those from Europe but they also considered that developmentally it was important that all students went through this experience. This viewpoint was shared by all the students (apart from one Turkish student whose different views are discussed later). It is summarized below by one South American and one South Asian student:

*It is very difficult to express the ideas when I speak compared to when I write down my own idea because you can change it, you can express things in different ways. When you are talking you think 'Oh God, I am using the incorrect verbs to say something. I hope that the person understands me but I am not sure. But afterwards it made me feel really good. If I can do something like that interview in the future, I've got some feedback from that experience and I gained some experience as well. I am learning at the same time and that is very important for me and my future development (Female Columbian student)*

*I would tell other students not to be too nervous and express what you are thinking, It doesn't matter how good your English is just express with any words you know. They want to know what you are thinking about so just talk (Female Korean Student)*

What became significant from analyzing the students' responses was an apparent willingness to take on responsibility for the language issue. Several of them argued that at the MA level they should be able to converse on their topic to an interested other. They also argued that while the answers may not be in perfect English they should be able to understand questions based on what they had written and be able to express their ideas for their topic The students considered that they should be able to do this type of exercise, because they were expected to have a certain level of language before becoming MA students although that didn't mean that did not find it nerve-racking. The Programme Leader considered this point, while doing a spoken assessment like a mini-viva was challenging he felt that business MA students needed challenging because you could see an equivalence in work situations so this made the experience worthwhile, a viewpoint that several of the students supported in their comments.

## 4. The meaning of a Mini-Viva

Students' views of what a mini-viva meant were diverse but basically fitted into two categories, a spoken exam and a formal interview, the formality of these interpretations were suggested by the summative nature of the assignment. The group of students who saw the mini-viva as more of an interview (while nervous) were less concerned about the grade and more concerned with the exercise. Several of them alluded to the

role-play they had seen and based their interpretation on that or quizzed other students who had done a viva. They saw the exercise more about expressing ideas and keeping talking. This slightly less formal interpretation of the meaning of the assessment maybe influential in student approaches to learning because this group were less anxious compared to those who saw it as an exam (Boud 1995).

> *A mini-viva was just another way of doing an assessment, but doing it deeper because you can ask me what I am doing, I was nervous about 50 percent but all the questions were about what I've written. When I am talking about it I am thinking about it and it gets me further and further and I realize I only know a bit of this and I have to do more. (Female Indonesian student)*

However, those students who perceived a mini-viva more as a spoken exam had different implications for their learning experience. A female Turkish student claimed that that many of her Turkish friends worried too much because they thought it was like an examination. They became defensive and stubborn about their ideas when the tutor suggested that they needed to change elements of their research design because they considered that you were threatening their grade. A male Turkish student was interviewed and his views seemed to fit into this category as he outlined how he thought it was unnecessary to ask what was on his mind and he just repeated what he had written rather than give another opinion. Here there seems to be clear lack of understanding of the learning outcomes of the mini-viva and this has impacted negatively on the students' experience. The misinterpretation has resulted in this student becoming defensive and not seeing the mini-viva as an opportunity to improve on his written work. However, this was the only student interviewed who reacted negatively to the mini-viva despite achieving a respectable grade.

One of the objectives of this research was to examine whether there were other language aspects in relation in a spoken assessment that need to be considered when experimenting with a mini-viva. One student linked this to the open expression of ideas. From Uzbekistan he outlined how people from his country were not used to openly discussing their views and justifying their decisions. This viewpoint he related to his experience of the former Communist regime where open discussion was discouraged. While he was disappointed in his mark because of this difficulty he did recognize that this was perhaps part of the learning process of doing a higher Western degree. Interestingly other students who too had experience of more authoritian regimes such as the Korean student did not raise this issue.

While the Uzbek student was very committed to learning he was disappointed with his performance in the mini-viva. He pointed out that in Uzbekistan the teaching is very different with very few presentations and very little direct questioning. However, he reflected on why (for him) he had not performed so well and then acted to improve his knowledge of research methodology. He worked hard to address his lack of knowledge in his proposal and consequently when reflecting on his development subsequent to the proposal was able to track his learning development in research methodology in relation to speaking about his ideas and was proud of the progress he had made in being more proactive and taking responsibility for his ideas.

