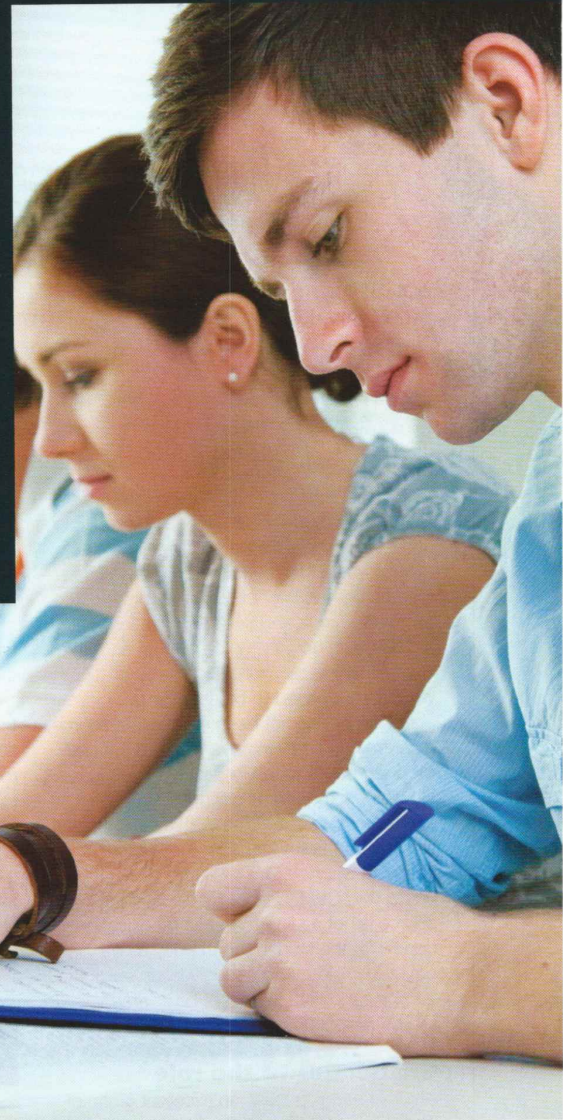


# Analysis

## OLMs at work

**Oral Language Modifiers (OLMs) support candidates who are unable to access examinations in the conventional way because of disabilities or learning problems, requiring specialised support. Caroline Roberts examines the crucial role of the OLM and the importance of getting the right training**



**A**ccess arrangements allow candidates with special needs whose reading comprehension is below average to have an Oral Language Modifier (OLM) present during GCSE, GCE and Entry level examinations. The role of the OLM is to clarify the language of questions and explain rubric when requested to do so by the candidate. The Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ) regulations state that a centre can appoint any responsible adult to the role, although in practice it is often a teaching assistant who normally works with the student, or the examinations officer, who acts as an OLM.

Simplifying complex and multi-layered questions in the pressurised environment of the exam hall is challenging as the modifier must ensure that the changes do not unfairly advantage the candidate or distort the question in any way. Although training is strongly recommended by the JCQ, it is not mandatory. However, the CIEA believes that preparation for the role is crucial and has been running its own training since 2008. The day-long course covers the regulations governing OLMs, practical examples of how language can be modified, and advice on preparation of candidates. Attendees receive accreditation after successfully completing a modification task.

Clarity of communication is not just an issue in formal exams; it is also important in the design of classroom assessments and is at the heart of teaching. The course, which takes place roughly once a month, has proved to be one of the most popular run by

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the CIEA and is relevant to subject leaders and classroom practitioners as well as those more directly involved in exams. “This is about language itself,” says Julius Lang, the CIEA’s training and qualifications manager. “It opens people’s eyes to how vital it is that language is accessible in any subject. If you get this right, learning can be much better.”

### **The role of the OLM**

Before 2007, Oral Communicators were made available during exams to support deaf and hearing-impaired students, whose reading comprehension often lags behind that of their peers due to their late acquisition of language. The role was then renamed OLM and the remit extended to supporting other candidates, including those with dyslexia and other disabilities affecting comprehension, such as autistic spectrum disorders. As in the case of deaf students, these candidates are likely to have smaller vocabularies, experience difficulty making inferences and may be confused by questions that use figurative or idiomatic language.

The OLM is permitted to rephrase the ‘carrier language’ (language used by a teacher or examiner to set a task or test), but not to change subject-specific or technical language as understanding of this forms part of the assessment. Importantly, they can only modify questions or rubric in response to a specific request from the candidate. The regulations allow an OLM to open the paper up to an hour before the start of the exam to underline any subject-specific



language that cannot be changed, but not to pre-modify the questions. Following the exam, they must complete a cover sheet detailing modifications made.

