

All about **IELTS**

How the test works and
what you need to do
to get a good grade

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CHAPTER 3. SPEAKING

THE AIM OF EACH PART

The speaking test is made up of three parts and takes about 11-14 minutes. At the time of writing, the speaking test is still done 'live', meaning you will be in a room with two other people (one who will ask you the questions, one who will be assessing your performance). You won't be with any other test takers.

In the first section, you will be asked questions about yourself. These could be about your education, family, hometown, hobbies, likes/dislikes etc. These questions are designed to help you feel at ease and also give you a chance to show how well you can answer relatively low-level questions. Let's look at the kinds of questions that might come up:

What kinds of activities do you do in your spare time?

Tell me about your family.

Have you always lived in X?

What did you most enjoy studying at school?

EXAM TIP: There are certain kinds of language which you will probably find useful for this section. This includes using verb combinations (like/hate +ing), comparatives and superlatives (better, best etc.), tenses (in the examples here you might need to use present simple, past simple, and present perfect), and expressions of preference (I'd prefer), as well as vocabulary of topics about you such as family, hobbies, places, and studying. If you're aiming for a high score, you should be using this kind of grammar accurately and also using some higher-level language if it's appropriate. Higher-level language includes many components, but some examples of this language include idiomatic expressions (e.g. "it runs in the family"), inversion (e.g. "what I particularly enjoy about hiking

is being surrounded by nature”) and conditionals (e.g. “If I had more spare time, I’d quite like to take up tennis”) amongst many more.

Part 1 is designed to be relatively easy. The questions and grammar focus on lower levels and a B1 (pre-intermediate) student should be able to answer these questions relatively well.

Part 2 is often considered the most difficult part of the test. This is because you have to speak alone for 1-2 minutes. You will have 1 minute to prepare this before you need to speak. The examiner will give you a task card which you will need to speak about. Here is an example of a task card:

Describe a person who you admire a lot.

You should say:
who the person is
what they are like
how well you know them

And explain why you admire them.

You have 1 minute to prepare your answer, so use the prompt well. Make sure you answer all parts of the prompt. This will also give what you say structure and enable you to say more. Timing is probably one of the most important issues in this section, so before you do the test, practise speaking for 1-2 minutes on topics to give you an idea of time. Like part 1, part 2 is still based on you, so you will not be asked to speak for an extended time on things which are in no way related to you. The examiner will probably ask you a few closing questions about what you talked about.

Part 3 is a discussion. The topics here will be more on wider issues, so you will need to give your opinions on issues such as global warming, personality traits, education systems etc. This topic is usually linked thematically to part 2, so for example, if we moved on from the part 2 example given above, part 3 questions could be:

Do you think celebrities are admired too much?

What kinds of people make good role models?

Can admiring a person be a negative thing?

Should children always respect their elders?

These questions have themes related to admiration and respect, but they are asking for your opinions about society and issues in general. This is something which, according to the CEFR (Common European Framework of Referencing), is a competence of students at level B2 and above (intermediate and above), so essentially these questions are higher level and the language you need to use will also be higher level.

EXAM TIP: The final part requires you to show opinions, justify them, show degrees of certainty and show alternatives to real-world situations or future possibilities. It is important that you give full answers and reasons for your thinking. Try to hypothesise (put forward your opinion/argument with reasoning). For example: "I think admiration can sometimes be negative. What I mean by this is that there are situations where people are admired for something which might not be a very positive quality. Take for example admiring a celebrity simply for their looks. I'm not sure this kind of admiration really contributes anything positive to society."

WHAT ARE THEY LOOKING FOR?

The IELTS speaking test is marked on 4 criteria (areas): fluency and coherence, lexical resource, grammatical range and accuracy, and pronunciation. There is a public version of the descriptors for every level, so you can read much more about what each level requires for each part of the criterion. If you search on the internet for 'IELTS speaking public band descriptors' you should be able to see the version that is available to everybody. However, here is a quick exploration of what each criterion means:

Fluency and coherence:

This is the ability to speak smoothly without long pauses and to connect your speech well. A student who often pauses or hesitates and who says small chunks without connecting them in speech with, for example, words like “this is because...” “but I suppose on the other hand” is unlikely to do very well in this area.

