

IELTS Simon

Lessons with Simon, ex-IELTS examiner

February 28, 2020

IELTS Speaking Part 2: 'day out' topic

Let's look at a new speaking topic:

Describe a day out that you enjoyed recently. You should say

- where you went***
- whom you went with***
- what you did that day***
- and why you enjoyed the day out.***

Note: When we talk about a "day out", it means that you went somewhere for leisure purposes. I wouldn't talk about anything related to work or studies here.

[Comments \(5\)](#)

February 21, 2020

IELTS Speaking Part 2: using the prompts

An IELTS teacher asked me the following questions:

Is it compulsory for candidates to address all of the prompts on the cue card? What happens if candidates ignore the prompts but speak well about the topic anyway? And what happens if the candidate misunderstands the question and speaks about a different topic?

Here are the answers that I gave the teacher:

I tell my students to use the prompts because they help you to structure your answer. However, it is still possible to get a very high score even if you don't address all of the points e.g. if you speak well about the topic but miss the last point or two. I don't recommend ignoring the points completely, because there's a danger that you'll go off task if you do that.

If you misunderstand the question and give an unrelated answer, I'm afraid you'll get a very low score. The reason is that candidates could memorise a perfect answer if off-topic answers were allowed.

[Comments \(3\)](#)

February 14, 2020

IELTS Speaking Part 3: use adjectives

Look at the following question and my sample answer, in which I've highlighted the adjectives.

What do you think are the characteristics of a good speaker?

I think good speakers are **confident** and **passionate** about the subject of their speech. They need to be **interesting** and **engaging**. I think a speaker's body language is also really **important**. A famous example of a **great** speaker is Barack Obama; he seems to be a naturally **inspiring** speaker, but I'm sure that practice and preparation are more important than **natural** talent.

Note:

Can you see how the adjectives bring my answer to life?

[Comments \(3\)](#)

February 07, 2020

IELTS Speaking / Grammar: a mixed conditional

Somebody asked me about this sentence from last Friday's speaking [lesson](#):

- There **would be** no computer programmers if the computer **hadn't been invented**.

The student asked me why I didn't follow the normal third conditional 'rule' and write "there would have been" instead of "there would be"? Did I make a mistake?

The answer is no, I didn't make a mistake. I wrote a mixed conditional sentence on purpose. Can you see why? I'll explain in tomorrow's lesson.

[Comments \(4\)](#)

January 31, 2020

IELTS Speaking Part 3: 'technology' topic

1. What technology or equipment is used in most workplaces nowadays?
2. Does technology help workers or make their lives more difficult?
3. What effect does new technology have on employment?

1. Tip: give a list of different technologies, then talk about one in detail:

In most workplaces people use equipment such as computers, phones, printers, fax machines and photocopiers. I think the computer is probably the most essential piece of equipment because we rely on it for almost everything: communicating by email, writing reports, organising data, and finding information on the Internet.

2. Tip: talk about the positives AND the negatives:

Technology definitely helps workers because it makes many tasks so much easier. For example, email is such a useful tool for communication between employees in different offices, or even in different countries. On the other hand, technology can make life more difficult, especially when it goes wrong. It causes a lot of stress when the Internet is down or a computer crashes.

3. Tip: give the good effects AND the bad effects:

I think technology is often responsible for people losing their jobs. Machines have replaced people in areas like manufacturing and agriculture, and whenever a new technology is introduced, there are redundancies. At

the same time, jobs might be created thanks to a new technology; for example, there would be no computer programmers if the computer hadn't been invented.

Comments (3)

January 24, 2020

IELTS Speaking: where to find official videos

Most people don't know that there are videos of IELTS speaking tests on the official website ielts.org. The site also shows you the official score that each candidate was given.

Here's a quick guide to finding the videos:



I've been using three of these videos in the ***speaking band descriptors*** lessons on my [member site](#).

We've been analysing the speaking performances of Tina (band 5), Alexandra (band 7) and Khush (band 8). All three candidates could improve their speaking scores if they followed some simple advice!

