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Ellen: Hi there IELTS test takers. This is Ellen and I'm back with another podcast today. This one will deal with speaking. What I have done is I have pulled up the band descriptors for speaking and the goal to this podcast is to kind of clarify for you what is graded and how you are scored in your speaking test.

What we have here in front of us is clearly the public version as it says here in parenthesis, but I've spoken to a number of IELTS examiners and they assure me that what we have available as the public is really very similar to what the actual IELTS examiners have the day of the exam in front of them. Maybe theirs has one more bullet or it's a little more detailed in certain areas, but on the whole, we can use this and gauge where we are in speaking.

So, this is what I want to cover today. Many of you may have seen this before, but I'm also pretty sure that a lot of you haven't seen this. These are available all throughout the internet. All you really have to do is just type in your favorite search engine 'IELTS speaking band descriptors' and you'll find them.



Also, you can easily find the writing band descriptors for Task 1 and for Task 2. That's just for your future reference if you want to see them on your own you can look them up. It's really easy to find them.

Let's talk about what we have. We all pretty much know that there are nine bands. You can ignore band 0, but essentially it's bands 1 through 9 and of course, there are four criteria that we are graded on: fluency and coherence, lexical resource, grammatical range and accuracy, and pronunciation.

I'll just stick with writing because in writing we are scored on four criteria as well although one of the criteria is different. So, here we have pronunciation whereas in writing we have coherence and cohesion. Again, you are scored on four different areas. That's the whole point.

Let's now talk a little bit about these criteria. One thing that we need to know is that each one of these criteria counts for 25% of your speaking score. I don't want you to think that your fluency coherence score earns you more points than say, for example, your pronunciation or your lexical resources is more important than your grammatical range and accuracy. That's simply not the case.

From what I understand, this is kind of a more holistic feeling that the examiner gets listening to you and then it breaks down into more detailed information regarding your vocabulary, regarding your grammar and then regarding your pronunciation. What ends up happening is



that something in your speaking could potentially affect two or possibly even more areas, but we'll get into that.

Let's start actually looking at the 9. From what my examiner friends tell me, the 9 is more or less the kind of speech you would expect from a native speaker. Yes, exactly. We all know that there is no 10, but a 9 is what they reserve for someone who has either spent many years in an English speaking country or is a native speaker or who speaks with such fluency that the mistakes they make are the kinds of mistakes you might expect from a native speaker, but that's pretty much it. We're talking pretty flawless English here.

Let's actually look at what happens in the fluency and coherence score. I actually just made it a little bigger so it will be easier for some of you to read; easier for me at least. So, here we go. At the 9, fluency coherence says that the test taker speaks fluently with only rare repetition or self-correction.

A lot of times when we're speaking, we realize we've made a mistake or we started a sentence and then kind of midstream changed our mind about how we wanted to say what we want to say and so we self-correct. Even native speakers do this so it's not that rare, but the fact is at a level 9, at a band 9, you're not going to do this a lot or even repetition. It says "rare".

Sometimes, people who are learning English as a foreign language, they, they do this kind of thing where, where they, they-- that's repetition and there are other ways people use



repetition as well in their speech. At a band 9, you're speaking pretty fluently and there's not much of this. You start a sentence and you go with it.

Let's look at the second bullet. It says any hesitation is content related rather than to find words or grammar. Again, this is the kind of characteristic that you would find in native speaker speech. Even if you listen to some of my podcasts, you'll see that I say a lot of ums and other kind of-- there it is, types of hesitation where it's not that I can't think of a vocabulary word that I want. That's not the case. It's just I have to think about how I want to formulate my answer in the clearest way possible.

Again, it's something that is pretty characteristic of native English speech. The hesitation you hear in an instance like that is really rather different from this where you are looking for words or grammar because when you are looking for words or grammar it's pretty obvious by the words that follow.

For example, if a person hesitates and then what they end up saying is really actually rather simplistic, then you can understand that this person wasn't looking to formulate his or her answer, they simply couldn't think of the words that they were looking for or couldn't really understand the kind of grammar they need to use and so they were struggling with it.



The third bullet tells us that a 9 speaks coherently with fully appropriate cohesive features. I know in a previous podcast I did, I talked a lot about cohesion, things that create cohesion. At a 9, you are able to use them not only in your writing but in your speech as well.

That's things like ellipses, that's things like appropriate use of pronouns, appropriate use of linking devices, appropriate use of words like such, so, this, that. It's fully appropriate and it's accurate. It doesn't say that, but it's assumed that your use of these cohesive features is accurate as well.

