



Female Voice: You are now listening to the IELTS podcast. Learn from tutors and ex-examiners who are masters of IELTS preparation. Your host, Ben Worthington.

[Music]

Ben: Video call speaking test. Hello there. My name is Ben Worthington and in this episode, we're going to look at video call speaking test. Now, up recently, the IELTS has been paper-based and face-to-face. However, a lot of test centers are now offering the computer delivered version although that still involves sitting across a table with an examiner.

Now, because of COVID and everything, the IELTS Cambridge Assessment English, British Council IDP, and IELTS Australia have been working on increasing IELTS availability and making it basically more available for candidates living in remote areas or possibly even in conflict zones where they might not have a British Council examiner at the test center.



Now, they've been working on this for a while I think from since like 2019 in certain centers in India. However, in 2020 with lovely COVID-- that's sarcasm by the way-- with lovely COVID, everything has obviously sped up and there has been basically a back log of test takers as the test centers slowly start opening up.

Now, experienced examiners especially those ones experienced in the traditional in-person face-to-face tests, they are now doing it from home. Not all of them, but a lot of them have set up with the permission of IELTS and they are now doing it remotely. They've set up with the right equipment so it's all kind of like standardized and they've been organized regionally to avoid problems with the time zones.

Now, the examiners might have interviews with candidates from the country where they're based or from neighboring countries. So, for example, if you're in Europe, then the time zones are broadly similar across the continent. So, you could be in Spain and have an interview with your



examiner in England. However, you're probably not going to have an interview-- say if you're based in China, you're not going to have an interview with an examiner based in England just because of the time complications and the different time zones.

Now, is this going to come to where you are? Well, it's difficult to say because they have done a few tests as I said in India and also in China. However, they are going to extend this eventually. Now, big question is how different is this to the in-person one?

Now, if we think about the normal in-person test, you go in there, you have a brief registration process, you're getting your ID checked, you're leaving your bag and your phone and then you're with the IELTS invigilator staff for the duration of the test. And then you're going to get called into the room and you're invited, you sit down, the test begins. So, it's kind of standardized in the sense that you know what to expect.



Now with VCS or video call speaking, what happens is that there's a small change. You still go to the test center. You still have the ID check and you're still taken to the exam room, but you are sat in front of a screen and the invigilator will lock you in and you're provided with some headphones and then a video connection with Zoom, okay?

Then the connection is established and you have to answer some questions when everything is checked to see if it's in perfect working order; the volume, the connection, and all of this and also that the examiner can see the examinee clearly and vice versa. Now, you should have your ID on the desk for the duration of the test.

And it's also mentioning that you as a test taker you do not have any control over the volume or any other of the controls in the test. So, it literally is just a screen. Now, you're asked to keep your hands on the table during the interview and not to pick up the pen or the paper which is provided for the Part 2 and that's because they basically want to reduce the noise interference.



Now, when this is all set up and you've got the green light, the invigilator will leave the room and the exam starts. And it follows the traditional pattern of the in-person interview. So, you've got the three parts. It's roughly around 40 minutes.

Now, the major difference is that the test card for Part 2 is featured on the screen and it will fill more than half the screen and then remain there until the long speaking turn is over. So, probably for about two minutes. Now, you have a pencil and paper as we mentioned before and you've got one minute to prepare.

Now, the examiner has a full view of you the test taker during the entire duration of the exam. Now, with Part 2 as I said, the test card is on the screen and it covers about two-thirds of your screen or maybe a half, somewhere in between there and the examiner is in the remaining part. So they always can see you during this part.



Now, it would have been nice to have a timer, but it doesn't happen for any part of the exam, okay? However, you're still going to prepare and speak for the same duration and if necessary, the examiner will probably just interrupt when necessary. So, he might say like thank you or you know just say okay next part, okay moving on.

Now, we've included a video in the tutorial where you can see and the actual British Council video on the VCS talks about speaking clearly, not to touch your face, not to touch the screen, and obviously as we mentioned not to touch the items on the table because it may interfere with sound quality.

Now once the examiner ends the test, the candidate has to wait to be collected by the invigilator before leaving the room. Now, I would follow this very strictly if I were a candidate and the reason is because 1) obviously this could be your ticket to moving abroad, to starting university, to getting the grade that you want. So, you do not want to give them any reason for cancelling or



changing your grade. So, just follow the rules because you could be accused possibly of doing something. So, you just want to follow the rules as strictly as possible and give them no opportunity to even suspect anything could be going on, okay?

Now, what does this mean for you? So, let's have a look. Do these technical aspects of VCS affect you? Will it affect your communication style and how might it affect your response? These are quite good questions. Let's have a look at them in each one.

So, as we mentioned before, we've got headphones and you've got no personal control over the volume or the sitting position. So, you might not like this. I've told students in the past just to sort of like sit back, sit straight. That's still going to be valid, but if you're a student who might want to just move around while you talk--



I know from experience that students from Latin American countries are quite animate when they talk and they use their hands and it's almost part of their communication style. They're quite expressive. So, it could have an effect on some people from some countries rather than others.

Now, during the test we know that there's quite a lot of effort made to maintain a good quality of sound because obviously clarity is very important. And this good quality of sound is going both ways; both for you as the speaker and your headphones when you're receiving the information.

Now, I think just as a side note, perhaps one good way to test or to prepare would be to start listening to speaking interviews with headphones just so you get used to it. I know that when I was speaking Spanish, I got to a certain level where I could understand people speaking face-to-face. However on the phone, it was just incredibly difficult because all the visual clues had been taken away. And it took me a while to build up the auditory skills of just listening and not using the visual clues.