Lexical resource:

This is the amount and quality of vocabulary you can use. A lower level student will only be able to use a small range of vocabulary on a topic, while a higher level student should be able to use a wide range of vocabulary. So, it is worth thinking about synonyms and expressions you can use for each subject that might be discussed. Where possible, avoid too much repetition and try to vary your vocabulary.

Grammatical range and accuracy:

This includes two parts, the amount of different structures you can use (range) and how correctly you use them (accuracy). If you are a first language English speaker, you probably already use most of the structures without even recognising it. However, you would also be surprised how many first language speakers have long standing errors in their grammar, so it might be worth checking your speech with someone who is a language buff (if you know anyone like that).

Pronunciation:

Pronunciation can be a specific problem area for students from some countries. A lot of the focus in the public band descriptors are based on intelligibility (how well you can be understood). Your intonation (the rise and fall) or word stress (the words you place importance on) are important in communicating what you want to say in English. Additionally, it may be worth doing a little research on common pronunciation problems in English in the area you are from. Common errors include, but are not limited to:

Distinguishing L and R sounds for many Asian countries

Distinguishing W and V sounds for many European countries

Distinguishing B and V sounds for Spanish speakers

Producing short 'i' sounds and regular past (ed) endings for almost all speakers!

Please consider all these four categories of the marking criteria when preparing for your IELTS speaking test. Often what can happen is that candidates can show fluency at the expense of accuracy or vice versa, but for a top band score, you really need to have fluency, accuracy, show a range of language, and be easily understood.

EXAM TIP: If you are a first language English speaker, then you should have relatively little problem with fluency and pronunciation. Where you might have problems is not using a sufficient range of language to get the score you need. Try to reduce this problem by hypothesising and imagining and explaining what things you would do differently/ or what things could be done differently. These types of explanations usually lead to higher level language that will improve your score.

BE INTERESTING

Of course, you are not being examined on how interesting you are, but if you can say exactly what you want to say and can use more interesting language to say it, you will do better. Let's look at an example of this. Imagine two students are asked to tell the examiner about their home country.

Student 1: "I am from China. China is a very big country with a long history. China is a part of the Asian continent."

Student 2: "I am from China. It's a big country, actually about the size of the USA, and the climate changes dramatically, but, unlike the USA, we're just in one time zone."

Which one do you think is better? Hopefully, you think student 2 is better. Let's think about student 1. What has the examiner found out about the student? Nothing, except that they are from China. Most people know that China is a big country, and most countries have a long history. This is the kind of sentence that examiners might hear a lot, but it actually tells them nothing about the person and makes the speaker seem like they have learnt set phrases to an extent. Now let's look at student 2. They have said it is a big country, but there is also more information. The student has given an interesting comparison and possibly told the examiner something they didn't know before. By expressing something more interesting, they've also used more interesting vocabulary ('climate', 'dramatically', 'time zone'), which affects the score.

This is true of every part of the speaking test. Being interested and interesting will probably lead you to give better answers. Let's look at the part 3 question from above and imagine two students giving their answers:

What kinds of people make good role models?

Student 1: "I don't know. I think people who make a lot of money and have a lot of success make good role models. Maybe they make people work harder. For example, a businessman like Bill Gates or Steve Jobs. These are probably very positive role models because they both have successful companies, and they both have a lot of money, and they are hardworking and I think they both help other people. These are qualities that everyone should want."

Student 2: "I'm not sure if there is any particular type of person that makes a good role model. I think people's role models are quite dependent on their situation and how they've been raised. In some contexts, a successful businesswoman could be a good role model for young girls, especially if they want to have more equality in their own lives, but that role model might not be so applicable for boys. People who have been brought up with a focus on morals, may aspire to people who work in charity. In a way, role models depend on what the individual aspires to, and there's not necessarily a formula."

Here, again speaker 2 is probably going to do better. Speaker 1 doesn't have many ideas and repeats themselves. This student mentions twice that role models should make money, work hard and be successful and this has also made the student repeat language ('they both'). The viewpoint is simplistic and this often produces simplistic language. Probably the most complex use is 'both'. However, student 2 presents a more complex viewpoint. They are not sure there is a 'kind' of good role model, and they explain why they think this by using hypothetical examples "a successful businesswoman could be... if they want to have more equality...". The viewpoint here and the expression of this gives an impression of more complexity, compared to the more simplistic first answer.

Remember that although the examiner is trained to mark objectively, it is likely that they hear many students like 'student 1', so try and stand out from the crowd.