

Speaking: Improve to 7+

Note: This was prepared for a group of Chinese students, but the advice applies to students from all over the globe.

Pronunciation

- Overall, clear and understandable pronunciation is the main thing.
- Secondly, the correct use of the following features will determine the pronunciation grade:
 1. basic word pronunciation;
 2. linked speech sounds;
 3. correct and appropriate sentence stress (i.e., which word or words in a sentence are stressed more than others); and,
 4. appropriate use of intonation (rising and falling) to emphasize meaning.
- Slightly inaccurate (= unclear) pronunciation is usually understandable if the correct words and grammar are used but slightly inaccurate pronunciation combined with other errors can result in language that is not understandable at all.
- American pronunciation is acceptable. But try not to suddenly change between standard British and standard American pronunciation too much, or to mix the two too much. This is because the examiner will not be expecting such sudden changes.

Grammar

- Basic grammar, especially the verb tenses. Know how to make the tenses and use them correctly.
- Complex sentences: Don't just use simple sentences all the time. Instead, often use sentences composed of parts that are joined together with conjunctions and other linking words. (This is a "must" for a Band 6 or above in this sub-score.)
- Complex structures: Show that you have (at least some) knowledge of higher level grammar.

Vocabulary

- Show a wide range of vocabulary.
- Use words suitably – don't try to score extra vocabulary points with 'impressive' words you are not sure of.
- Make sure you correctly pronounce words – don't just learn the written form of new words.

Fluency

- Speed – push yourself to speak a little faster but only if your pronunciation is good.
- Continuity – avoid unnaturally long pauses, especially in Part 2.
- Smoothness – use linked pronunciation and use contractions.

Coherence

- Expand your answers with a suitable amount of relevant extra information (detail).
- Use connectives to link sentences especially when expressing more complex ideas. (This is a "must" for a Band 6 or above in this sub-score.)
- Answer questions directly.
- Add extra relevant details in suitable amounts after *first* answering the key point of the question.
- Link your answers to the questions by using *the same* verb tense.
- Try to ensure that your answers to questions are suitable for the *real* meaning of the questions.
- Show knowledge of the 'short form' of answer for 'Yes/No' questions.

1. Pronunciation

- For more detailed information on the common pronunciation errors that Chinese students make, see the page, [COMMON PRONUNCIATION ERRORS](#).
- To improve your pronunciation, see the document, [IMPROVING YOUR PRONUNCIATION](#).

2. Grammar

- For grammar, examiners first notice if candidates can make sentences using simple grammar correctly. The **frequency of basic errors** is what examiners first notice. The majority of these errors involve verbs, especially verb tenses. You should especially take care to answer questions using the same verb tense as the question. This not just concerns correctly forming verb tenses but is also based on of whether your choice of verb tense is suitable for what you are trying to say. Of course, in addition to verbs, there are also lots of other possible grammatical errors.
- Even a candidate who gets an 8 for grammar is allowed to make a very small number of errors but most of these are made when attempting to speak the more complex grammatical structures and these errors are not so bad that the listener misunderstands the speaker's meaning. On the other hand, a Band 3 candidate makes frequent grammatical errors (in almost every sentence) at the most basic level.

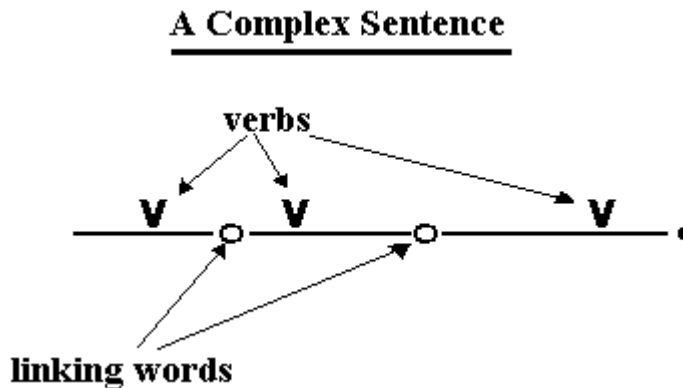
- The examiner also especially looks to see how often and how well the candidate can make **complex sentences**. The examiner also looks at your range of, or variety of connecting words. A complex sentence is a sentence that has two or more parts, each containing a verb, that are joined by words such as '**and**', '**but**', '**because**', '**although**', '**which**', '**that**', '**who**' etc. Note that frequently using '**and**' will not help your score for complex sentences very much although it is better than always speaking simple, short sentences.