Comments (10)

January 18, 2020

IELTS Speaking: a recorded example

Describe an interesting place you have visited.

You should say:

- ***where it is***
- ***what you can do there***
- ***and why you think it's an interesting place.***

Here's an example description of a place I've visited. I've used the vocabulary from yesterday's lesson to describe London.

Listen to the recording while following the vocabulary (see yesterday's lesson). Then you could practise your own description of London using the same vocabulary. Keep practising until you're happy.

 [click here to listen](#)

[Comments \(13\)](#)

January 17, 2020

IELTS Speaking Part 2: describe a place

In part 2 of the speaking test, you might have to describe a place. There are several possible questions about places. For example:

1. Describe a place you have visited.
2. Describe a historic place.
3. Describe a holiday.
4. Describe a place you would like to visit.
5. Describe somewhere you have lived or would like to live.

My advice is to prepare a description of one place that you could use to answer all of these questions. Then search the Internet for some good vocabulary.

For example, here are some ideas I found to describe London:

- **Adjectives:** it's exciting, busy, hectic, cosmopolitan, multicultural, unique. It's historic but modern at the same time, it's a thriving, prosperous city, it's fashionable, lively, fun...
- **Activities:** London is famous for its history, culture, art, museums. Tourists go there to see Big Ben, The Tower of London, Buckingham Palace, Trafalgar Square etc. You can get a fantastic view of the city from the 'London Eye'. It's also famous for its theatres and shows in the West End, its shops, restaurants and nightlife. There are endless things to see and do.
- **Negatives:** London is expensive, crowded, stressful, polluted. The underground system is dirty, travel is overpriced and unpleasant. The cost of living is high (shopping, house prices etc.), the locals are always in a hurry and can be unfriendly, there are social problems (like you can find in most big cities).

[Comments \(0\)](#)

January 10, 2020

IELTS Speaking: three students' questions

Here's part of a recent lesson on my [member site](#). You'll see me answering three questions about the IELTS speaking test.



[Comments \(3\)](#)

January 03, 2020

IELTS Speaking: two types of hesitation

If you look at the 'fluency and coherence' column of the band descriptors, you'll see the following:

- **Band 7:** may demonstrate *language-related* hesitation
- **Band 8:** hesitation is usually *content-related*

Do you understand the difference between these two types of hesitation? Here's how I would summarise them:

- Language-related hesitation: the candidate pauses because he/she is struggling with vocabulary or grammar.
- Content-related hesitation: the candidate pauses to think about his/her answer to the question.

Tip: Try recording yourself as you answer some IELTS speaking questions. Listen to the recording and pay attention to your hesitations. Ask yourself whether you paused to find language or to consider your response to the question.

[Comments \(4\)](#)

December 20, 2019

IELTS Speaking Part 2: describe a festival

A common topic for the short presentation (IELTS Speaking Part 2) is "describe an important festival in your country".

My advice is to look for a description of your festival on Wikipedia. Copy the best parts of the description and make small changes if necessary. As an example, I've copied a short description of Christmas from Wikipedia.

Describe a festival: Christmas

Christmas is an annual holiday that, in Christianity, commemorates the birth of Jesus Christ.

Popular customs of the holiday include gift-giving, music, an exchange of greeting cards, church celebrations, a special meal, and the display of various decorations; including Christmas trees, lights, nativity scenes, and holly. In addition, Father Christmas (known as Santa Claus in some areas) is a popular figure in many countries, associated with the bringing of gifts for children.

Over the Christmas period, people decorate their homes and exchange gifts. In some countries, children perform plays re-telling the events of the Nativity, or sing carols that reference the event. Christmas, along with Easter, is the period of highest annual church attendance.

A special Christmas family meal is an important part of the celebration for many, and what is served varies greatly from country to country. In England and countries influenced by its traditions, a standard Christmas meal includes turkey, potatoes, vegetables, sausages and gravy, followed by Christmas pudding, mince pies and fruit cake.

