

By David Park

Some misunderstandings about the speaking test

It's clear from the comments that candidates and students make that there are many wrong ideas about the speaking module in IELTS (International English Language Testing System).

Here are three common misunderstandings.

“If the examiner stops you, your English is bad.”

An IELTS candidate had this to say after her recent exam:

“When the examiner asked me something and I was answering, sometimes, he didn't wait and let me finish what I wanted to say. Maybe he didn't like what I was saying or my English was no good.”

The fact is that examiners may **need** to interrupt candidates in any part of the speaking module.

In Parts 1 and 3, examiners must ask test takers a range of questions to allow the candidates' speaking skills to be fully assessed. Each question tests candidates' ability to use English in a different way.

For example, one question might test how well candidates can satisfactorily compare items in English. The next question might test whether test takers can talk about possible events in the future.

Consequently, if a candidate gives a longish answer to a question, the examiner may decide to interrupt. This gives the examiner the opportunity to ask other questions to assess different aspects of the candidate's English.

As well, there's a maximum time limit for each part of the test, so an examiner may need to interrupt an answer to keep within time limits.

Similarly, examiners will interrupt a candidate if the Part 2 talk starts to run over the maximum time of two minutes. In all parts of the test, however, there's no scoring penalty for being interrupted.

If a candidate is interrupted many times, it's usually because the answers are longish. Nevertheless, willingness to talk at length is a factor affecting the fluency score.

Provided there's not too much hesitation, correction or repetition, talking at length gives a candidate a better chance of getting a higher mark for fluency. This is good!

“If the test is short, your English is bad.”

Another test taker made this comment after his exam:

“I felt like the examiner didn't spend more than about 10 minutes with me for the speaking exam. When he said that the exam was over, I was surprised and was about to say, 'Please ask more questions, I still want to speak.' So I don't know what that meant. Maybe he felt like my speaking was so poor or that he didn't understand my speaking at all, so he stopped the exam.”

The speaking module only lasts 11 to 14 minutes. In the case above, the examiner gave the candidate the minimum time allowed.

Why would the examiner use the minimum time allowed? It would simply be because the examiner had already decided the candidate's speaking level. It wasn't necessary to continue for up to three more minutes.

Provided a candidate is talking at a normal speed, an examiner is often able to assess a candidate's speaking skills within the minimum period of 11 minutes. Most speaking tests therefore last around 11 to 12 minutes.

Sometimes, however, examiners will let a test continue for any time up to the full 14 minutes allowed. This may happen, for instance, if a candidate hasn't spoken enough to allow the examiner to satisfactorily assess the candidate's range of speaking skills in 11 minutes.

As an example, nervous candidates may need extra time to show their full language ability since:

- their answers may tend to be brief;
- they may be speaking slower than normal; or
- they may be pausing, correcting, hesitating and/or repeating themselves a lot.

On the other hand, there are positive reasons why tests take longer. For instance, strong candidates tend to give long and detailed answers to Part 3 questions, which takes up more time. Also, an examiner who is particularly enjoying the discussion might use the full time allowed.

The main point is that examiners **never** finish tests before 11 minutes. In contrast, examiners use as much of the 14 minutes available to them as necessary to ensure the candidate's score is accurate.

In other words, the extra time between 11 and 14 minutes is available to make sure:

- enough questions are asked in Parts 1 and 3;
- candidates have the opportunity to present ideas; and
- test takers' assessments are accurate.

The fact that examiners speak with some candidates for the minimum time does not indicate that the candidates' speaking is poor, or good, or even excellent.

“If the examiner doesn't look interested, your English is bad.”

One candidate told me her examiner often didn't look directly at her while she was talking. She thought this meant that her answers were boring or her English was poor. Another candidate wrote this on the Internet:

“If an interviewer doesn't respond excitedly to your answers and looks indifferently, you are not going to make a satisfactory score on speaking.”

Both candidates wrongly interpreted the examiner's body language. A lack of eye contact does **not** mean that what

candidates are saying is boring or that their English is poor.

While a candidate is talking, the examiner is:

- listening to everything being said in order to carefully analyse the candidate's speaking skills;
- perhaps glancing at papers on the scoring scheme;
- maybe making some brief notes; or
- reading the next question to be asked.

As well, the speaking module is a standardised test. This means that assessment is not based on a loose, social conversation, but on a formal, structured interview. It also means that speaking test examiners around the world are required to behave professionally, and in a consistent way.

For example, they have to avoid giving encouraging comments (e.g., “That's interesting”) or showing excessive supporting gestures with their hands or face. An examiner will certainly never “respond excitedly” to an answer, as the person on the Internet suggested.

To sum up, don't let doubts or anxiety caused by misunderstandings lead you into thinking you're not doing well. Negative thoughts only harm performance.

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