

What does it really mean to be “good at English”?



- How do we assess someone's English level?
- How can IELTS help us to understand what “good English” is?
- Why is all of this important anyway?

Here's an episode which I hope will be really useful as a way of helping you to understand what it really means to be good at English.

We're going to consider some things about

- how English is assessed (how your English level is judged),
- the different skills which are involved in using English,
- and what aspects of English are the most important.

I hope this episode gives you a bit more perspective on what it means to have a good level of English.

Also there will be a lot of vocabulary for describing English skills and English levels or assessment in English, and that includes a lot of *metalanguage* - the language we use for talking about language. So try to notice all that vocabulary too.

Hopefully this episode will help you think about

- your level of English,
- how to assess a person's level of English
- and also how to talk about both of those things.

It's important for any language learner to get a sense of what they should be aiming for in their learning, so that they don't spend their time on the wrong things, and that they have the right things prioritised in their learning.

Do you remember the episode I published at the beginning of the year (2023) with Santi from Spain, working in a top job at Oxford University Press?

806. PERSEVERANCE, POSITIVITY & PRACTICE with Santiago Ruiz de Velasco from Oxford University Press



📺 806. PERSEVERANCE, POSITIVITY & PRACTICE with Santia...

You will find it in the episode archive and if you haven't heard it, go back and check it out.

This episode follows on from that one. I was inspired to do it after seeing some responses from my audience.

Just as a reminder, Santi learned English mostly as an adult when he moved to London after studying at university in Spain.

He had some very challenging experiences being immersed in the English language and eventually found his way to a top job in the English teaching industry itself - not as a teacher, but in publishing. He ended up as the Managing Director of English Language Teaching at OUP, and he got to that position despite the fact that his English is not “perfect”.

I was pleased with that episode because it allows us to use Santi's personal experience as a way to consider the importance of motivation and attitude in dealing with challenges in learning English (or any language) and also it raised questions about what “good English” really means.

With Santi, “the proof is in the pudding”, which means that we know his English is good because he uses it successfully every day.

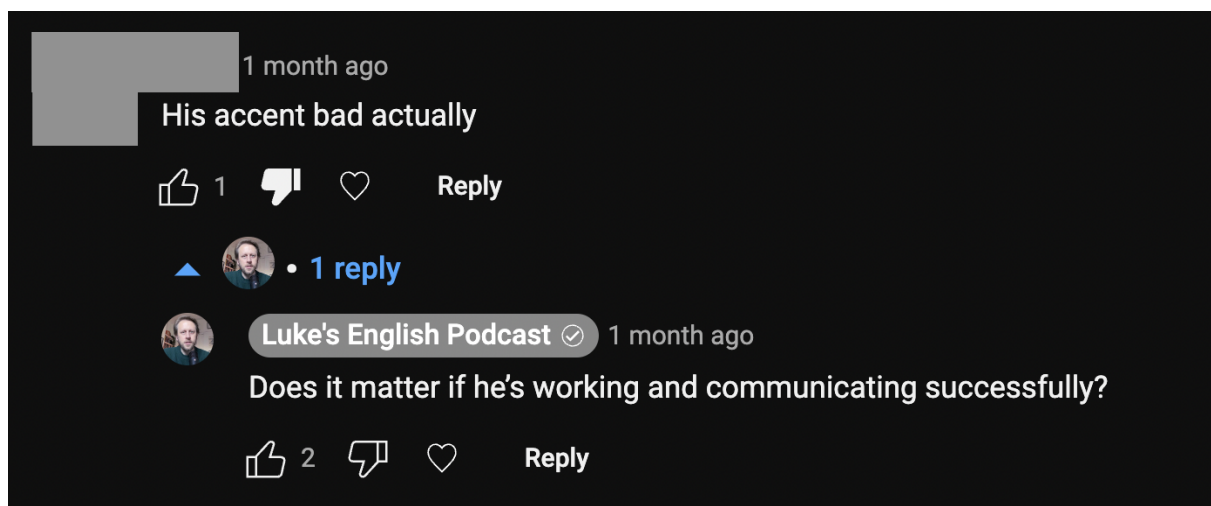
Every single day at work he uses English to successfully perform a number of different communication tasks. I expect he writes emails and reports in English, conducts interviews in English, does presentations, has meetings, probably does negotiations, sells products and services in English, and builds relationships with people in English - no doubt both professional relationships but also meaningful personal relationships too.