The above student's process of learning bears similarities with Argyris's concept of single loop and double loop learning (Brooks 2003). This connects to his reflection on the mini-viva experience, highlighting particular problems and then spending time resolving them, using an alternative approach if necessary (reading more material, contacting the tutor as much as possible). This indicates that he was adopting a double loop learning strategy in order to facilitate deep learning. However, one point to consider in relation to this adoption is as the student outlined he needed the time to do this, for him this was a couple of months, this included time to reflect and then take steps to put right deficiencies and then again reflect on progress. This also indicates the value of doing the interviews when the students are at a later stage of the research process and can examine their experience without focusing exclusively on their grade.

Contrary to expectations those interviewed from more collective South Asian countries such as Taiwan, Indonesia and Thailand did not consider it difficult to explain their idea. In the main they saw speaking about their research design more as an opportunity to advance their specific skills, particularly their business skills. However, a Thai student raises a point about language and politeness that had not been considered and underlines the importance of body language and presenting a clear interest in the students' work when doing an assessment such as the mini-viva to help address cultural distance:

> *Actually I feel a little bit nervous because it never happened in my country before. I worry that if I do not speak friendly, because I am not fluent that is not friendly, but I try to speak clear and make the interviewer understand what I am saying. The interviewer did understand because I could see that*

*from their reaction. After the viva I feel that more is clear and I feel more confident. I think during the viva the questions made me think deeper and deeper. For me this is good. (Male Thailand student)*

This is not necessarily a negative because outcomes can also be affected by the students' intention to learning. Different experiences need not necessarily preclude the students' learning if they wish to learn (Trigwell et al 1999). The above statement seems to suggest that the Thai student is able to value a different way of learning through speaking and gains confidence from that even through he was initially very concerned about this process.

The above illustrates how one can not discount cultural influences when experimenting with mini-viva assessments but also at the same time how one can not necessarily rely on stereotypical groupings of nationalities to explain cultural influences. Interestingly this did not seem to have been a distinct problem in the mini-viva because as the students commented the teaching team were very used to teaching a variety of international students and clearly outlined how the viva would be more of a discussion about their paper than a gladiatorial contest. This approach was made explicit in the mock mini-viva which was conducted in an earlier lecture and is discussed by a Norwegian student:

*I had never done anything like a viva before. I got what I expected because we had this viva role play before. But it was kind of scary because it is assessed and it is part of the research design mark and that's scary but you always get nervous when you are assessed. I think a lot of the students found it scary. To me the exercise was a great help. I was concerned about getting difficult students you can't answer. For example, I was asked about what samples of questions I was going to ask in my interviews. I hadn't really though about it so when you get those type of questions you start sweating and try to find the right answer. I think the question side helped me to focus in on what were the key elements. I think it opened my eyes to what is possible for the proposal. I found out where it was lacking (Male Norwegian student)*

Several students referred to the mock-viva when talking about their lack of experience of this type of assessment and how it helped to alleviate some of their nerves. This allied with the students' willingness to take on responsibility for dealing with language issues overcame most cultural issues in connection to doing a spoken assessment. There also had be a lot of reiteration about what we expected from the mini-viva to reassure the students about participating in a spoken assignment about research design. It was encouraging in the research that despite the varying cultural backgrounds many of the students, including ones from countries such as Taiwan, Cyprus, India, Jordan and even Uzbekistan, saw the mini-viva as being part of a developmental process that students wishing to gain a British MA degree should undergo.

## 5. Writing, speaking or both?

A mix of assessment styles has the potential to provide a more accurate picture of students' knowledge and students' achievement (Ramsden 1992). The Programme leader also considered that a mini-viva was a good fit in helping to establish individual students' degree of understanding in relation to research methods as they need to apply these skills later. However, what was interesting was how the students began to split into two camps in relation to learning preferences. What was significant was that this division did not correlate with national cultural stereotypes in that some students from a more authoritarian collective background such as the Indonesian and Korean students claimed that they fitted into the preferred talking group while our Taiwanese and Thai students considered that they preferred writing as discussed by our Indian student:

