

A Guide for Taking English Speaking Tests

Introduction

It is an inevitable case for many learners, especially in South Korea, that there has been an emphasis on examining and a growing demand upon the improvement of performance with particular tests. Many of the tests in public schools abroad, which test a student's ability within English, include a formal assessment upon speaking. The international examinations available are provided from a range of organisations such as the Cambridge ESOL Examinations, such as the First Certificate English (FCE) or the Key English Test (KET), the newly introduced Aptis Examinations by the British Council or the International English Language Testing System (IELTS). All these aforementioned examinations contain different elements which test your English production and skills such as reading, writing, listening and speaking. The speaking part of the test is probably the most nerve-wrecking section of the international examinations. Many students feel quite embarrassed or self-conscious of what they are saying and are wondering whether their grammar is appropriate, whether they should be translating from Korean to English, whether there is an expectation to fill silence. This eBook will look at the speaking element of any examinations, such as those previously mentioned. So what sort of activities would candidates expect from a speaking test?

Structure

In any speaking examination, candidates would be expected to undertake various speaking activities to demonstrate their ability as well as their level of English. Any reputable examination would be expected to test the candidate's ability to speak alone or develop conversations with others undertaking the examination. There are usually four different task types when examiners are assessing the candidates' ability of communication. These would include: a short conversation between the candidate and the interlocutor, an extended piece of speaking for the candidate on a particular topic, a two-way discussion (much like a role-play) as well as an extended discussion for each candidate. There are normally two candidates present in the room during the examination. All these task types are aimed to assess the candidate's ability to communicate in English in varying degrees. For example, the first task type (a short conversation between the examiner and the candidate) is aiming to 'break the ice' and relax the candidate. It is a chance for you to introduce yourself to the examiner and 'catch your breath' prior to the other more demanding tasks. However, the second task is aiming to assess your ability to

utilise English in more extended pieces of communication (such as a response to a photograph). The third task requires candidates to liaise together and play a role during the examination. For example, one candidate might be required to make a complaint while the other has to respond to the complaint. In the final task type you might be expected to provide a presentation on a particular topic and this is assessing your overall ability to use English over a period of time (such as one or two minutes). Nevertheless, the overall structure of the speaking examination is very controlled and there are normally two examiners present in the room. One examiner is normally assessing your communicative ability while the other is guiding you through the examination. Notwithstanding, what is the assessment criteria for speaking examinations? What are examiners assessing?

Criteria

Speaking in language examinations is traditionally assessed on a range of criteria but the more recent communicative examinations place greater emphasis on fluency and interaction rather than grammar and correctness. However, this is not always the case in the more reputable examinations. For example, much of the marking criteria assess a range of different areas such as discourse management, pronunciation, interactive communication as well as grammar and vocabulary.

Grammar and Vocabulary	Discourse Management	Pronunciation	Interactive Communication
Candidates are able to show a good degree of grammatical control as well as able to use a range of appropriate vocabulary to give and exchange views.	Candidates are able to produce stretches of language with little hesitation, able to contribute relevant and clear ideas and able to use a range of cohesive devices.	Pronunciation is intelligible, intonation is generally appropriate, sentence and word stress is accurate and articulation is suitable.	The candidate is able to initiate and respond to contributions appropriately with other speakers and is able to maintain and develop interaction naturally.

Most learners believe that speaking tests involve marking the number of grammatical mistakes to determine the level of the student. As the marking criteria demonstrates, grammatical control is one factor that examiners take into account but there are other aspects in speaking which are assessed. Usually with an FCE examination, or those other reputable examinations, marks are based on a sliding scale from 'Zero' to 'Five' (or higher

with the IELTS). The higher the number, the better the score. For example in the FCE examination is marked at a grade of 'Five', it would be a very good score. Nevertheless, examiners usually assess each criteria in the table above, provide a mark for each criteria and then decide on an overall mark for the entire assessment with the candidate during the examination.

Candidates & Examiners

When you decide to take an international English examination, you may notice another candidate in the examining room. Normally, there are two candidates as well as two examiners present during the examination. The other candidate is usually prompted to discuss ideas or opinions with you and you are expected to respond appropriately. Depending on the task type, you could be discussing ideas or topics together or presenting on a particular subject for a number of minutes. As there are two examiners in the room, one will be assessing, based upon the criteria above, while the other examiner is guiding the tasks and students through the examination. The whole examination is very controlled but the speaking produced during the examination should not be constrained. Try to develop, albeit quickly, some rapport or common interests with the other candidate or examiners in the room. If you are confident, it will show through and you feel better to undertake the examination. The next section of this eBook will look at preparation and areas to consider when preparing for any examination.

Preparation

As you will be liaising with the others in the room, you may not understand something that has been mentioned by either the examiner or the other candidate, you should mention something. It is recommended that you just mention quietly and professionally, "I am sorry. I didn't catch that.". If the other learner doesn't understand, you could rephrase and say, "Please repeat that. I didn't hear you.". You wouldn't necessarily be marked down on this and it will show clear confidence and control with English. So the number one thing to prepare for examinations is not to worry if you don't understand something that has been mentioned. I suppose another area is to focus on the task type set by the examiners. If the examiner is asking the candidate to talk about a particular subject for a few minutes, don't interrupt the candidate or the examiner. It is rude and it does you no favours. You shouldn't try to 'show off' when taking the examination as examiners will not look at this in any good light and it could consequently affect your overall marks for the speaking test. I would also recommend that you listen to the examiners and answer the question.

Candidates have no problem speaking but it is important to answer the question. If the examiner asks “What do you like to do at the weekend?”, do not discuss various hobbies that you like to do during the week. The examiners will notice that you haven’t answered the question and it will affect your overall marks. Besides the logistics of performing and behaving during the examination, it is important to prepare for the expected vocabulary in each topic.

It is expected that during the first task in any examination is related to discussing about yourself. Try to feel comfortable talking about yourself: hobbies and interests, family and friends, routines, hometown, etc. I would recommend that you make a vocabulary notebook and write down vocabulary (phrases, etc) in this based upon the topic. If you are at Wall Street English, you could ask your teachers or fellow students for ideas on these topics. Ask yourself how you would say a particular thing in English. If you don’t know how to say this in English but you know how to say it in Korean, ask your teacher or friends for advice. It all helps. Also, if you are able to attend free-talking at your Centre, you could gain greater confidence with the speaking element of any test by practicing with friends. Try to develop debates, share opinions, listen to others but most of all enjoy your time of learning and applying English in various contexts. If you are in the free-talking environment or are able to get private tutoring, try to get everything recorded. These days, smart-phones can record conversations and you are able to re-listen to these in your spare time. Make a note of pronunciation issues which you hear, and try to practice pronouncing individual words and sentences. At the end of the day, the more preparation that you undertake, the more likely you are to feel confident during the speaking examination. Finally, don’t worry if you achieve a grade less than you expected. It is all good practice taking an examination and you will have the opportunity to re-take the examination in the future. You will learn more from your mistakes than you will from a flawless performance.

The Day Of The Examination

The day before your examination, it is best to have a rest and get to bed early the evening before. It is also very important not to study or cram for the test a few days prior. Rather than cramming, it is probably best to have a look at your notes, remind yourself particular vocabulary (phrasal verbs, collocations, etc) and review your preparation. On the day of the examination, have a good breakfast and then listen to some music. Relax and try not to get worked up or stressed regarding the impending examination. You should be a good frame of mind for the examination and perform suitably, depending upon your preparation

and self-confidence. I wish you the very best of luck with your examination and remember, you never stop learning when it comes to acquiring English.