I'm assuming a lot of that because I don't know every single thing he does in his job every day - but I'm pretty sure that he does all of those things. They're just totally normal communication tasks at work. And it's not just at work for Santi. I'm sure he also socialises in English.

So, I think the fact that he does all those things, seemingly successfully, this is proof of his competence in English, right?

I think it would be very hard to be the Managing Director of the ELT Dept of Oxford University Press without those kinds of communication skills in English.

But, as I mentioned, his English is certainly not “perfect” by any means (and he says this himself too), and a number of listeners in the comment section on YouTube pointed this out, saying things like “He clearly has a Spanish accent” or “He made mistakes which made me surprised that he is in that position” and “I expected someone with RP English.” etc. I am paraphrasing there, but that's the gist of it.



What does it actually mean to have a “bad accent”?

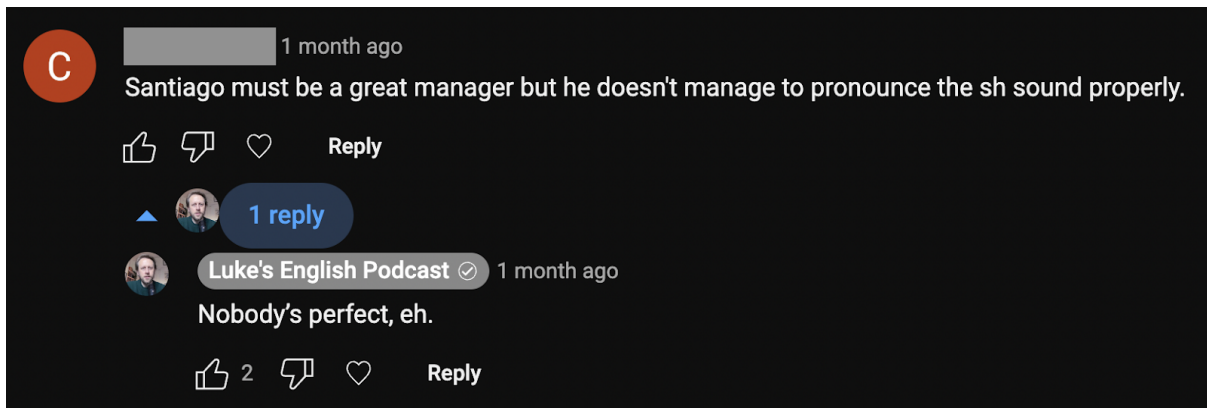


Maybe he could use some different fillers, just to avoid repeating the same thing. But why did this person focus only on that when there were so many other positive things to take away from the episode?

What is wrong with saying “you know” ?

- It doesn't stop us understanding him. It doesn't stop him expressing himself.
- It's just an aesthetic issue, not a functional issue.
- It's just annoying for some people, but it doesn't actually change the message or cause any misunderstandings.

Perspective here - it's not such a big deal, unless you're really focused on it. Sure, Santi could work on this, but we all have things to work on.



Fair enough, that one is quite funny.

I shouldn't focus on the negative comments. The vast majority were positive, I must say. But I notice that whenever I feature someone on this podcast who is not a native speaker, and even some guests who are native speakers but have accents that are not RP, some listeners have to comment or criticise what they are hearing. I don't think this is really the right attitude to have.

It's not a competition, is it?