*When it came to talking about what I had written I wasn't sure how I would perform I was a bit jittery since what I was going to talk about was assessed. Compared to writing things it is more difficult because you have to be very sure of what you are saying because once you have said it, it is all done. I was looking at it from a different perspective but when the questions were put to me it was like 'OK. I can do it that way, that I should look at it because I knew the right things but I was not putting them in the correct places. For example, the relevance of the literature review to the research project, after the viva I could understand that it is the soul of the research project. (Male Indian student).*

These views contrasted with those students who preferred to speak including one of the African students:

*In the viva you need to make sure you know what you are talking about maybe writing is different from talking and explaining so the viva is a chance to make sure you're on the right track because you hear yourself talking and you hear the question and you can say to yourself 'that's right, I've justified my choice. Maybe I am more comfortable with talking than writing so it was quite good (Female Burkina Faso student).*

There were also some students who did not mind either approach. The gender split of those whose preference of talking as against writing was also considered. However, the split was fairly even between the two genders in this respect and as such did not evidence a gender difference. It is possible to connect the split between those students who preferred to write down their research design and those who relished the opportunity to speak about it as being more related to individual's different learning styles (Entwhistle and Entwhistle 1991, Greer 2001) For example, the latter research grouping, those who liked speaking, saw the mini-viva as an opportunity to improve the mark they had gained from the written design while the others saw the mini-viva as an exercise to be gone through. But as the students' comments as a whole indicate there was something about both writing and speaking that helped to the release the students' learning potential regardless of nationality, gender and cultural background

## 6. Discussion: The Mini-Viva assessment, experience and learning

It seems possible to suggest from this research that there is an intention to learn from doing this type of spoken exercise. If as we outlined earlier a key component of students' taking a more conceptual, deep learning approach is the students' interpretation of the task and the assessment's context (Boud 1995, Ramsden 1992). You could speculate that the students saw the language issue as a barrier to overcome but once the mini-viva was completed they could use this experience to bolster their confidence when talking to their supervisors, and interested others about their research design, some took it further and thought it could be useful when doing interviews in the wider business world. So on the whole the students were, as Trigwell et al (1999) suggests, taking on responsibility for their learning in relation to their language skills.

However, this does not mean that the students do not need to be supported in relation to doing a spoken assessment otherwise you run the risk of the anxiety levels being too high to facilitate learning (Ashcroft and Foreman-Peck 2002). Consideration must be given by the tutors of the stressful nature of doing this and certainly from the comments, such as 'relax it is not an exam' or 'she made me feel comfortable so I could relax' seems to suggest that this was happening. A role-play in relation to the mini-viva helped to take away some of the fear factor for many of the students.

However, the findings indicated that some students still struggled with what a mini-viva meant and saw it as a 'serious event'. But apart from the Turkish male students' all the students saw the outcome more positively despite sometimes having received a lower grade. So how can the difference be explained? The male Turkish's students' response seems on the surface to support Boud's (1995) claim that students who do poorly in assessments can lose confidence (Yorke 2003). But I would argue that what is key here is what the students do in response to not doing well in the viva and this is relational to how they perceive learning. If we examine the following quotation from the male Turkish student we can begin to assess his learning approach:

*After the viva everything goes wrong and suddenly you start worrying about your topic because I don't want to fail the course. I don't think as the proposal as being connected to the viva, I take them separately and in each subject I try to do my best. I don't want to fail. I don't think about the future because there is no guarantee to doing well in the future. (Male Turkish Student)*

The above quotation suggests that this student is employing a surface approach to learning. He is doing the task to his best endeavour and then moving on without reflecting on that experience and linking it to improving his learning. The danger of taking a surface approach is that this takes the learning element out of context and isolates it to one piece of work and links it only to the grade. Thus the student is less likely to appreciate the purpose of the mini-viva exercise (to explore the students' own understanding of research methods and design). Therefore he is less likely to reflect on what he needs to do to improve his understanding of research design, and indeed this was the only student who thought that the viva was 'unnecessary'. So for me the key question here is Ramsden's (1992) question what is this students' intentions when it comes to learning and how does this influence how he learns?