This is really interesting too: develops topics fully and appropriately. You're not going off into a tangent. If they ask you an abstract question like you usually find in part 3, you are answering it on topic, it is coherent, it makes sense, you extend, you fully answer the question, so it's a conversation that flows like it would with any proficient speaker of English. That's what's happening with a band 9.

Now, what I want to do is I want to skip over the 8 and I want to talk a little bit about band 7 because this seems to be the score that most IELTS test takers come to us about. At least they need a 7. Sometimes people need a 7.5, but usually, people need a 7. So, I want to talk about that right now.

Let's see how they are different. Here, a test taker speaks at length without noticeable effort or loss of coherence. Look at the difference. “Speaks at length without effort or without



noticeable effort”, here it is “speaks fluently”. So, you can see that you are not speaking fluently at a 7, but you can tell that there is ease. You are comfortable speaking English, you are not stumbling, you're not [halchuring? 00:10:04.02], you're not hesitating a lot even though it may lack some of that fluency and some of that gracefulness that you would find at a band 9.

Additionally, there is no loss of coherence. The whole time you're speaking, the examiner understands you. That's what's happening at a band 7. You're not saying anything that is confusing or is incoherent and makes the examiner kind of scratch his or her head in confusion.

The second bullet tells us that the test taker may demonstrate language related hesitation at times or some repetition and/or self-correction. You may remember that at the band 9, we saw that there was rare repetition or self-correction. Here, some is expected.

Yes, occasionally you're going to slip up. You're going to correct yourself. Maybe you're saying an advanced grammatical phenomenon like, “If I had taken this trip, I would go to this...” and then you're like “...no, I would have gone...” That's the kind of thing that you would expect at a 7 where you realize oops, I used the wrong tense. Let me fix it now that I caught it. That's the kind of thing that you would expect at a 7.



Let me talk about self-correction. I've already explained what we mean when we look at words like repetition. Maybe you're not just 100% sure you said something correctly, so you just kind of say it again. So, yes, this is going to happen at a band 7.

Then let's look at this. The last bullet tells us here that a 7 uses a range of connectives and discourse markers with some flexibility. What does that mean? That's a really vague term, isn't it? "Some flexibility." Yes, you are using connectives. You are using discourse markers.

Everyone always asks me, what is a discourse marker? Well, discourse markers are essentially these words that native speakers use to kind of break into their speech at times. I mean, I know I use a lot of them and I just did. This "I mean" is one. "So" is another one. I know I am notorious for using "so" a lot. Anyway, is one, well is another one.

So, when you are doing the speaking test, at a 7, you will use some of these. You will use words like anyway, so, well, I mean. All of these are discourse markers. Again, if you do a nice little search on the internet, you'll find a variety of these and you'll see kind of which ones you can use and which ones will be relevant for the speaking exam. At a 7, you are expected to use some of these.

Now, really briefly what I want to do is talk about how the 7 is different from the 6. In general, there is a jump from a 6 to a 7. When you are entering 7 territory, you're kind of entering



proficiency territory whereas in the 6 you are kind of considered intermediate, an intermediate language user.

That's why so many people seem to struggle with that jump from the 6 to the 7 because essentially, you're jumping categories. Not just bands but a category of language user. So, you're getting away from this kind of intermediate use of the language into this more proficient use of the English language.

Look at how the 6 differs from the 7. Here, you're willing to speak at length. So, it's like you want to speak at length, but you might not always manage it. Here, you might lose coherence and that loss of coherence might be because you are repeating yourself, you are self-correcting yourself or maybe just because of a lot of hesitation. You're pausing, a lot of ums, a lot of thinking. That's going to be pretty characteristic of a 6. Now, here you may use connectives and discourse markers, but they are not always 100% accurate.

So, essentially what's the takeaway from the 6? You're doing what you're supposed to do, but you're not really super fluent about it. That's what I kind of want to cover as far as fluency and coherence goes: the band 9, the band 7 and the band 6.

Moving on, I want to look at lexical resource. As you could probably guess, at a band 9 you're never at a loss for words. You know exactly the word you want to use, you are precise, there it



is right there, on a wide range of topics, you know the proper word to use in a variety of contexts and you can use idiomatic language naturally and accurately.

Idiomatic language is the kind of thing that you probably won't see a lot in your writing, but we do use quite a bit of it when we speak. At a 9, you're pretty comfortable with this kind of language. Compare that to a 7 where you use vocabulary resource flexibly. Flexibly means that you are able to talk about a variety of topics. Some of them might be abstract, some of them might be complex, but it's not that fluency and it's not that precision of language. You're able to get through it, you're able to discuss ideas and concepts at a good level, but it might not be as if you were talking to a native speaker. That's the major difference.