But, the fact that Santi has that job, has achieved that and continues to do that in English is something that can't be taken away from him. I mean, people can point out errors in his English, but ultimately, the fact remains that he uses English very successfully on a daily basis. That's important - the fact that he uses English "successfully".

Because this is the point of language. It is functional and it should be judged first and foremost on that - whether it works as a communication tool.

Sure, aesthetics are important too. The absolute best communicators also have English which is a pleasure to listen to, which is easy on the ears and is rich, pleasant and entertaining. But that stuff is also a matter of opinion and taste, and is really just the cherry on the top of the cake most of the time. Why focus on the cherry? You need to have a cake first, before you can have the cherry. You need something for the cherry to go on, right?

Priorities - focus in the really important things first - the cake - and then work on the aesthetics - the cherry on the top.

I'm getting a bit lost in this metaphor now, but I hope you get what I mean.

Common attitudes and assumptions about “good English”

The point is that these comments are indicative of certain attitudes about English proficiency. They show us what a lot of people think makes someone “good at English”, namely:

- Accuracy (using English without making errors) especially grammatical accuracy is the most important thing and speaking with zero errors is what makes you good at English. No mistakes.
- All learners of English should have RP as their target in terms of pronunciation, and if you speak with a different accent or with obvious traces of your first language then this is a

problem. And hearing someone use English with an accent is somehow “shocking” or even “unpleasant”.

- You're good at English if you use complex English, meaning longer words, formal words, idioms and convoluted sentence structure.

So, basically, you need to make no “pronunciation errors” or “grammar mistakes” and use complex “impressive” language.

That short list of assumptions is based on the things I've heard and read from learners of English during my teaching career. I've met thousands of learners of English and also read thousands of online comments from learners of English too and I often notice those attitudes.

I suppose it is understandable really, that some people think like that.

Not everyone has thought about this subject a lot because they don't work in language teaching, people have been taught that English is all about correct grammar and correct pronunciation, and these things are obvious “low hanging fruit” in terms of English assessment.

It's not everyone's job to think about how to assess someone's language level, and to be honest I only learned about this from doing professional training, reading academic books, teaching IELTS courses and working out the assessment criteria for Cambridge Exams and stuff.

And we're going to look at that official assessment criteria for judging someone's language level later in this episode in order to find out that it's not just about grammar and pronunciation errors and that there are other important factors. Obviously, being "correct" in pronunciation and grammar are important things, but only to a certain extent.

Like with the example of Santi. I feel like some of those comments are trying to take away Santi's achievements, but you can't, can you?

The fact remains that although he makes a few mistakes in grammar, and clearly has a Spanish accent when he speaks English - despite those things, he is a very successful user of the English language and you can't take that away from him. So how does he manage it, without being "perfect"?

What makes someone good at English then? What else is important?

What I'd like to do now is to talk about actually what makes someone good at English and to show that there is a lot more involved than just accuracy (making no errors) and also complexity (using big impressive, rare words that nobody else knows).

Defining what makes someone good at English should be an important thing for us all to consider and remember.

For you, if you are a learner of English, this is all about how you can get a sense of what you should be focusing on and what you

should be trying to achieve. Also it can help you get out of a negative frame of mind when learning English. If you're afraid that your pronunciation is not perfect or that you know you make errors, it might help to know that those things are not the be-all and end-all in this English speaking game.

Also, if you are a teacher of English, like me, thinking about this can help us to guide our students and provide the right kind of teaching to help them to achieve things in English.

How do you assess someone's English level?

Let's use **IELTS** as a way of helping us to answer this question. By looking at how IELTS measures someone's English level, we can work out what "good English" actually means.

What is **IELTS**?

The International English Language Testing System, is an international standardized test of English language proficiency for non-native English language speakers. It is jointly managed by the British Council, IDP: IELTS Australia and Cambridge Assessment English, and was established in 1989. (Wikipedia)

Basically it is probably the standard international test for assessing someone's level of English as a foreign or other language.