Now then, communication style. Now at its best, we all know the IELTS speaking test gives you the opportunity to show off your English skills in a controlled, but supposedly relaxed environment. I think it's a relaxed environment in the fact that it's face-to-face. You can see the examiner and you can maybe smile. It's a little bit sort of like more human I guess. So, maybe this could affect you if you're in a room and just talking to a screen.

Now again, you want to probably get familiar with just talking into a screen. Obviously nowadays, it's quite common. A lot of us are working remotely and we're talking into screens all day all night. However, I know from personal experience it does take a while to adapt and developing those listening skills specifically if they're coming from a speaker or from a headphone because as we said, it's not the same as face-to-face.

Now, as we mentioned before, it's going to be difficult with students who use gestures a lot, okay? And also not only using gestures, but sort of like picking up on gestures from the



examiner. Now, these could be lost. I've heard in the past of examiners kind of like waving the hand encouraging the student to continue talking where necessary. Now, these natural cues they could get lost.

And also, even though we've got the screen in front of us, it's going to be more difficult to pick up on kind of like on the visual clues of the examiner; if the examiner is smiling, if they're neutral. I mean they're supposed to be neutral, so there shouldn't be that many cues anyway. However, we know these examiners are human and they can encourage you with their eyes or just encourage you to start talking more, giving you sort of like an encouraging look or even smiling. And these visual clues could be lost if it's just a screen.

Now, for some students I know that they struggle a lot with maintaining eye contact. Now, for you with a screen in front of you, it's going to be incredibly easier because staring into a screen--



staring into a camera that problem of eye contact is practically gone because you've just got a screen there.

Also, just one last thing for the students who do talk with their arms and are quite expressive with their hands, then it could be an issue if the rules are really strictly applied. It could be a problem if the examiner keeps asking you to keep your hands on the table. Again, it depends on how sensitive the microphone is, how strict the examiner is.

So, this is early days and I think as more tests get rolled out and they kind of get more information, more feedback, they'll be able to start adapting and saying okay, with these microphones, we can allow the students to be a little bit more expressive or with this setup, we have to be very strict because it influences the sound quality. Either way, we're definitely going to witness some changes as with all things that get rolled out slowly but surely.



Now, the good thing is that you don't have to wear a face mask. That's definitely a positive. Now, then we spoke before about the responses, about this examiner being in a different sort of like region possibly even a different country. So as I said, the examiner might be in England doing exams for students based in Spain or Italy because they're in the same region.

Now, if the examiner were in Spain and living in Spain, they would be more attuned to the cultural norms of that country. For example, they would completely understand why this Spanish person is waving their hands around trying to communicate whereas an examiner who possibly has never lived in Spain might be a little bit confused.

Also, for example, if the student is talking about local landmarks or local cultural references or typical foods, then if the examiner is not familiar with that region then it could be a little bit difficult whereas if the examiner had lived in that region, knew the food, knew the culture, then



again, it could be a little bit more challenging. So, you might want to sidestep those and just try and make it a little bit more general and a little bit less local.

I imagine maybe the questions could be adapted to avoid this issue. However again, it's in early days. So, you just might want to be aware of this if you're doing VCS and you have a question about local food then you may want to completely assume that the examiner has no idea about what you're talking about.

If you're talking about something like paella which is a rice dish typical of Valencia, it's reasonably famous internationally, but there could be some local dishes that are not famous and you could get yourself into a bit of a pickle we say. You could get yourself into a problem trying to explain this very localized dish. So, you're probably just better going for a little bit more general, a little bit more famous things there.



Now, you definitely want to put in some extra preparation because of this distance, not just geographically, not just physically and not just culturally, but it's up to you as the examinee to kind of make the most and reduce that gap by thinking about what answers you're going to give, thinking about just trying to make it easier for the examiner.

Also, you might want to just start increasing the volume of how you talk and slowing down because these are all just general ways to improve your level of communication. I slow down when I'm talking on this podcast because it's easier for my listeners to understand, it gives me more time to organize my thoughts, and also you cannot see me. So, you're missing out on these non-verbal cues and speaking slowly, adding pauses, giving you time to process the information are just ways that I've adapted my speaking for you to compensate for the situation.



And I think I would strongly recommend you do the same for your exam. So, slow down, try to avoid the local peculiarities, maybe get used to speaking without your hands or even just try and reduce the amount of action you can do with your hands.

And also get used to speaking into a screen as if you've never done it. Most of us are coming out of lockdown or are in lockdown, so we've probably got more than enough experience with that. However, it still does not hurt getting used to that and just trying to speak at exam level while you're talking into a screen.

Now, that's it from me today. If you are doing the VCS, get in contact. Tell us how it's been. We could even get you on this podcast and we could do an interview with you. You could tell us your thoughts how you experienced it. I'd be more than happy to have a chat with you about it. So, please get in contact.



And also remember if you are struggling with the IELTS, we've got the online course. We've got lots of students passing every single month. We are getting a ton of essay corrections. It's Ellen who's doing them at the moment. Daphne will be back soon. Sometimes I do them now as well because we've got so many. So, you're not alone with this and we can help you pass. And if you stick at it and if you're working with us, we'll definitely get you to the grade you want.

So, have a great day and all the best with your IELTS preparation.

[Music]

Female Voice: Thanks for listening to ieltspodcast.com