



Qualifications and  
Curriculum Authority

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# **Summary of oral language modifier pilot partnership research reports 1–3**

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## Contents

Purpose and limitations of this document.....	3
Report 1 – Oral language modifiers’ cover sheets reporting their actions.....	3
Report 2 – Questionnaire on demand for oral language modifiers.....	5
Report 3 – Perceptions relating to the use of oral language modifiers.....	6
Summary of commentaries .....	8
Outstanding issues within the commentaries .....	10

## Purpose and limitations of this document

1. This document is written for participants at the oral language modifiers (OLMs, formerly called oral communicators) project group meeting to be held on 30 July 2007. The document summarises the main findings of three research activities conducted during the summer 2007 exams session and the commentaries of project group delegates on those report findings.
2. Being a brief summary, this document cannot capture all the important nuances of the full research reports. **Readers are strongly advised to consult the full research reports to obtain a complete description of the work.**
3. The research cited here has limitations in the extent to which it can inform an understanding of the impact of OLMs on the integrity of assessment in general qualifications. The research evidence relates to participants' opinions and the cover sheets filled in by OLMs. There has been no direct observation of OLMs working in examinations. In addition, there is no analysis in this suite of activities of score data relating to the use of OLMs. The absence of these types of data limits the extent of conclusions that can be drawn about OLM use. However, this is not a neglectful omission. Rather, it is a reasonable limitation given the understanding of OLM use at this point in time, and the timescale within which the research was conducted.

## Report 1 – Oral language modifiers' cover sheets reporting their actions

4. Awarding bodies and the Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ) carried out an analysis of cover sheets provided by OLMs in the pilot, documenting any actions the OLMs had taken in support of the candidate.
5. One hundred and fifty five deaf candidates used an OLM in the summer series of GCE and GCSEs, mostly in GCSEs (77 per cent) and across 110 different specifications.
6. Twenty seven out of 182 deaf candidates who applied for an OLM in the pilot were refused, on the grounds that they had not demonstrated a below average reaching comprehension score.
7. Sixty five per cent of OLMs supporting deaf candidates reported that they had not been asked for help in the examination. Of the 35 per cent who had been asked for help, most reinterpreted a maximum of four words.

8. Of the 373 words reinterpreted, 35 per cent (132) were deemed to be technical or subject-specific rather than carrier language. The instructions to OLMs state clearly that reinterpretation can be applied to carrier language but not to technical language. Such reinterpretation constitutes a breach of the instructions and is therefore classed as malpractice, which could lead to a loss of marks gained for a particular section or component. There were examples of candidates appearing to be both advantaged and disadvantaged by the explanation of technical terms.
9. Eighty per cent of candidates who had an OLM present in the examination also used a modified paper, and on some occasions the carrier language in these had been explained by the OLM. The report stated that particular care should be taken in reinterpreting the carrier language of modified papers, as this has already been modified by a teacher of the deaf specifically for deaf candidates.
10. The report's authors conclude that it is not known why the OLMs reinterpreted so many technical terms. They suggest that as these would be relatively easy to identify in a GCSE paper, even to a non-subject specialist, it may be that the OLM did not think an explanation of the technical term would jeopardise the question.
11. The report indicated that command ('suggest') and abstract ('feature') words have been chosen with a great deal of precision by examiners for the carrier language, to elicit a particular response from the candidate. However, some command and abstract words in the carrier language were changed – for example the word 'suggest', which normally tests higher skills such as the application of knowledge and understanding, was replaced by 'give' or 'say', which implies straightforward recall. The report concluded that the deaf candidate could have been led to misinterpret the question.
12. The report's authors found it surprising that 65 per cent of the candidates who were given permission to use an OLM did not use the arrangement. Of those cover sheets with comments, 42 per cent had only one word explained by the OLM. The report puts forward some ideas as to why this might be:
  - candidates' levels of comprehension are sufficiently high not to require an OLM
  - modified papers are clear enough to need no further explanation
  - OLMs misunderstand the need to complete the cover sheets
  - candidates are reticent about asking the OLM for help.