Comments (4)

December 13, 2019

IELTS Speaking Part 1: simplify

Your priority in part 1 of the speaking test should be to demonstrate **fluency**, not difficult grammar or vocabulary. You'll speak more fluently if you keep your part 1 answers simple.

Here are some examples of how I would simplify students' answers.

Note: the students' answers contain some mistakes.

Student's answer:

Logically people from different generation will have taste variation. Depending upon the maturity, music stars of their own age, impact of globalisation as well as technological development in music industry will divide younger and older generation.

My simplified answer:

Of course, people from different generations have different tastes in music. Popular music changes all the time, and most of us are influenced by whatever style of music is popular when we are growing up.

Student's answer:

Yes, I am fond of music. It is simply the medicine for my mind. When I am stressed, music remove stress. When I am happy, music inspires me to be more. It always in the centre of all my parties with friends. When I am sad, music takes me out glue and move forward.

My simplified answer:

Yes, I love music, mainly because it helps to put me in a better mood. When I'm stressed or sad, music picks me up and puts me in a positive frame of mind.

Comments (6)

December 08, 2019

IELTS Advice: examples bring your answers to life!

Examples are important because they bring your answers to life*. They make your message clearer and your answers more real.

Look at the examples that I used in my 'difficult jobs' answers in Friday's speaking lesson. Without these examples, my answers would be boring and abstract.

- concert pianist
- surgeon
- police officer
- firefighter
- soldier
- paramedic

*Look up the phrase "bring something to life". What does it mean?

[Comments \(5\)](#)

December 07, 2019

IELTS Vocabulary: 'less common' phrases

Here's a list of the 'less common' phrases that I used in yesterday's speaking answers. Notice that I'm highlighting **phrases** and **collocations**, not individual 'big' words.

- are difficult in the sense that
- they require a high level of skill
- that must be developed through many years of study and practice
- might not require such high skill levels
- they are known to be extremely stressful and sometimes traumatic
- do something meaningful
- achieving a great ambition
- for altruistic reasons
- it's their duty to contribute to society
- in the grand scheme of things
- a tight deadline
- minor inconveniences
- the horrors of war that soldiers face
- life-and-death situations

[Comments \(2\)](#)

December 06, 2019

IELTS Speaking Part 3: 'difficult jobs' answers

Here are my sample answers to the questions in last Friday's lesson. Can you find any useful vocabulary in

my responses?

What are the most difficult jobs that people do?

I think jobs can be hard for various different reasons. Some professions, such as concert pianist or surgeon, are difficult in the sense that they require a high level of skill that must be developed through many years of study and practice. On the other hand, jobs like police officer, firefighter or soldier might not require such high skill levels, but they are known to be extremely stressful and sometimes traumatic.

Why do you think some people choose to do difficult jobs?

I suppose we all want to do something meaningful. For some people, this means achieving a great ambition that takes years of hard work. People who choose dangerous jobs might do so for altruistic reasons or because they feel it's their duty to contribute to society.

Do you agree or disagree that all jobs are difficult sometimes?

I would have to disagree with that. I think we all feel that our jobs are difficult or stressful at times, but in the grand scheme of things we have nothing to complain about. A tight deadline or a lost computer file are really just minor inconveniences when compared with the horrors of war that soldiers face, or the life-and-death situations that paramedics see every day.

Comments (2)

November 29, 2019

IELTS Speaking Part 3: 'difficult jobs' discussion

How would you answer these questions (from Cambridge 14, test 3)?

1. What are the most difficult jobs that people do?
2. Why do you think some people choose to do difficult jobs?
3. Do you agree or disagree that all jobs are difficult sometimes?

Tip: Try to think about giving answers that contain three sentences: answer, explain, example.

Comments (9)

November 22, 2019

IELTS Speaking Part 2: describing how you felt

Faye asked a good question below last Friday's lesson:

Can you give some suggestions on how to answer the question "how you felt about something" in speaking part 2?

My suggestion is to start with a simple **adjective** (e.g. happy) and prepare a **theme** around this word. There's an example of theme preparation [here](#), and I used this technique in several of the speaking lessons on my [video course](#) website.