COMPLEX SENTENCES IS AN IMPORTANT COMPONENT OF THE GRAMMAR SUBSCORE AND YOU SHOULD STUDY THIS TOPIC. You cannot get a 6 for grammar if you don't make it obvious that you can speak using many complex sentences.

- The following is an example of a complex sentence using two joining words (关连词), **which** and **because**.

"I need to learn English, **which** is very important **because** it will help me get a good job."

Below is a diagram showing a complex sentence with two linking words.



- A Band 4 candidate rarely attempts a complex sentence.

A Band 5 candidate tries to make only a few complex sentences, usually just using 'and' or 'but' as conjunctions. When they try to use more difficult joining words or phrases, they often make mistakes.

A Band 6 can make complex sentences with a (limited) range of joining words and phrases but there still might be several, but not so serious errors.

A Band 7 can make a wide range of complex sentences with only a few errors.

And a Band 8 makes a wide range of complex sentences with almost no errors.

- Examiners also look at the candidate’s grammatical range, that is, whether the candidate can accurately use the more difficult grammar, or **complex structures** such as 过去完成式 (the past perfect tense), 被动语态 (the passive voice), 情态动词的完成时 (perfect modals), 非真实条件句 (conditional sentences or ‘if...would’ sentences), and 间接引语 (reported speech). As with basic verb tenses, the point here is not just the correct construction of the grammatical structure but the appropriate usage of it.

A Band 8 candidate can effortlessly use these and similar grammatical structures with very few or no errors.

A Band 7 can use these but might make a few minor errors.

A Band 6 **tries** to use some of these but makes several errors. However, these are usually errors that do not impede communication. The key point here is to **try** and to be correct *most* of the time but not necessarily correct every time. If you never attempt more complex grammatical structures because you are afraid of making any mistake, it will give you fewer points than if you at least showed the examiner that you know about the existence of these structures.

A Band 5 cannot use (or is afraid to attempt to use) many of these higher-level grammatical forms. If a Band 5 candidate does attempt a more complex grammatical structure, he or she makes errors most of the time and sometimes attempts to remake sentences, trying to get the grammar correct.

- Most candidates in China get a 4 or 5 for grammar. It seems that the majority of students in China don't include much grammar study in their IELTS preparation. **This is a serious mistake** – it is very difficult to get a 6 for Speaking (and Writing) or an overall 6.5 or above in the whole IELTS test if you don't do much **extra** grammar study (beyond what you learned in school) or at the very least, a review of your grammar. You need to not only know how to make the different verb tenses and the more complex grammar structures, you also need to understand ***the correct usage*** of the different grammatical structures. And you need to know it well enough to produce it quite quickly in natural speech.
- For more information on improving your grammar, go to [IMPROVING YOUR GRAMMAR](#).

3. Vocabulary

Most candidates in China get a 5 or a 6 for vocabulary.

Examiners look at several aspects of vocabulary:

- **the range and variety of vocabulary**, i.e., how well the candidate can use words from the simple, everyday level up to the 'expert' level when talking about different topics; how much the candidate can display an accurate and appropriate usage of idiomatic expressions; and how much the candidate speaks a variety of words which express the *same* idea, rather than repeating the same word several times. [If you vary your choice of word in an attempt to show the extent of your vocabulary, don't make the common mistake of using different words that have a *similar* meaning but not the *same* meaning. *Similar* words sometimes introduce new concepts that are *not* what you intend to say. There is nothing wrong with a moderate repetition of the same word – that's natural in the speech of educated native English speakers.]
- **the suitability, or appropriacy** of the words that are used, and the **accuracy of meaning** that is expressed by the words used. **Some candidates try to impress the examiner by using so-called 'big' or 'impressive' words but they use these words inappropriately or incorrectly. You will lose points for this – you would do better if you only spoke simpler words but ones that you know are suitable and correct.** The reason is that communication is the number one goal – if you use words inappropriately or incorrectly then the examiner might have no real idea of your meaning. Of course, you will get points if you use 'impressive' vocabulary appropriately and show that you know the exact meaning of these words.
- the candidate's **ability to talk about unfamiliar topics**;
- the candidate's **ability to use idiomatic expressions**;
- and the candidate's ability to communicate a meaning when he or she doesn't know (or forgets) the exact word to use. This is called **'paraphrasing'**. This is an important language skill.

