

Guidelines for Writers of Speaking Tests

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Guidelines for designing paired discussion tasks

Item writers should bear in mind that

- the reading input given on the candidate's task sheet should be minimal as the exam is not intended to measure candidates' reading ability (use word prompts instead of full sentences, maximum 30 words);
- the task instructions should be read out by the Interlocutor and so they cannot be given on the Task Sheet for the candidates (they should appear on the Interlocutor's Sheet only);
- candidates' potential contributions to the interaction should be balanced, which could be achieved by giving an equal number of visual or word prompts for both candidates;
- candidates should have comparable tasks, i.e. both of them should be required to do the same thing (to list, compare, contrast, select, justify, modify, extend, reduce options, etc.) in order to facilitate a balanced, realistic and smoothly-running exchange between them;
- the interaction between the candidates should be task-based as it seems to give them a meaningful purpose to engage in a conversation (e.g. select the three most/least important aspects of something, rank order items in a given list);
- the tasks have to be guided but not fully controlled, i.e. candidates should have a chance to add something of their own to the exchange (use the word prompt *Anything else?* to indicate that candidates can add their own ideas);
- controversial topics seem to be more likely to generate a discussion than neutral topics;
- distressing, offensive, violent or taboo topics should be avoided;
- the topic should be something on which it is reasonable to expect candidates to have an opinion;
- in order to make the task realistic for candidates, they should define the context of the conversation very carefully, but at the same time they should not force candidates to agree with a point of view that they may not accept in real life. Candidates should be given a chance to voice their own opinion rather than argue for something that they cannot identify with.

Guidelines for intervening in paired- task performances

It is the Interlocutor's duty to intervene if

- there is a communication breakdown;
- there is imbalance between the two candidates' contributions;
- the amount of language produced by the candidates is insufficient.

In such cases the Interlocutor should

- repeat all or part of the rubric;
- invite candidates to talk about one specific aspect of the task;
- invite the candidate whose contributions seem to be unsatisfactory (i.e. too short or incomplete) to talk about one specific aspect of the task or to elaborate on something s/he said.

Guidelines for designing discussion tasks in the individual mode

- The examiner's scope for contribution to the exchange must be limited, especially in terms of what s/he can add to the discussion. The interlocutor also has to contribute to the interaction in such a way that encourages the candidate to justify and argue for his/her views.
- The interlocutor should assume a specific role while the candidate may act as him/herself, expressing his/her true opinion.. It is essential that the discussion activity is designed in such a way that there is a clear opinion gap between the examiner and the candidate. This can be easily ensured by assigning roles to the participants that require them to represent different points of views or to argue for different things.
- Since the candidate and the examiner cannot be expected to come to an agreement automatically or continue the discussion for long without showing willingness to accept the partner's point of view or reasoning, it should also be clearly specified in the examiner's role description what the outcome of the exchange should be. For example, the instructions for the interlocutor may suggest that s/he should agree fully or partially with some of the candidate's arguments.
- While the interlocutor's contributions should be kept to the minimum, s/he should always try to challenge the candidate as much as possible in order to elicit performance in L2 from the candidate to a maximum degree. The prompts for the interlocutor may
 - instruct him/her to ask for further justifications from the candidate;
 - argue against what the candidate has resented/suggested;
 - or to present opposite points of views.
- Candidates rarely have a chance to start the conversation in exam situations. Therefore, if possible, they should be instructed to do so in discussion activities in the individual mode. Because the interlocutor is responsible for eliciting language from the candidate, naturally it will be his/her duty to decide when to close the conversation.
- Item writers should also bear in mind that the reading input given on the candidate's task sheet should be minimal, and so word prompts should be used instead of full sentences (maximum 30 words).
- While it is clear that discussion tasks in the individual mode have to be guided, they should not be fully controlled: candidates should have a chance to add something of their own to the exchange. The phrase "*Anything else?*" will indicate to the candidates that they can add their own ideas.

Guidelines for designing individual long turn tasks

	DOs	DON'Ts
Picture prompts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Use black and white pictures. ✓ Use pictures that are clear and photocopiable (maximum A/4 size). ✓ Vary the source of pictures (photographs, drawings, cartoons, etc.). ✓ Select pictures which show general, everyday, life-like situations which candidates can easily recognise and relate to. ✓ Select pictures which show people in action. ✓ Always use 2-3 pictures to provide the candidate an opportunity for comparing and contrasting. ✓ Select pictures which can be easily related to each other, but with significant differences to elicit a wide range of vocabulary and structures. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Do not use sensitive, distressing, offensive, violent or taboo topics. ➤ Do not select bizarre, surreal, abstract or symbolic pictures, especially for lower level tests. ➤ Do not select over-crowded pictures. ➤ Do not select pictures which do not contain enough stimuli for language output. ➤ Do not use only one picture. ➤ Do not use too many pictures. ➤ Do not use pictures which are very similar. ➤ If possible, avoid using pictures which do not contain people and actions.
Interlocutor's questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ About 4-6 question prompts should be provided for any set of pictures. ✓ The questions should be independent of one another, i.e. the Interlocutor can choose to ask them in any order. ✓ The questions should always be general enough to relate to <u>all</u> the pictures in the task. ✓ The questions should be worded and focused in such a way that candidates can really produce long turns in response to them. ✓ Each task should have some questions which relate the pictures to the candidate's own experiences and/or opinions. ✓ Each task should be accompanied by follow-up questions which require some degree of generalisation and abstraction from the candidate, depending on the level of the test. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Do not ask questions which do not relate to the pictures at all. ➤ Do not ask questions which relate to only one of the pictures. ➤ The questions should not elicit physical description of either of the two pictures. ➤ Do not ask artificial, impersonal questions. ➤ Avoid questions which aim to elicit candidates' opinion about a topic in general as this can easily lead to candidates reciting memorised texts.

Guidelines for designing role-play tasks

Prompts

- Select prompts/input text and design the task so that it generates the appropriate amount of varied language at the required level.
- Use prompts that are clear, black and white, photocopyable (in size max. A4) and appropriate for the target age.
- Limit input text so that candidates can process it in 30 seconds.
- The language level of verbal prompts should be below the tested level.
- Do not use distressing, offensive, violent or taboo topics. Treat sensitive topics with care.
- Do not use surreal, abstract, puzzling or symbolic pictures at lower levels.

Situations, roles, interaction

- Create situations that are life-like, suitable for the target age-group and in which it is realistic for them to speak in English.
- Candidates should not be required to take unfamiliar roles.
- Use different questions and tasks of different complexity if using the same prompt for more than one level.
- The task should not require students to use their imagination or creativity as these are not to be tested.
- Role-plays should involve real interaction and have an outcome.
- Create an information-gap or opinion-gap in role-play tasks.
- In the individual format, when the student has to speak to the interlocutor, make sure the interlocutor does not have to speak more than the student.
- In the paired format, when two candidates have to talk to each other, make sure they have equal roles.
- Restrict the use of yes/no and alternative questions.
- Always try out the task yourself to see whether you can speak for the required length of time.

Rubrics

- Use standardised instructions.
- Instructions for candidates should be given orally by the interlocutor, so they should appear only on the interlocutor's sheet. Short, simplified versions only may appear on the candidate's sheet.
- Instructions must be given in English.
- Instructions should be simple.