Working out someone's level of English accurately and reliably is not easy. Sure, I could speak with a learner of English for 10 minutes and get a good idea of their level, but to get a fully detailed assessment including different reading, writing, listening and speaking skills, a longer and more rigorous test is needed.

This is why the IELTS test is quite long and quite complex. It takes a few hours to do the test and it's divided into lots of different parts. It's all done in a serious and thorough way.

IELTS is a test that has been developed over a very long time, by experts in English language teaching and testing, based on a lot of academic research and professional experience into how people learn and use the English language.

IELTS was developed by academics, teachers and examiners from Cambridge University and The British Council. These people know what they're doing when it comes to finding out someone's level of English. They want to do it properly, because this is important.

Universities and employers want to get a reliable sense of the level of English of potential students or employees so they can be sure that those people will be able to use English to study or work successfully. A reliable test is vital for this, and that's what IELTS is for.

It might not be a perfect test. There's probably room for improvement. In fact, it probably could be even longer and even more thorough, but that might just be impractical.

Anyway, let's look at the way IELTS works, and we'll see if we can draw from it some conclusions about the whole question of what it means to be good at English.

IELTS is in 4 sections - Speaking, Listening, Reading, Writing.

Already this shows that there are 4 skills involved in someone's English ability, and of course this reflects the type of things that you might need to do in English.

You have to speak to people, listen to people speaking in various situations, you have to read English in different forms, and you have to be able to write in English. OK.

So it's not just speaking skills. That's just one part of the picture.

Speaking

Of course speaking is often considered as the most important skill. It's the obvious skill. This is what we notice in people. As well as being vital for functional social communication, speaking is very closely connected to our identity and the way we express who we are to the world.

Naturally, it is often the way your English is judged. Because people meet you, talk to you and then immediately get a sense of your English level from that conversation. Fair enough. Speaking is important, but in IELTS it is only 25% of the test. It represents 25% of your final IELTS score. And as we will see, speaking can be divided into different sections too - and pronunciation is only one of those sections.

Listening

This is underestimated in terms of its importance. I've talked before about how, perhaps surprisingly, we spend more time listening than doing any of the other skills.

Episode [586. The Importance of Listening | Luke's ENGLISH Podcast](#)

This YouTube video from a couple of years ago 📌

▶ The Importance of Listening in Learning English / Building a S...

Also, it is absolutely vital that we understand the people we are talking to. If not, everything breaks down.

One way that I judge someone's language level when I'm talking to them, is the amount of effort I have to make for me to be understood by that person. This is a way for me to judge their listening skills in conversation.

If I just talk normally, without having to adapt my English or pay close attention to make sure the other person is following me, if I can just talk normally and be myself, it means their English is great.

I have met people who have had good English on paper and who were capable of producing sophisticated spoken English, but they were simply bad at having a conversation because their listening skills were not so great. They didn't seem to be listening or just did not pick up on a lot of the things I was saying.

For example, while listening to me talk, they didn't seem to realise how I felt about certain things we were talking about, they didn't notice little jokes I was making, they didn't react to certain points I made and did not respond to my efforts to talk about certain things, and it wasn't because they were just bad communicators even in their own language. It's because their listening just wasn't

good enough and they were not able to follow what I was saying, and in fact didn't even realise it.

Listening also relates to being able to deal with different accents. English is a diverse language and people speak it slightly differently all over the world, and this is a good thing and a beautiful thing, so being good at English means being able to understand English in all its diversity.

Only a very small percentage of people speak English like me, with my accent (let's call it standard modern English RP). If you hear someone from, well, anywhere, and they have an accent which is in any way different from my standard British English, or whatever accent you consider to be neutral, and you *don't understand it* then I'm afraid that is not the fault of the accent or the person speaking it.