For more information on improving your vocabulary, go to [IMPROVING YOUR VOCABULARY](#).

4. **Fluency and Coherence**

- Fluency and Coherence are two different things but are grouped together because neither fluency nor coherence alone is considered as important as pronunciation, grammar or vocabulary. Fluency and coherence are both concerned with "the flow of language" – fluency concerns the physical flow of language while coherence concerns the logical "flow of interconnected ideas".
- You need to satisfy the requirements for *both* fluency and coherence to get a particular score for this combined item. For example, if the examiner thinks you are a Band 7 for

Fluency but only a Band 5 for Coherence, you will only get a sub-grade of Band 5 for the combined 'Fluency and Coherence' sub-score.

Fluency

For fluency, examiners notice three related things; **continuity, speed and smoothness.**

Continuity

- This refers to your ability to just, 'keep talking', without too many unnatural pauses. (Natural pauses are the very short pauses that we make when we speak in order to: show the completion of an idea; think of the best word; consider an answer to a question; or to give dramatic effect.) Long pauses are unnatural and usually result from the speaker searching for vocabulary or making a complete sentence in his head before speaking. Pauses at inappropriate places in your speech are also unnatural.
- Many candidates who have long, unnatural pauses in their speech often do this because they are checking their grammar before speaking. In other words, they are overly worried about making grammatical mistakes. Similarly, those candidates who translate from Chinese to English before speaking also speak with long pauses. **In the test itself, you should concentrate more on letting your speech 'flow out' rather than worrying too much about grammar. Yes, keep grammar in mind, but in the test you should rely more on the habits of correct grammar that you had practiced in your preparation before the test. You will get a better score this way.**
- Some candidates break the continuity of their speech by correcting themselves too much. If a candidate corrects himself or herself too frequently, this could result in a loss of continuity. Therefore, you should not self-correct more than 2 or 3 times in the whole test and only do it if you think you made a major mistake that could cause confusion in the listener or if you think the mistake just 'sounds terrible'. Furthermore, you should do it quickly so that the continuity of your speech doesn't seem too disrupted.
- Similarly, avoid unnecessary repetition of what you have just said. (This is usually done by Band 3 and Band 4 speakers who do not have confidence in their English.)
- One way to avoid unnaturally long pauses is to communicate to the examiner, by speaking, what you are thinking as you prepare to answer a question or, in Part 2, as you prepare to say the next thing. For example, instead of sitting there silently while you think of how to answer a question, you could say something such as: *"That's an interesting question!"* or *"That's a difficult question!"* or *"I've never thought about that before."* or *"Let me think about that."*
- **A very important point is this:** many candidates lose points for fluency because they stop talking for unnaturally long periods of time in Part 2 – you are expected to speak

continuously in Part 2. The main reason why some candidates do this is that they simply can't think of enough things to say, or can't think quickly enough of something to say.

Speed

- If your speech is unnaturally slow, you will lose point for fluency. In the test, if you know that your pronunciation is fairly clear and accurate, you should push yourself to speak *a little* faster than you would in a normal, non-test conversation.
- But if you know that your pronunciation is not so clear or accurate, **DON'T** push yourself to speak faster because that could cause the examiner to not understand your pronunciation at all! You will lose big points if the examiner cannot understand you at all.
- Some teachers tell (all) students NOT to speak fast in the test. This is a mistake, I believe, because sometimes *all* the students then think that they should speak slowly. Only those students with poor pronunciation should speak slowly, but only slowly enough to be understood clearly. The candidate who speaks a little slowly in order to be clear will lose a little on the fluency sub-scale but that is far better than losing big points in the pronunciation sub-score for being totally incomprehensible.

