



FREE RESOURCE · PRONUNCIATION

IELTS pronunciation

In IELTS Speaking, pronunciation is one of four criteria that count equally. The assessor listens for how easily they can understand you: your individual sounds, word stress, sentence stress and rhythm, intonation, and how smoothly you join words. You do not need a native accent. You need clear, comfortable-to-follow speech.

What to know

What 'pronunciation' means in the Speaking test

The Speaking test is a conversation with a trained assessor, and it is recorded. Your speech is judged on four things: fluency and coherence, lexical resource, grammatical range and accuracy, and pronunciation. Each of the four counts equally in the final result.

The features the assessor hears

Think of pronunciation as a set of layers. Each layer helps the listener understand you.

- Individual sounds: vowels and consonants. A wrong sound can change the word, such as ship and sheep.
- Word stress: which syllable is strong. If you stress the wrong syllable, as in 'ENvironment' instead of 'enVironment', or 'DEvelopment' instead of 'deVELOpment', listeners may not recognise the word.
- Sentence stress and rhythm: the important words are longer and louder, and the small grammar words are short and quick.
- Intonation: the rise and fall of your voice. It shows meaning, such as a question, a list or a new idea.
- Connected speech: how words join together, so that the speech flows in chunks.

Accent is not the target

A common worry is that you must sound British or American. That is not what the criterion measures. Research on second-language speech separates accent from understanding. Munro and Derwing (1995) found that a speaker can have a strong accent and still be easy to understand, and that accent and intelligibility are not the same thing.

What helps the listener most

Start with the features that cause misunderstanding. Check the sounds that change meaning in your language group, then word stress on the key words of your topic, then the stress and chunking in your longer answers.

Common worries and myths

Myth: I must speak fast to sound fluent. In fact, a controlled pace with clear stress is easier to understand.

Exercises

1. In IELTS Speaking, the pronunciation criterion is mainly about _____.
 - a. having a British accent

- b. how easily the listener can understand you
 - c. speaking as fast as possible
2. Which of these is NOT a feature of pronunciation?
- a. The length of your essay
 - b. Word stress
 - c. Intonation
3. Which syllable is stressed in **environment**? en · vi · ron · ment
4. Which syllable is stressed in **development**? de · vel · op · ment
5. Which stress pattern is natural? *I enjoy living in a big city.*
- a. **I EN** joy liv **ING IN A** big ci **TY**
 - b. I en **JOY LIV** ing in a **BIG CI** ty
6. Find the mistake and write the right form: (1) To prepare for the test, (2) I will practise (3) copying a native accent exactly.
7. Which research idea does this article use about accent?
- a. A speaker can have an accent and still be easy to understand
 - b. Only native accents are clear
 - c. A strong accent always means low understanding
8. Write the word for the rise and fall of the voice in speech, which can show a question or a list.
9. Which syllable is stressed in **pronunciation**? pro · nun · ci · a · tion
10. The best speed for IELTS Speaking is a _____ pace with clear stress.
- a. steady, comfortable
 - b. very fast
 - c. very slow, word by word

Practise online, free: hear every example and check your answers at www.ielts-laboratory.co/free-resources/ielts-pronunciation/practice/

IELTS tip. Record one answer to a Part 2 prompt, then listen for the words you would have to repeat if you were the listener. Fix the sounds and stresses in those words first, because they decide how easily you can be understood. Aim to be clear and steady, not to copy any accent.

FOR TEACHERS · PRONUNCIATION

IELTS pronunciation

AIM	Learners will understand what the pronunciation criterion rewards and choose two features to improve.
TIME	30 minutes
LEVEL	B1 to B2 (IELTS 5 to 6.5)
MATERIALS	This worksheet, one copy per learner; the free online practice for the audio

Warm-up

Ask learners what they think the assessor listens for in pronunciation. List ideas on the board and sort them into sounds, stress, rhythm and intonation.

Lesson steps

1. Present the features of pronunciation and give one clear example of each from a recording.
2. Play a short learner-style answer twice. First for meaning, then for one feature. Learners note where understanding was hard.
3. Learners record a one-minute answer to a Part 2 prompt and listen to it with a checklist.
4. In pairs, learners give each other one strength and one target, and agree a short practice plan.

Extension

Use the public band descriptors for pronunciation and ask learners to rewrite them in their own words.

Answer key

1. b) how easily the listener can understand you. The criterion is about clear, comfortable-to-follow speech. It is not about a particular accent or about speed.
2. a) The length of your essay. Essay length belongs to Writing. Word stress and intonation are both features of pronunciation.
3. en**VI**ronment. The stress falls on the second syllable: en-VI-ron-ment. A wrong stress can make a key IELTS word hard to recognise.
4. de**VE**velopment. The stress is on the second syllable: de-VEL-op-ment. The first vowel is weak.
5. b) I en **JOY LIV** ing in a **BIG CI** ty. The stressed syllables are joy, liv, big and ci. The grammar words I, in and a are short and weak.
6. Part 3: *copying a native accent exactly*. → **being clear and easy to follow**. The goal is clarity, not a native accent. Work on the features that make you hard to follow.
7. a) A speaker can have an accent and still be easy to understand. Munro and Derwing (1995) separated accent from intelligibility. Strength of accent and ease of understanding are not the same thing.
8. intonation. Intonation is the melody of speech. It helps the listener follow your meaning.

9. pronunciation. The word is stressed on the fourth syllable: pro-nun-ci-A-tion. Notice that the verb pronounce has a different vowel in the second syllable.
10. a) steady, comfortable. A steady pace keeps sounds clear and lets you use stress and rhythm. Very fast speech blurs sounds, and very slow speech breaks the rhythm.

Questions learners often ask

Do I need a British or American accent for IELTS? No. The criterion is about how easily you can be understood, not about which accent you have. Keep your own voice and make it clear.

How is pronunciation scored in IELTS Speaking? It is one of four equal criteria. The assessor uses the public band descriptors, which refer to features such as sounds, stress, rhythm, intonation and the effort needed to understand you.

Which is more important: sounds or stress? Both help the listener. Many teachers advise starting with the sounds and stresses that change meaning, then adding rhythm and intonation.

Can I practise IELTS pronunciation alone? Yes. Record yourself, listen back, and work on one feature at a time. A teacher can help you find which features matter most for you.

Sources

- IELTS Speaking: Band descriptors (public version). British Council, IDP IELTS and Cambridge University Press & Assessment.
- Munro, M. J., & Derwing, T. M. (1995). Foreign accent, comprehensibility, and intelligibility in the speech of second language learners. *Language Learning*, 45(1), 73-97.
- Jenkins, J. (2000). *The Phonology of English as an International Language*. Oxford University Press.

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