It's because your listening skills are still not good enough. You are still not familiar with spoken English. Don't feel bad about it though, that's not the point.

The point is, listening skills are a huge part of the puzzle. Think of Santi. He described struggling so much every day when working in London as a waiter. He did not understand what people were saying to him.

People were asking for a coke and he was bring them their coat. His first arrived in London and actually heard real English being spoken and he freaked out. It wasn't like in the text books at school.

In London I expect he met various English people from different parts of the country. The English he heard was unrecognisable to him at the beginning, because he simply had never heard it before.

His English listening skills improved dramatically while living in the UK. When I spoke to him I felt he was completely on my wavelength and I didn't have to struggle or make a lot of effort to kind of adapt my English or *myself* during the conversation. I could relax and I felt like he would be able to follow my train of thought.

A lot of listening is connected to pronunciation. Good listening skills also relate to an ability to understand the way people produce the oral version of English, and this means being familiar with things like connected speech, elision, sentence stress, word stress, weak forms and all of those things. It's about knowing the oral version of the language, which is often very very different to the written version. This doesn't just mean knowing it academically (understanding the phonology), but knowing it through familiarity - having heard a lot of English from diverse sources so that you have kind of trained your ears to it, so it's not a huge shock or surprise when you actually hear it being used in the normal way.

Reading

I don't have so much to say about this except that reading is not just about knowing the words that you are seeing, and knowing which grammatical forms are being used. It involves being able to identify the bigger picture - what those words and that grammar are really communicating to you.

- Can you identify the opinion or attitude of the person who wrote the text? (What they think, or whether they are being serious or humorous in their writing)
- Can you identify their mood, their intentions, the overall purpose of the writing?
- Can you identify what kind of text it is - an article in a newspaper, a business report, an advertisement, a formal email, a personal email, an internal email, an external email, a piece of fiction, a humorous true story, a religious text, an old fashioned piece of writing, something modern?
- Are you aware of the different stylistic and linguistic conventions of different types of text?
- Are you able to read between the lines?
- Can you identify specific information as well as more general things?

It's more than just knowing individual words and grammar forms. It's also about overall text structure, organisation, and tone.

Again, it's not just about speaking. In the real world, all of these things come into play, all the time. It's all a mix of dealing with input, understanding it, and responding to it, while managing the pragmatics of communication - what impact language has on other people.

Writing

This relates to reading in the way that it's not just about knowing lots of words or grammar points, but knowing how to put those words and structures together to make a piece of writing that is coherent (easy to understand), cohesive (logical and organised)

and which does what it is supposed to do (persuade, inform, request information, entertain, etc).

With writing, sometimes the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. It's a bit like cooking a good meal. It's not just the ingredients and the cooking utensils, it's about having the overall vision for making a delicious meal and then using those ingredients and utensils to produce the intended result, and deliver it at the right time and have your guests say "Mmm, this is delicious" at the end of the process. Writing is a bit like that.

In terms of words that you might use in writing (or speaking) it's not about knowing a lot of words. That helps of course but some people might judge their English by the number of words they know - like, the higher the number, the better they are at English.

And it's not about how fancy or obscure those words are. Some people might judge their English by the rarity of the words they know - e.g. knowing some words that even a lot of native English speakers don't know. That's not necessarily an indication of being good at English. What's the use of writing something that most people just can't understand because you're using very old or very obscure words?

It's not about the number or the value of each word on its own, it is about using the right words, in the right combinations, at the right moments, to achieve the right result.

It's no good writing an email to someone and filling it with loads of complex and literary words than nobody really uses on a daily

basis. The effect on the reader will be just to confuse them. That's failing to communicate.

Watch out for those teaching materials, videos, whatever that say things like "Use these 5 words to get a high score in IELTS". It's not just about using certain fancy words. It's all about whether you are able to achieve certain results in English communication.

I've said it before and I'll say it again:

English is not just about what you know, it's about what you can do.