Smoothness

Smoothness is actually related to speed. If you don't use the two methods mentioned below to "smooth" your speech, it will be harder to speak at a natural speed. Two of the main ways to make your speech smoother are: a) to link your words and, b) to use contractions.

a) **Linked Speech**

In natural spoken English, most words are not spoken as single words but are linked with the preceding and following words. If you try to say each word individually, it will not sound 'smooth' and it will almost certainly be too slow. One of the main examples of linking is the pronunciation of words that begin with a vowel sound. For example, the sentence, "I'm an accountant" has two words that begin with a vowel, "an" and "accountant" and the sentence is spoken as:

I'm an accountant.

What you see in this example is that a syllable in English doesn't begin with a vowel sound (unless it's at the beginning of a sentence or after a comma or another natural pause). Instead, the syllable begins with the previous consonant before that vowel. This is why we have the word, 'an' – to create a consonant just before a vowel sound.

That sentence has five syllables, with the sentence stress on the syllable, 'ccoun'. When you say this sentence, it almost sounds like one word:

"I/ma/na/coun/tant"

b) **Contracted Speech** (缩写式)

In natural spoken English, we use the contracted forms of some verb constructions very often, or even most of the time. Examples of contractions are: "I'm" = "I am"; "He'll" = "He will"; and, "I'd" = "I would". We use the full forms to show emphasis or when we want to speak especially clearly for some reason, such as when stating a name.

The contracted forms are a faster way to speak and they are spoken in a smoother way than two separate words. Therefore, using contractions improves your fluency.

In the IELTS Speaking test, you should try to use the contracted forms at least 50% of the time. But don't worry if you use the full form sometimes (caused by your old habits of speech). Certainly, *don't* correct yourself if you use the full form. Using the full form is not considered to be *wrong* – it is simply more natural and therefore more suitable to use the contractions most of the time.

Speaking contracted English is not well taught in English classes in China, probably because there is no speaking test in high school.

(On this website, I often use contracted English in order to give a conversational and less formal tone to my writing. Normally, contracted forms are not used in serious writing but it is suitable to use contracted forms in written English that has a conversational tone, for example, in a letter to a friend.)

See [CONTRACTED SPEECH](#) for more on this topic.

Also see [IMPROVING YOUR FLUENCY](#)

Coherence

- The verb ‘cohere’ means, ‘to stick together as a mass or a group.’ In other words, the different parts of a whole are connected or linked. When referring to language, ‘coherence’ is mostly about the linkage of ideas.
- Coherent language is easy to follow because **the ideas are linked using special linking words and phrases** (= "connectives"). In other words, the absence of key linking words or phrases can make your language less coherent.
- Obviously, before you can show the language of linking ideas, you have to say several things, not just one thing. In other words, the first way to get some points for coherence is to speak extended answers, with extra information, not answers that only address the basic question, without adding anything extra. First answer the question directly, then develop your answer with extra information that is related to the question.

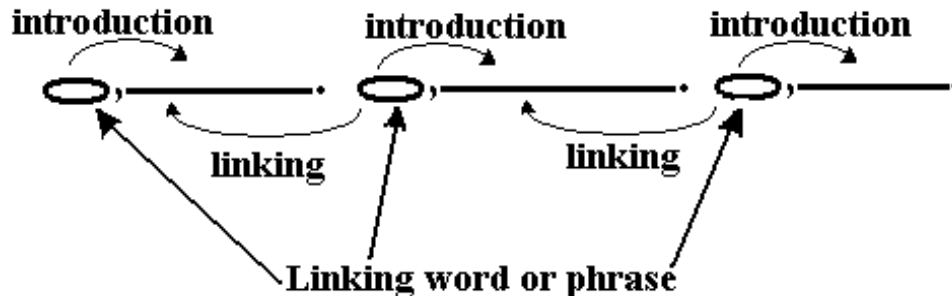
Extended (or 'developed') answers are also more coherent because they help the listener (or reader) better understand your meaning. For instance, adding an example of what you mean helps the listener understand. The more "understandable" or "clear" your answer is, the more it can be called "a coherent" answer.

