

What is the Purpose of the IELTS Speaking Test?

It is extremely important that you understand what the test is and, more importantly, what it is NOT.

It is **NOT**:

- A test of how many answers you've **memorised**.
- A test of how many 'big'/'fancy'/'high-level' words you know.
- A test of how many different grammar structures and tenses you know.
- A test of how 'British' or 'American' your accent is.

It is:

- A test of how well you can communicate through spoken English.

There is a little more to it than that, as you will see below, but you should always remember that they are simply testing if you can open your mouth and communicate in English.

Don't make it more complicated than it needs to be.

There are four parts to the IELTS marks scheme:

1. **Fluency and Coherence**
2. **Lexical Resource**
3. **Grammatical Range and Accuracy**
4. **Pronunciation**

IELTS Speaking Part 1- Dos and Don'ts

Do # 1- Know What to Expect

You will probably be a little nervous and you don't want any surprises that will make you even more anxious, so you must be aware of exactly what will happen when you walk into the room.

Before Part 1 begins four things will happen.

1. The examiner will introduce themselves and ask you what your name is. You can simply reply 'My name's _____'. Make sure that you use the contraction

- 'name's' rather than 'name is'. This will remind you to use contractions (e.g. I'm, We'd, they'll) in the rest of the test.
2. The examiner will then ask you 'What can I call you?'. You can simply say 'You can call me_____'. If you have an English name, it is fine to use it, but make sure that you pronounce it correctly. If you can't say your own name properly, it does not create the best first impression. If unsure, just use your normal name.
 3. They will then ask you where you are from. Simply state "I'm from_____". There is no need for you to give any extra information about your answers at this stage.
 4. The examiner will finally ask to see your identification. Show it to them and then the test can begin.

By knowing these four things will happen you will be more confident and start the exam well.

Do # 2- Create a Good First Impression

My students often ask me, if they smile, are friendly and give the examiner good eye contact, will they get a higher mark. The answer is no and yes.

There is nothing in the marking criteria which says that being nice, or looking the examiner in the eye will improve your grade. However, being confident helps you because it will have an effect on your answers.

If you look at the floor and give the impression that you would rather be anywhere in the world apart from in the room with the examiner, you will normally give very short monotone answers and this will lower your score.

However, if you are open and friendly with the examiner, you are more likely to give natural sounding answers.

Don't overdo the eye contact thing. It feels really strange when someone looks you straight in the eye for 15 minutes. Pretend that you are having a normal conversation with a friend. If you were looking at the floor the entire time, a friend would ask you if you were OK. If you were staring them dead in the eye, they would get a bit freaked out.

Pretend it is just a normal conversation and you will be fine.

Do # 3- Pretend You're Interested in the Questions

Let's face it, most IELTS questions are really boring. If you listen to someone answer a boring question you will notice one thing- their voice is monotone i.e. it does not go up or down in pitch at all, it sounds very flat. If you speak like this you will get a lower mark for pronunciation because one of the crucial factors you will be tested on is intonation.

When native English speakers talk, their voice naturally falls and rises depending on how they feel about what they are saying.

Imagine you are late for class, you walk into the room and the teacher says to you in a falling tone 'Sit down, please.' They are probably telling you, through their intonation, that they are not very happy with your lack of punctuality. However, if they said it with a rising tone at the start, they would probably be telling you they don't mind that you are late and are happy to see you.

Similarly, if you pretend that you are interested in what the examiner is saying your intonation should become more varied. However, be careful not to overdo it and make your voice really high, or really low because you will sound like a crazy person.

Listening to native speakers talk and copying their intonation will give you a good idea of what natural intonation sounds like.

Do # 4- Extend Your Answers

There is no set amount of words or sentences that you should use in Part 1.

They shouldn't be too short because you want to show the examiner that you can actually use English, so 'I'm a student.' is not really long enough.

However, they should not be too long either, because Part 1 is on familiar topics (family, work, hobbies etc.) and you don't normally talk for 2 minutes when someone asks you where you are from. Also, you will have lots of opportunities to give longer answers in Parts 2 and 3.

As a general rule, if you only give a single sentence answer, with a single clause like 'I'm from Ireland.', then your answer is too short. I also don't think Part 1 answers should ever have more than three sentences. Somewhere in between is just right.

Do # 5- Practice

It is a very bad idea to prepare memorised answers before your speaking test, but because Part 1 is very predictable, you should practice the familiar topics mentioned above in number one.

Try recording yourself and then listen back and think about the following:

1. Could you improve the vocabulary?
2. Did you make any grammar mistakes that could be fixed?
3. Did you speak fluently or did you speak at an unnatural speed?
4. How was your intonation?
5. Did you extend your answer enough?

6. Did you speak clearly?

Try again and keep practicing until you are really confident about talking about the common topics.

See my article on [Part 1 sample answers](#) for ideas.

Don't #1- Give Yes/No Answers

This might sound very obvious, but you would be surprised how many people simply answer with 'Yes' or 'No.' This is probably because many of the questions would naturally lead to a yes or no answer, but you must remember that you are in a test and you have to show the examiner how good your English is.

Giving yes or no answers does not allow the examiner to judge your ability and you will get a low mark no matter how good your English is.

Some people give yes or no answers because they are very nervous and they want the test to be over as soon as possible. The examiner is not there to trick you and most of them are nice people who want you to do your best, so don't be afraid to tell them you are a little nervous and this will normally relieve the tension.

Don't # 2- Go Off Topic

Some students try to tell you their life story or the entire history of their hometown when you ask their name and where they are from. Remember that these are very simple questions and if you have given more than 3-4 sentences you are probably giving irrelevant details.

For example, I recently asked a girl what she did in her free time and she told me everything there was to know about badminton. I did not ask about the rules, history, great players, positives and negatives of the sport, just which sport she liked and why.

Don't # 3- Give No Answer

You don't get to choose the question and if you don't know the answer to a question, or you simply don't like the question, you don't have a choice- you must answer it.

Remember that Part 1 is about YOU. There will be no question you don't understand because they will all be about you.

If you don't understand one word in a question, it is acceptable to ask the examiner to explain what that one word means. It is also acceptable to ask the examiner to repeat the question if you didn't quite understand what they said. However, do not abuse this privilege and use it for every question; only use it when absolutely necessary.

If you really have no idea, be honest with the examiner and tell them you don't really know and then have a guess. It is not an examination of your knowledge, it is a test of your English, so it is perfectly acceptable to make something up if you are really stuck.

Don't # 4- Speak Very Quietly

This is one of the most annoying things for the examiner because no matter how good your English is, if we can't hear you, we can't give you a high score.

This has a lot to do with confidence and shyness. Make sure that you are not talking to the floor and speak a little louder than normally. The examiner will also be recording the test, so it has to be loud enough for the recording device to pick up your voice.

Try recording yourself and play it back. If you can't hear yourself clearly then you need to increase the volume of your voice a little more.

Don't # 5- Be a Perfectionist

The examiner knows that you are speaking in a non-native language and does not expect perfection. Even people who get a 9 make small mistakes, and people who get Band 7 and 8 make quite a few mistakes.

If you are constantly thinking about the perfect grammar and vocabulary, it will reduce your fluency and pronunciation. Fluency and pronunciation make up 50% of your marks, so there is no point in trying to use perfect grammar and vocabulary, if you are losing half your marks in the process.

Speak as naturally as possible, with a focus on speaking at a natural speed and clear pronunciation and the grammar and vocabulary will look after itself.