Task: Let's prepare a 'happy' theme together. To be more precise, imagine that you have to describe how you felt when you passed an important test. List some ideas, and share them in the comments below.

Comments (6)

November 15, 2019

IELTS Speaking Part 2: start with vocabulary ideas

The model answer that I shared last Friday was at band 9 level, mainly because of the range of words and phrases that it contained.

But I didn't spontaneously invent those words and phrases; they came from my research into the topic. I searched for good ideas, made a list of topic vocabulary, and then built my description around the phrases on that list.

I'm not suggesting that you can do this in your test, but it's the best way to prepare topics at home.

Comments (5)

November 08, 2019

IELTS Speaking Part 2: 'describe a book' answer

Describe a book that you enjoyed reading because you had to think a lot.

You should say:

- what this book was***
- why you decided to read it***
- what reading this book made you think about***
- and explain why you enjoyed reading this book.***

Here's my band 9 answer, using vocabulary from last week's lesson:

- I'm going to talk about a book that really made me think, and that has had a positive effect on my life. The name of the book is 'Atomic Habits', and it's about the compounding effect that small decisions and minuscule changes can have on people's lives.
- I decided to read Atomic Habits after seeing an interview with the book's author, James Clear, who is a world-renowned expert in the field of habit formation. In the interview, he told inspiring stories and revealed some simple life hacks that can make people more productive, motivated and happy. I found the whole idea of the 'science of tiny habits' fascinating, and so I bought the book straight away.
- While reading the book, I was forced to confront my own habits and behaviours. I realised that I'm nowhere near as productive as I could be, but that some small tweaks to my routine could make a significant and long-lasting difference. The book also gave me a framework to understand how good habits are formed and how bad habits can be broken. It has encouraged me to analyse my own habits accordingly.
- I thoroughly enjoyed reading Atomic Habits because I thought it was well researched, well reasoned and well written. The author's ideas and advice aren't simply his opinions; they are taken from cutting-edge research and real success stories. I enjoy reading books that change my way of thinking in some way or give me practical, life-altering ideas, and this was definitely one of those books.

Comments (4)

November 01, 2019

IELTS Speaking Part 2: less common vocabulary

Here's a list of 'less common' vocabulary from the descriptions in last Friday's lesson. If I can use these phrases in my description (next Friday), I'll be able to give myself a band 9 for vocabulary!

- atomic habits
- a world-renowned expert
- the compound effect of hundreds of small decisions
- a ground-breaking book
- minuscule changes
- life-altering outcomes
- life hacks
- cutting-edge psychology
- he tells inspiring stories
- the science of tiny habits
- productive, motivated and happy
- a dramatic positive effect on my life
- well researched, well reasoned, and well written
- makes a significant and long-lasting difference

Quick exercise:

Take just three of the phrases above, and try to use them in full sentences. Share your sentences in the 'comments' below.

Comments (11)

October 25, 2019

IELTS Speaking Part 2: ideas for 'describe a book'

In last Friday's lesson I shared a task that asks you to describe a book. To prepare for this description, let's choose a book and 'steal' some ideas from an online summary / review.

I'm currently reading a book called 'Atomic Habits'. I found a summary and a review of this book on Amazon (see below), so I'll steal some ideas and use them in my answer next Friday. Maybe you could prepare ideas, in the same way, for a book that you've read.

Here's a quick summary from Amazon:

People think when you want to change your life, you need to think big. But world-renowned habits expert James Clear has discovered another way. He knows that real change comes from the compound effect of hundreds of small decisions – doing two push-ups a day, waking up five minutes early, or holding a single short phone call. He calls them atomic habits.

In this ground-breaking book, Clear reveals exactly how these minuscule changes can grow into such life-altering outcomes. He uncovers a handful of simple life hacks, and delves into cutting-edge psychology and neuroscience to explain why they matter. Along the way, he tells inspiring stories of Olympic gold medalists, leading CEOs, and distinguished scientists who have used the science of tiny habits to stay productive, motivated, and happy.