13. The report concludes that OLMs are changing questions in such a way that the skills being tested are different from those originally intended by the question setter. It follows that candidates are being disadvantaged as much as they are being advantaged by the use of the OLM.

## Report 2 – Questionnaire on demand for oral language modifiers

14. This research sought to provide information on the likely extent of demand for OLMs in general qualifications, in line with the specification agreed by the project group. To do this, a questionnaire was sent to exams officers in a representative sample of English schools.
15. One hundred and forty nine centres returned the questionnaire, representing approximately two per cent of all schools in the country. The proportion of special schools in the responding sample was slightly higher than the corresponding national proportion. The two facts above suggested that the questionnaire findings could give useful information, but that they should be treated as indicative.
16. The percentages of responding centres that reported having at least one student with a specific type of disability were as follows:
  - deaf: 56 per cent
  - dyslexic: 73 per cent
  - aphasic: 13 per cent
  - other comprehension disabilities: 39 per cent (of which the most common were autistic spectrum disorders).
17. The number of centres that reported having at least one student with a particular disability varied considerably. In general, there tended to be few students with either deafness or aphasia in any one centre. In contrast, there could be more students with dyslexia in any one centre.
18. To assess demand, centres stated whether candidates would require an OLM for disabled candidates in particular examination subjects. The percentage of centres **both** having candidates with a particular disability **and** offering GCSE that believed they would request an OLM ranged between 27 per cent and 69 per cent. The percentage tended to be less than 50 per cent.

19. Similar questions were asked for centres that offered GCE A levels. In general, the percentage of centres that said they would request an OLM for their GCE candidates was lower than the corresponding percentage for GCSE. The percentage of GCE-offering centres likely to require an OLM for specific subjects was less than 30 per cent in most cases.
20. Questionnaire respondents answered a free-text question, which asked them to make additional comments. Common responses suggested issues such as:
  - varying experience and knowledge of OLMs
  - general support of the use of OLMs; however, the extent of this support was variable, with some strongly in favour, others more mildly so
  - reservations about OLM use; however, reservations were mainly related to the fairness of the provision or attendant practical difficulties.

## **Report 3 – Perceptions relating to the use of oral language modifiers**

21. The consultancy Ipsos MORI conducted qualitative research to the project group's specification. The research consisted of the following elements:
  - scoping interviews with awarding body and disability group delegates
  - in-depth interviews with teachers, examinations officers and deaf candidates in four schools which had deaf students
  - a discussion group with OLMs.
22. Ipsos MORI's research was project managed by QCA, and it has been realised to QCA's approval. By design, the research was a small-scale, qualitative study. In their nature such studies can explore issues in detail and give indications of the strength of respondents' opinions. However, findings from such projects are necessarily illustrative, rather than statistically representative. Therefore inferences about the extent of findings should be avoided. Further, the work gathered participants' opinions and perceptions, rather than directly observing the work of OLMs in exam sessions.
23. The independent Ipsos MORI researchers concluded that OLMs were seen as a very important support mechanism, which should be available for those who needed it. The

provision was perceived to be fair by teachers, deaf candidates and OLMs, although there may be associated practical considerations to overcome.

24. The role of OLMs was well understood by professionals working in the field (although some students were less sure of the role). OLMs felt that they understood the difference between readers and OLMs, and that they could distinguish the concepts of ‘carrier’ and ‘technical’ language. Beyond this general perception there was some support for precise guidance for OLMs specifying particular words that could or could not be explained (eg by listing all the technical terms in a given exam paper).
25. While OLMs were mainly seen as an important provision for deaf candidates, there were a few perceived disadvantages. This included the perception that several adults walking round an exam hall could be distracting for examination candidates. There was also a small amount of negative feedback from other students about deaf candidates having an ‘advantage’.
26. On the whole, the respondents felt that tests currently available for assessing students’ comprehension abilities, and therefore eligibility for OLM support, were not always appropriate. It followed from that viewpoint that the nature of the tests used should be reviewed, or that eligibility should be left to the discretion of teachers.
27. In contrast, there was also a view among teachers and OLMs that control from regulators and/or awarding bodies had the advantage of bringing transparency and consistency to the use of OLMs.
28. It was viewed as important that OLMs were trusted to use their professional integrity and expertise to support deaf candidates in exams. Also, it was acknowledged that some training would assist potential OLMs to acquire the necessary skills to do the job.
29. Practical issues for schools around OLM use included finding additional exam rooms, timetabling and completing the necessary paperwork. All these practical difficulties were perceived, on the whole, to be reasonably surmountable.

