Oral Comprehensive Exam

After submission of your portfolio, your Oral Comprehensive Exam will be scheduled. This one and a half hour exam addresses aspects of both your TESOL courses and your portfolio.

Please direct any questions you may have about the portfolio requirements, selection of portfolio elements, and/or the submission process to the portfolio reader (contact the TESOL Office if you are not sure who the Portfolio Reader is for any particular semester).

What is an Oral Comprehensive Exam?

The intention of any comprehensive exam is to test your general knowledge of your discipline. In some ways, the comprehensive exam asks you to demonstrate your awareness of the values and beliefs of your discipline, and your mastery of its forms of discourse (of which, terminology is an obvious component).

The point of departure for AU TESOL Oral Comps is always your Portfolio. This ensures that each student’s Comp is personalized, and it’s extremely fair to the examinee: the materials you choose to include in your Portfolio implicitly announce both your pride in these materials and your confidence in being able to answer questions about them. Therefore, in a certain sense, the AU TESOL Oral Comp is in part, a defense of your Portfolio, in the same way that one defends her thesis or dissertation.

What is the Structure of an Oral Comp?

Currently, the Comp lasts about one and a half hours. There are always at least two examiners, although students are permitted to have a third professor participate if they desire. To begin, the examiners will take a few moments to discuss some of your achievements and the positive elements of your participation in the TESOL Program. Then, simply, the examiners take turns asking questions. Initial questions almost always concern the Portfolio. Supplemental materials you include in the Portfolio are rarely topics for questions in the Comp.

While efforts are made to make the Comprehensive Exam as pleasant as possible, the nature of the Oral Comp is conducive to some stress. Students should expect a critical analysis of their efforts. While part of the Comp may be a defense of your portfolio, reacting defensively to the examiners’ queries never makes things easier. Those who respond with an openness about ways to improve their instruction are typically those who fare best.

If the Comp goes well after discussing the Portfolio, examiners may ask some general knowledge questions. Care is taken to be sure that you’re only asked questions about topics studied in your particular program of courses. Please note that your examiners frequently need to refer to your Portfolio during the examination. Therefore, if you wish to refer to Portfolio documents during the examination, you are permitted to bring your own copy.
Realize that the examiners are not “out to get you.” They have an obligation to ensure that you can represent yourself well as a TESOL professional. Therefore, if you don’t understand a question, don’t know an answer, or answer incorrectly, the examiners will usually ask follow-up questions to lead you to the right answer. In fact, the examiners see the Oral Comps as a teaching opportunity as well as an assessment process. Missing one or two specific questions will probably not cause you to fail. No one is perfect, the examiners know.

At the end of the examination, you will be asked to leave the examination room for a few minutes while the examiners discuss their impressions of your responses. Then you will be called back, your performance discussed, and suggestions for improvements made.

If problems arise

In cases where examiners feel that an element of the student’s performance needs further review, the student may be asked to return for a follow-up session before passing the Comprehensive. To date, the follow-up sessions have been of three types:

(1) Students are asked to prepare a short list of specific topics which they were unable to address appropriately during the first Comp session;

(2) Students might be asked to give a teaching demonstration to the examiners (for such lessons, the topic, the student audience, and the aspects of the topic that the lesson should address are provided by the presenters); or

(3) Students might be asked to submit a revised lesson or a new lesson on a different topic.

The type of follow-up asked for will depend on the kind of problems that the student had in the Comprehensive Exam. The students will decide with the examiners the date and time of the follow-up session.

Lines of Inquiry to Anticipate

(1) If one of the portfolio readers has suggested a modification/revision in one of your documents, and you choose not to make it, that is your prerogative; but obviously, you may be asked to defend your decision in the Oral Comp.

(2) If there’s an apparent contradiction or discrepancy between what you claim to believe and what you practice (e.g. you claim one thing in your “Philosophy of Teaching” but do something different in your “Teaching Video”) you may be asked to explain this. There are probably two ways you can do this:
   a. defend and contextualize the contradiction
   b. (particularly in the case of your Teaching Video) acknowledge that in light of what you’ve learned you might now do things differently (and explain what changes you’d make)

(3) Since our program stresses “bringing theory into practice” and “experiential learning,” and since this is a test of your comprehensive knowledge, you may be asked to apply theory or principles mentioned in Portfolio documents to realistic situations. For example, if you do a paper on collaborative learning, we might ask you how you’d structure a small group task for third graders to ensure that is genuinely collaborative learning and not just “students sitting around in a group.”