And here's a customer review (there are many others on Amazon):

I feel lucky to have found this book. It's the only self-help book that I've thought, afterwards, was worth reading. It's had a dramatic positive impact on my life. It's well researched, well reasoned, and well written. A self-help book that actually makes a significant, and long-lasting difference. I'm going to keep re-reading it.

[Comments \(6\)](#)

October 18, 2019

IELTS Speaking Part 2: describe a book

Let's start work on a new task, which comes from Cambridge IELTS 14:

Describe a book that you enjoyed reading because you had to think a lot.

You should say:

- what this book was***
- why you decided to read it***
- what reading this book made you think about***
- and explain why you enjoyed reading this book.***

Which book would you choose to talk about? I'll give you my ideas next Friday.

[Comments \(5\)](#)

October 11, 2019

IELTS Speaking: vocabulary review

Let's look at some of the useful vocabulary from the answers that I shared in last Friday's [lesson](#):

- I can't see shopping malls disappearing*
(I can't see... happening = I don't think... will happen)
- any time soon
- attract shoppers
- mainstream = popular / used or done by most people
- packed with people*
- hugely popular
- it offers more than just...
- and naturally they will

- browse the shops
- I'm pretty sure that...*
- no physical presence on the high street
- the way that things are going*

Note:

The phrases with a star (*) are great for the speaking test, but a little too informal for a written essay. Would you have known this?

[Comments \(4\)](#)

October 04, 2019

IELTS Speaking Part 3: future 'opinion' answers

Here are two sample answers that include opinions about the future:

Will large shopping malls continue to be popular, despite the growth of internet shopping?

I can't see shopping malls disappearing any time soon, so yes, I think they will definitely continue to attract shoppers. We already have internet shopping, with websites like Amazon now mainstream, but the large shopping centres in my city are still packed with people. The Trafford Centre near Manchester, for example, is hugely popular, and I think this is because it offers more than just shopping. It's a place where families go for a day out, to have lunch or to visit attractions like Sea Life or Legoland, and naturally they will browse the shops and buy things there too.

Do you think that some businesses (e.g. banks and travel agents) will only operate online in future?

I'm sure they will, and I think this is already happening. I'm pretty sure that there are online-only savings accounts, and there are travel websites like Airbnb that have no physical presence on the high street. I imagine that more and more services will only be available online; this seems to be the way that things are going.

[Comments \(0\)](#)

September 27, 2019

IELTS Speaking Part 3: opinions about the future

In part 3 of the speaking test, the examiner might ask for your opinions about what will happen in the future.

For example, here are two questions from Cambridge IELTS 14 (test 4). How would you answer them?

1. **Will** large shopping malls continue to be popular, despite the growth of internet shopping?
2. Do you think that some businesses (e.g. banks and travel agents) **will** only operate online in future?

[Comments \(5\)](#)

September 20, 2019

IELTS Speaking Part 3: verb tenses

When answering the two questions below, you should be aware that the examiner is expecting to hear some different verb tenses.

1. Do you think films have changed since you were a child?

No, I don't think films have changed much since I was a child. When I was younger I enjoyed watching action films, and the Hollywood formula for this type of film seems to be the same today. For example, I liked the original 'Superman' films, and superheroes are still a popular subject for film-makers.

2. As the technology for home viewing improves, do you think people will stop going to the cinema in future?

No, I don't think that people will stop going to the cinema. People can already buy fantastic home viewing equipment, but it still feels more special to share the experience of watching a new film with a theatre full of people. I don't think that technology will be able to replicate that cinema atmosphere.

[Comments \(0\)](#)

September 13, 2019

IELTS Speaking: when to worry about tenses

In a recent lesson I explained why I'm not a fan of the 'PPF technique' for part 2 of the speaking test. I believe that candidates should focus on giving a good description in part 2, instead of worrying about verb tenses.

If the examiner wants to test your use of verb tenses, he/she can do this in **part 3** of the test, by choosing certain questions.