You're also able to use some less common and idiomatic vocabulary, which is great. You show that yes, you understand style and collocation, but occasionally, there might be some errors. Collocation is something I talk about a lot during the essay corrections that I do here at ieltspodcast.com. A lot of you use really, really nice collocations in your writing, but sometimes I see people making mistakes. It's just combinations of words just don't go together.

There are tons of resources regarding collocations which I encourage you to use. I know that I personally have a couple of books on collocations, both intermediate and advanced collocations and if you do a good solid search on the internet, you can find things about collocations; which words go together and which words don't.



Here, uses paraphrase effectively. What does this mean? It's possible that you may need to describe something or you may need to explain something, but you don't exactly know the precise word to describe it. When this happens, you must use paraphrase and that essentially means that you find another way to basically define or explain what you're talking about without actually using the word that you can't think of or you just don't know.

At a 7, you are expected to do this appropriately, effectively, probably not a ton, but when you do need to use it, you can. Now, compare what happens at the 6. Here, you have a wide enough vocabulary to discuss topics at length. Here, there's not a lot of precision. Basically, you are getting the job done.

You're making your message understandable, you're communicating your message to the examiner, but there's not a lot of precision, there might be some inappropriacies, you may use the wrong words at times, but essentially you can get through those 14 minutes and make the examiner understand your answers and your opinions about all the topics that you talked about. Here, you generally paraphrase successfully. Occasionally, the examiner might be like, "What? I didn't really understand," but on the whole, you can do it.

Now, let's take a look at grammatical range and accuracy. At the 9, you're using a full range of structures naturally and appropriately. This is a person who doesn't have to think about grammar. This is a person who just speaks and just goes with it and doesn't have to think to him



or herself, "Okay, I'm using a conditional here. So, which tense must come in my results clause?" or, "I need to use a relative clause. So, do I put my preposition before the relative pronoun or at the end of my clause?" At a 9, you're not thinking about this stuff. You're just talking and it comes out beautifully and it comes out accurately and it's at a high level.

Here, produces consistently accurate structures apart from slips characteristic of native speaker speech. I know that when I hear myself in some of these error corrections, I make little slips. I make little slips because I'm thinking about what I want to tell the student whose essay I'm correcting and sometimes, I say little things.

It's just thoughtless little errors. Even I do it even though I have been teaching IELTS for over 10 years. These kinds of silly little things are expected at a band 9, but it's probably not a lot of them. It's just maybe one or two.

Now, compare that to what happens at a band 7 where the test taker uses a range of complex structures. Do you see the difference here? Here's a full range, which means that you're using lots of different grammatical structures. If you're not really sure of what we mean by a full range of structures, seriously, just grab an advanced grammar book and look at some of those last chapters. Those last chapters of those books will pretty much tell you what some of the complicated grammatical structures are.

At a 9, you're using all of those structures accurately. At a band 7, you're using some of those structures. Some of the times they are correct, a lot of the times they are correct. There are some errors though. If



you are using say, for example, inversion, which is one of my favorite grammatical structures, occasionally you might make some mistakes.

You could say something like, "Not only it is a good test but it is a comprehensive test as well." That's a mistake because the proper way to say this is, "Not only is it a good test but it is," etc., etc., etc. At a band 7, you might have a couple of those mistakes. However, look at this. You're expected to make frequently error-free sentences.

I think the word frequently here is really easy to misunderstand. A lot of people think well, frequently means 60%. Well, not really. My understanding of this is that at a 7 you are expected to do a lot better than just 70% accuracy. You are expected to have more accuracy than that.

Then some grammatical mistakes persist. I have seen students who have a hard time with articles and it's just they just can't wrap their head around it. It's one of their problem areas. So, this is the kind of thing that you might see happening even though everything else is beautiful, everything else is accurate, everything else is advanced and complex and flexible.

You might see at a band 7 that you know what, the candidate is still messing up his or her articles or maybe some prepositions. A lot of people have a hard time with prepositions. So, that's what's happening here, but you'll see that the majority of the sentences, the vast majority of them are error free.

Now, look at how that differs with the band 6. Here, you're using simple structures and complex, but you're probably not really comfortable using a lot of these complex structures. So, you probably prefer



some of the simple ones and when you do try to use a complex structure, you're probably having some mistakes.