## Modification at source

It makes sense for exam questions and other assessment tasks to be written simply and clearly in the first place to avoid disadvantaging weaker readers. Awarding bodies do involve experienced language modifiers in the development of papers, particularly in key subjects such as English, maths and science. But, says Lang, there are not enough modifiers to cover every subject and modification standards vary. "Some examiners and teachers think it's important that the demands of the question are created by the language and see simplification as 'dumbing down'," he says. "But an assessment is only valid if it assesses what it's supposed to be assessing."

If a paper has not been modified at source, a centre can apply in advance for a specially modified paper for an individual candidate. However, a modifier is still needed in the exam room, says Sandra Wattley, a specialist teacher and team manager for Dudley Learning Support Service, and CIEA-accredited OLM. "Paper modification at source is not as fine-tuned as modification done with the student on the day as it's not student-led. And a modification suitable for one candidate might not be appropriate for the wider cohort."

## Challenges of the role

An OLM needs to have an excellent grasp of English, and ideally some subject knowledge so they are able to easily distinguish between carrier language and subject terminology. They also need to be familiar with the particular needs of the student they are supporting.

Caroline Read, a specialist teacher, consultant and expert in access arrangements, says: "The biggest issue is the danger of either advantaging the student by modifying too much, or causing them to lose marks by modifying the language into something the examiner wasn't asking."

This has been a source of anxiety for secondary schools in Dudley, says Wattley. "You have to respond to whatever the student is asking while operating within the rules and regulations, but you're doing it on the hoof. It's a high-level skill. OLMs have to have confidence in what they're doing and the CIEA training really gives you that confidence."

Candidates also need to know when to ask for help. JCQ statistics for 2010 show that OLMs were present in 1,482 exams but, according to cover sheets returned, language modifications only took place in 440 of these. This could suggest that papers are being adequately modified at source but, says Read, it is more likely that many candidates have not accessed the support available.

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Wattley agrees: "Part of the training is to help you understand how to prepare the student and to make sure they realise the role of the OLM in the exam is very different to that of the TA in the classroom setting.

"They have to be trained to ask for help. You need to practise in mock exams and in the classroom, particularly with students on the autistic spectrum, as they are often very uncomfortable with changes in routine.

"One of my Year 10 students is dyslexic

and on the autistic spectrum. I have had meetings with his teachers and TAs about what they can do to get him ready, such as rephrasing questions in the way that it will work in the exams. He has responded very well and is learning how to break down the questions for himself.

"I think a lot of the things we worked on in the training are very good practice for teachers in the classroom anyway," she adds. "It forces you to think about what you're saying, how you're structuring your questions and how you're writing your worksheets or presenting information on your whiteboard. It definitely improves the quality of teaching." ■

## How to keep it simple\*

Elaborate vocabulary and phrases can be simplified. For example, *in conjunction with* can be changed to *with*; *on completion of* becomes *when finished*; and *utilise* can be replaced by *use*.

The passive voice is one of the last linguistic structures that we acquire as children and often causes problems for those with language difficulties. It should be changed to the active whenever possible. *Describe in each case how the fault can be corrected becomes Describe how to correct each fault.*

Phrasal verbs can be confusing, so *He was cut short in mid-sentence* could be changed to *He was interrupted*.

Complicated sentences can be broken down into shorter units. For example: *What kind of cleaning agent will remove the hard-water stains left by a dripping tap on a washbasin?* would be clearer as *A dripping tap leaves hard-water stains on a washbasin. What kind of cleaning agent will remove these stains?*

Metaphorical language should be avoided.

*Why did the government frown on the regime?*

could be changed to

*Why did the government object to the regime?*

There is a hierarchy of instructional verbs, ranging from *list* to *evaluate*, which make different demands on the candidate. OLMs must be very careful when changing these words and candidates should be taught the meaning of instructional verbs commonly found in exams to minimise modifications.

OLMs need to take care with subject-specific language. The word *locate* can usually be changed to *find*, but not in a geography assessment where it is a subject-specific term.

\* The examples given are drawn from the CIEA's Oral Language Modifier: Guidance Examples. See: [www.ciea.org.uk/training\\_and\\_qualifications/OLM\\_training.aspx](http://www.ciea.org.uk/training_and_qualifications/OLM_training.aspx)