- Another aspect of coherent language is the logical placement of the ideas. That is, **the ideas are stated in a logical order**. For example, if you are explaining something that has several steps, you normally first talk about the first step and continue on to the last step. In this case, the linking words at the beginning of the sentences should be words such as ‘First’, ‘Second’, ‘Next’, ‘Then’, and ‘Finally’.
- Here's an example of using a short linking phrase to connect the second sentence (the second idea) to the previous sentence (the first idea).

“If you've got a lot of money and especially if you think you can get a good job when you come back to China, studying for an MBA overseas could be a good idea. **On the other hand**, it might not be the wisest decision if your family has to make financial sacrifices to allow you to study overseas because many returning MBA's can't find good-paying positions in China.”

The words, ‘**On the other hand**’ is the linking phrase. It tells the listener (or reader) that the second sentence is an alternative idea to the first sentence. (There are different linking phrases, representing different meanings.) This linking phrase does two things: it serves as an introduction to the second sentence and it links to the idea of the first sentence. Overall, the linking phrase makes it easier for the listener to understand your meaning in the remainder of the second sentence.

Example of cohesion: Three sentences linked



- Good coherence is important in language because if a speaker makes errors in pronunciation, grammar or vocabulary (or all three), or if there is background noise (such as when talking on a telephone), the listener can probably still understand the meaning because he or she was given an introduction to what you are going to say. In addition, when you are speaking about something complex, it is a **good communication skill** to give the listener special help in following what you are saying so that the listener does not have to strain too hard to follow you. (This also applies to your writing in the Writing test.)
- Using good coherence is especially important when a speaker speaks for a long time, as in Part 2 or when a speaker is explaining something rather complex or abstract, as in the answers for many Part 3 questions.
- In the Speaking test, many candidates speak in a way that can be generally understood, i.e., they speak in a way that is not particularly unclear, illogical or inconsistent. This is often because they just say simple things. In addition, the IELTS examiner might understand you because he or she knows what to expect when you give an answer, based on the examiner's experience. However, the examiner's job is to also consider how well you would be understood by a typical English-speaker overseas. In order to get a good sub-score (6 or above) for coherence, you have to **clearly demonstrate that you know how to correctly use several different joining words and phrases.** (To get a 6 for Coherence, you will be forgiven for making *a few* mistakes in the correct usage of joining words and phrases – just show that you have knowledge of this and are trying!)
- Using connectives to link sentences is the most important aspect of coherence but there are other examples of the logical linking of language that come under the heading of 'Coherence'. One example is, when you reply to a question, closely link your answer to the question – link it grammatically (using the same verb form as the question) and link it logically by *first* answering the question and *then* giving other details.
- By giving extra details, you will be making your language more coherent (= easy to understand) because these extra details help the listener to understand more clearly what

you meant in the first part of your answer. In fact, by giving extra details to your basic answer, you can demonstrate good coherence in two ways: a) by simply giving extra ideas that are related to the first idea in your basic answer and, b) in the way you *connect* these extra ideas to your basic answer by using phrases such as “For example, ...”, “In other words, ...” etc.

- Another important aspect of coherence is to understand what the question *really* means so that your answer actually suits the question. See [my comments](#) about the answers that the Portuguese girl gave in the video of her interview. It helps to understand what IELTS examiners expect in your answers and this understanding is best gained by reading many of the pages on this website.
- Show the examiner that you can use the '[short form](#)' of answers to 'Yes/No' questions. These short forms are clearer and more *emphatic* than simply saying, "Yes" or "No" and are, as a result, more coherent.
- Although you should answer questions directly, that does not always mean that you should answer questions immediately. For example, if you are asked a rather complex question in Part 3, it's very suitable to begin your answer with **an introductory statement** before you address the actual question. One example of this is to say, **"Well, it depends on the situation."** And then answer the actual question with words such as, "If then but, on the other hand, if ... then ... ". The key point is not to speak indirectly.
- Showing your coherence skills becomes more important as you progress through the test from Part 1 to Part 3. In Part 2, where you describe something in detail for 1.5 to 2 minutes and therefore speak several sentences on the one topic, it is important to show connections between these sentences. And in Part 3, showing good coherence is especially important because many (or most) of the questions require answers that link several ideas or several statements. See [here](#) for notes on coherence in Part 3. These notes are also applicable to Part 2.