However, look what happens here. They rarely cause comprehension problems. In other words, this is a person who might be a risk taker. It's a person who is familiar with some of these complex structures, it's a person who has learned them, who if they are writing them could probably do them with some success, but when speaking, it's a little overwhelming. That doesn't mean however that they're not coherent. The examiner can still understand what they're saying and the message can still come across.

Let's take a look at pronunciation. I remember doing-- oops, sorry about that. I don't know what just happened. I remember I did a lot of work with pronunciation in a previous podcast, but I want to talk about it a little bit here. Again, this is basically all you need to know. It's effortless to understand.

I want though to say something about this. That doesn't mean that you have to speak like a native speaker. This is something that people misunderstand all the time. They think to themselves I have an accent from my country. I have an accent from my native language, whatever. That's okay. That doesn't matter. You will certainly have an accent. You are expected to have an accent and no one is going to score you poorly for that.

However, there are other things that are important in pronunciation. There are things like intonation, there are things like chunking, which I know I've talked about in the past. Chunking is how you group words together. So, if you sit and listen to this podcast and just look at the way I group my words



together, you'll understand that a native speaker groups her words together differently a lot of times than a learner of English groups their words together.

That might be a really interesting thing for you to do. You can sit and analyze this podcast using the band descriptors that you have in front of them and see well okay, what is Ellen doing? How is she chunking? How is she using intonation? How is she using emphasis when she speaks? What words is she emphasizing? Like what I'm doing right now. You can see that I'm really putting emphasis on certain words I think are most important.

These are some of the things you're doing at a band 9. You understand how to do these things, you understand when to do them and you're doing them accurately. Now, here's where the band descriptors get really frustrating because look at what it says to us at 7: shows all the positive features of band 6 and some, but not all of the 8.

So essentially, what is a 7? It's some of the good stuff of an 8, but not all of them. That's something that really, really clues us in to how we're being scored. Let's think about that for a minute. It says some of the 8, but not all of them. So, what they're basically telling us is that in order to be an 8, you have to have all of these things and whatever else the examiner's band descriptors have.

What I want you to take away from this is that let's say, for example, you say, "Oh, I do this and I do this. So, I'm a band 8." No, you have to do all three of them plus, like I said, whatever the examiner's version has. This is something I think that is really meaningful.



Even though I find this 7 kind of frustrating, it tells us that they expect us to do all these things. It's not just sort of like "he is sort of here." No, you have to be completely there otherwise you're not an 8 and that tells us that you are a 7 essentially. What's important for us to understand then is some of the 8 and then of course some of the 7-- sorry. I meant some of the 6.

Let's look at the 6. You use a range of pronunciation features with mixed control. In other words, you're using all those things that I talked about, but maybe not consistently 100%. Again, it says pretty much the same thing if you look at it. It's not sustained. So, you can do it, but you can't do it throughout the entire speaking exam. You can generally be understood throughout, but occasionally you might mispronounce some words or sounds.

I think I've talked about this before as well. Some of you speak native languages that create certain difficulties with English sounds. I know that in some languages, it's really difficult for you to be able to say the 'p' versus the 'b' in English. I know that for a lot of different languages, the 'sh' sound in English is really difficult. I know that for some of you the 'th' sound, the 'th' is really difficult.

You have to be really careful with these sounds because what you don't want to happen is you don't want the word you end up saying to actually be a different word because that can create incoherence. For example, if you say something like, "Give me a ben and a baber," that's a problem because I don't think you want a Ben, what you really want is a pen and because these are two words and both exist in English, it can create some incoherence.

Another culprit of this problem is the 'i' sound in English. I know I meet a lot of students who have this problem. So, combine that with the 'sh' sound and these people have a ton of problems with words like



ship. So, if you want to say something like the sip-- the ship came to the beach, it ends up sounding like the sip came to the beach, which is simply wrong and it just creates confusion because as I said before, sip as well is another sound that exists as a different word in English.

I really want to end this misconception that you have to sound like the Queen of England or you have to sound like a Hollywood actor; you don't. You can have an accent, but just try to mimic as much as possible and to adopt some of the intonation and some of the chunking that you hear from native English speakers.

I think we have covered the speaking band descriptors as far as the band 9, the band 7, and the band 6 are concerned. This should help you well on your way to getting the score that you need for speaking. If you have any questions, do contact us at ieltspodcast.com.

Also, for those of you interested, there are speaking lessons available. So, look into that as well. We're also available to help you with all of your writing needs, so take a look at the site, see the options that are available to you to help work with us and meet your IELTS goals. We're all really looking forward to it. We're looking forward to hearing from you. Good luck.

Female Voice: Thanks for listening to ieltspodcast.com