## Summary of commentaries

The following section summarises the additional points made at two meetings and one email discussion, during which project group delegates from awarding bodies, JCQ and disability organisations discussed the implications of report findings.

### Points of agreement within the commentaries

30. The likely demand for OLMs for learners within the broad grouping 'other comprehension difficulties' is still unclear. While some teachers did report on demand from people with speech and language difficulties (9.4 per cent of respondents said they had at least one candidate with this), the way in which the questionnaire was phrased may have led other centres not to predict this type of demand. It was also noted that the self-reporting of 'other comprehension disabilities' may have led to under-reporting of the demand for OLMs from candidates with other disabilities.
31. Centre concern about the quality of modified papers might be the reason why some were strongly in favour of OLMs. In any case, it was generally agreed that the quality of modified papers was in need of review.
32. Some centres might not be fully aware of their own accountability in law to provide reasonable adjustments; this should be made clear at all times.
33. The problem centres had encountered with the need to resubmit a reading comprehension test for OLMs, even where this had already been submitted for a reader, had been an unfortunate consequence of OLMs being piloted in the final term of 2006/07.

### Actions agreed by project group delegates

34. JCQ agreed to form a panel of project group disability organisations, as well as representatives from the Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) to work on JCQ regulations for reasonable adjustments.
35. JCQ agreed to more precise wording in the JCQ regulations clarifying the difference between an OLM and a reader, and why an OLM would be needed as opposed to a reader or the use of modified papers. It should be made clear that deaf candidates use OLMs as a reassurance to boost their confidence in the examination. Therefore candidates respond better where they are familiar with the OLM, for example a teacher of the deaf that they already know. In addition, JCQ will make a presentation on this and other issues for reasonable adjustments in general qualifications, as part of the free

training provided to exams officers by the National Assessment Agency and WJEC (formerly Welsh Joint Education Committee).

36. Nick Lait of JCQ will offer a helpline service to exams officers on the interpretation of JCQ Access Arrangements, which includes reasonable adjustments for disabled candidates.
37. If OLMs were to be reintroduced, their impact should be monitored by reviewing provision every few years.

## Outstanding issues within the commentaries

There are three outstanding issues:

38. Awarding bodies/JCQ and disability organisations differed on their interpretation of the cover sheet data, which showed OLMs had explained technical terms, sometimes inaccurately, and explained command and abstract words in the carrier language in a way that misdirected candidates.
- a) Awarding bodies/JCQ concluded that the findings demonstrated that the provision of OLMs undermined the integrity of the qualification, and that the provision should therefore not be reinstated.
- b) Disability organisations concluded that there was no case not to reinstate OLMs, but that there was need for greater regulation as indicated below. It was felt that the same level of guidance and quality control should be applied to British Sign Language/English interpretation where similar problems of risk can be assumed to exist.
- identifying the qualifications and expertise expected of OLMs
  - instituting an OLM training programme
  - invigilators monitoring OLMs in examinations, with guidance on how to intervene
  - highlighting the technical terms in specific examination papers.
- c) All were agreed that there should be greater emphasis on teaching deaf candidates what command words expect of them, and the meaning of abstract terms.
39. Awarding bodies/JCQ and disability organisations differed on their interpretation of the proportion of OLMs who had reported not taking any action in the examination (65 per cent). Disability organisations felt this should have been expected because, as they had pointed out prior to the research, most students use the OLM provision as reassurance. Awarding bodies/JCQ felt that it was surprising.
40. Disability organisations were concerned that the legality of operating rules which require testing for access to a reasonable adjustment may be open to question under the Disability Discrimination Act. The awarding body/JCQ position is that testing is necessary for some reasonable adjustments to confirm that the provision offered is appropriate, and to ensure a consistently level playing field across all centres. Therefore the research findings lend credence to this view in the case of OLMs.