If approaches to learning are relational, and adoption of a deep learning approach is dependent on the students' interpretation of teaching, it is relative to their independence in making choices about learning and a clear awareness of the goals and standards required in the subject-research methods (Ramsden 1992, Trigwell et al 1999), then you could argue that in connection to the male Turkish student this has not occurred. However, a Taiwanese student who failed the summative assessment seems to negate Boud's (1995) claim that students' who do poorly in assessment can lose confidence. He has reacted much more positively to take on responsibility for learning and to reaching the necessary standards to enable him to progress:

> *The viva was a positive thing. I was quite disappointed with the viva but it meant that I worked hard for the proposal and passed the proposal. The major advantage was that it made me think, research methods for international students like us is new. So we need to think about subjects like methodology, I had done projects in Taiwan but not methodology. Before the viva I was really confused afterwards I found more books about methodology whereas before I didn't think about it. (Male Taiwanese student)*

Failing a student in a summative assessment maybe problematic because some students may feel this reflects adversely on their ability, they could lose confidence and so shift toward a position of learned helplessness rather than an independent learner (Yorke 2003). However, I would argue that the above quotation illustrates how the Taiwanese student is shifting towards a deeper approach to learning. He is making independent choices about learning and putting these in place in order to reach the required methodological standards. If we return to Ramsden's key question; what is the students' intentions and how does this influence how a students learns? Here you could claim the student has recognised that research methods is not just about the mini-viva assessment but is about learning and understanding research methods. For him the mini-viva is positive because he has realised that he took on responsibility for developing his own understanding and knowledge and gone to the library to facilitate his understanding and thereby become more of an independent learner.

Argris and Schon (cited in Brooks 2003) suggest that most individuals (and organisations) are good at single-loop learning where people operate within accepted limits set objectives and monitor their performance and then keep repeating the same process. They argue that this can limit learning progression. For them double-loop learning is more desirable but this only occurs when individuals reflect on practice and recognise that some situations require an alternative solution than current practice as indicated by the Taiwanese and Uzbek student who could trace their development and had gained confidence from doing this.

While it was considered that this type of assignment would probably favour the more confident articulate student it was interesting that doing a mini-viva could assist other less articulate students. There was something about combining two learning styles that has helped to release the students' learning potential. For those students who struggled with this exercise there was the recognition that they had to do more work. It made them go deeper into the subject than they would have necessarily chosen to go. They had to shift from surface learning to deep learning because they had to fill in their gaps of knowledge, which had become very evident from the mini-viva. They had to really understand what they had written if they wanted to do a successful proposal for the MA dissertation. All the interviewees thought that combining both a written and spoken exercise about their research design reinforced their learning apart from the male Turkish student. This suggests to the researcher that these students are intending to adopt a deeper approach to learning because strategically they recognize that this topic is not going to go away (Case and Marshall 2004, Prosser and Trigwell 1999).

## 7. Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to explore the meaning that international students gave to mini-vivas. As indicated this was split between those who considered it was a spoken exam and those who thought it was more like a formal interview regardless of nationality. An outcome of these perceptions was that those students who considered it was more like a spoken exam suffered increased anxiety than the other students. However, the students' intentions about learning were key to understanding how the students interpreted the results of their mini-viva regardless of their interpretation of what a mini-viva was (Case and Marshall 2004). As a result of the mini-viva some international students have begun to move towards a deeper level of learning, to enhance their learning of research methods.

The adoption of a deep learning approach is dependent on the student recognizing the value of research methodology goes beyond the original context of the assessment (Boud 1995). The students need to recognize that a surface approach may not give them all the methodological skills to justify choices not only in research design but for their later proposals and dissertation. This takes us back to theorists who argue that in designing assessment the focus is not on transmitting information but understanding why you individually need to know this information (Trigwell et al 1999).

The mini-viva has to be about changing students' conceptions (Prosser and Trigwell 1999). This has been achieved for some students who recognized that there was a shortfall in their knowledge and they had to improve if they wanted to progress. It is possible to argue here that by engaging in a spoken assessment where the students expand on their understanding of research methods for their own individual design highlights vividly strength and weaknesses. Just the act of speaking about their decisions can help them to internalize concepts that they have written about as well as generate new ideas (Ramsden 1992).

When this research began it was thought that issues of language would be predominant but as the above indicates although this is an issue, it has not overset the value of doing a mini-viva. Indeed the combination of both a written and spoken exercise may help students in different ways to release their learning potential, help them to realize that they are independent learners, and as such they can overcome language problems despite their anxiety.

## Acknowledgement

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