Here are some typical 'tense' questions from speaking part 3:

- Do you think _____ is different **now**, compared to when you **were** a child?
- **Did** your teachers _____ when you were at school?
- How do you think _____ **will change** in the future?

Listen carefully for these 'tense' questions in part 3. The examiner will be listening closely to the verbs that you use in your answers!

[Comments \(1\)](#)

September 06, 2019

IELTS Speaking Part 1: negative answers

Here are some **negative** answers to the 'photography' questions that I showed you a couple of weeks ago. The questions come from Cambridge IELTS 11.

1) What type of photos do you like taking?

Well, I don't usually take photos to be honest. I prefer to enjoy whatever I'm doing, rather than stop to take a photograph.

2) What do you do with photos you take?

I don't really do anything with the occasional photos that I take. They just stay on my phone and I forget to save them or upload them to my computer.

3) When you visit other places, do you take photos or buy postcards?

Neither. As I said, I prefer to enjoy myself, so I tend to let other people take photos. I used to buy and send postcards when I was younger, so maybe I should go back to doing that.

4) Do you like people taking photos of you?

As a child I was always a bit shy when it came to having my photo taken, so I would have said that I didn't like it. These days, if someone wants to take a photo of me, I don't mind at all.

[Comments \(3\)](#)

August 31, 2019

IELTS Speaking Advice: my view on the 'PPF' idea

In [this lesson](#) I asked for your views on a technique that some students and teachers are using: they use three verb tenses (past, present, future - PPF) to organise their speaking part 2 answers. In other words, they begin by answering in the past tense, then they move to the present and into the future.

Here's my view on this:

I'm not a fan of this PPF technique because it encourages you to go into the speaking test with a 'grammar mindset'. Your brain is focusing on verb tenses instead of more important things: the task, the bullet points, your ideas, and the vocabulary that you're going to use to express those ideas.

If there's one thing that I stand against as an English / IELTS teacher, it's the 'grammar mindset' and the idea that you can impress the examiner with 'complex structures'.

I'm a '[vocabulary mindset](#)' teacher. I want my students to focus on the 'true content' of their answers, rather than grammar tricks.

[Comments \(5\)](#)

August 30, 2019

IELTS Speaking Part 3: 'nice home' answers

Here are some sample answers for the 'nice home' questions that I asked you to look at two weeks ago. The questions come from Cambridge IELTS 14.

Note: I try to answer in a natural and slightly informal way, but with some good 'topic vocabulary'.

Why do some people buy lots of things for their home?

I think there could be a couple of different reasons for this. Some people like to surround themselves with beautiful objects and furnishings to brighten up their lives, while others buy lots of devices that are supposed

to save time. In my own home we have examples of both types of object: we have things like ornaments and pictures because they look nice, and we have useful gadgets, like a small vacuum cleaner that we recently bought.

Do you think it is very expensive to make a home look nice?

No, definitely not. Basic furniture isn't expensive these days, especially now that we have shops like Ikea. I know plenty of people who have furnished and decorated their homes really nicely without spending too much money. Personally I also like the minimalist look: some basic furniture, light colours and not too much clutter.

Why don't some people care about how their home looks?

Maybe they just see their homes as a base - somewhere to eat and sleep - rather than a reflection of their tastes or personalities. And many people are just too busy with work and life outside the home to worry about furniture and decorations. A friend of mine, for example, doesn't seem to care about the way his house looks, but this is because he's almost never there; he travels for work and spends more time in hotel rooms than in his own house.

Comments (2)

August 23, 2019

IELTS Speaking Part 2: past, present, future?

Several people have asked me about a technique that some teachers recommend for part 2 of the speaking test: the 'past, present, future' technique, or 'PPF'.

Before I give you my opinion about this technique, I'd like to hear from you.

- Has anyone been taught to use this PPF idea?
- How exactly did your teacher suggest that you use it?
- Did it work for you?
- What benefits and drawbacks do you think this technique has?

Note:

Please remember that techniques like this are just suggestions, not rules. If your teacher is saying that you **must** use three tenses in your part 2 answer, he/she is wrong.

Comments (12)