It's about your ability to complete tasks in English effectively. To understand other people and then have other people understand you. It's about knowing when to use simple English and when it is appropriate or necessary to use something more complex, or something more specific. Right words, right form, right order, right time.

So I just talked about the 4 skills in English - speaking & listening, writing & reading.

Speaking & listening are together because they deal with the oral version of the language. The language in the air.

Reading & writing go together because they deal with the written version of English - the language written down.

Now, because I'm referring to my interview with Santi, which was an oral interview, let's focus our attention for the rest of this episode on the spoken word, on speaking skills.

I did say that speaking is only a quarter of the whole picture, but I think for many of you out there, speaking is what you want to focus on, right?

So let's consider what makes someone a good speaker of English?

What I'm going to do now is look at IELTS assessment criteria.

Assessment criteria means the specific ways in which English is judged. The specific standards by which English is assessed.

How do IELTS examiners judge someone's level of English?

When you take an IELTS speaking test you will receive a score.

This score is calculated by the examiner after they have listened to you and then marked you in a few sub-categories. Speaking is broken down into a few sub-categories and you're given a score for each category, and then those scores are added together and then an average score is worked out.

What are those categories?

- Fluency & coherence
- Lexical resource
- Grammatical range & accuracy
- Pronunciation

Each category is defined further and certain criteria or standards are defined which help the examiners decide what score to give in each category.

In other Cambridge Exams, like FCE and CAE, speaking scores are assessed with similar criteria to IELTS, but there's also a score for Global Achievement. This is like a score for overall task achievement.

When you do a speaking test, you're given a few tasks to do (short interview, having a discussion, doing a short monologue or presentation) and global achievement basically means "did the person manage to complete the task effectively".

Quote from the CambridgeEnglish website explaining how speaking scores are measured for FCE.

<https://www.cambridgeenglish.org/images/210434-converting-practice-test-scores-to-cambridge-english-scale-scores.pdf>

Candidate speaking performances are assessed using scales which are linked to the CEFR. The assessor gives 0–5 marks for each of the following criteria:

Grammar and Vocabulary;

Discourse Management;

Pronunciation;

and Interactive Communication.

Marks for each of these criteria are doubled.

The interlocutor gives a mark of 0–5 for Global Achievement.

This mark is then multiplied by four.

Basically, this means that “global achievement” is more important than any other single criteria.

What is “global achievement”? For me, this is how well the person succeeded in the communication task.

Your ability to complete a communication task effectively is more important than just your correct pronunciation or grammar. Having a few errors in your English is not the end of the world and what's more important is task achievement. And that includes all that stuff about getting things done in English and getting the right result from a bit of speaking.

For example, did you work well with your speaking partner in order to achieve the task you were doing - maybe to discuss some travel options before deciding together which one was the best, or having to make another joint decision.

Actually, let's have a look at a sample part 3 section from a CAE speaking test.

Here you will see extracts from a sample speaking test from this page

<https://www.cambridgeenglish.org/exams-and-tests/advanced/exam-format/>

By the way, CAE is another English test, designed by Cambridge English. If you pass the test, you get a certificate which proves that you have advanced level English at C1 level.

CAE is similar to IELTS, is based on the same research and conclusions that have been used in creating IELTS, so it can also help us to understand how English is assessed.

Let's look at the extracts to see an example of a speaking task that people have to do when taking CAE. In part 3 the examiner is interested in seeing how people use English to achieve something in collaboration with someone else. It's about interaction and working together for a common goal. Important communication skills, right?

Part 3

Interlocutor Now, I'd like you to talk about something together for about two minutes (*3 minutes for groups of three*).

Here are some things that people often have to make decisions about and a question for you to discuss. First you have some time to look at the task.

*Place **Part 3** booklet, open at **Task 21**, in front of the candidates. Allow 15 seconds.*

Now, talk to each other about **what people might have to consider when making these decisions**.

Candidates

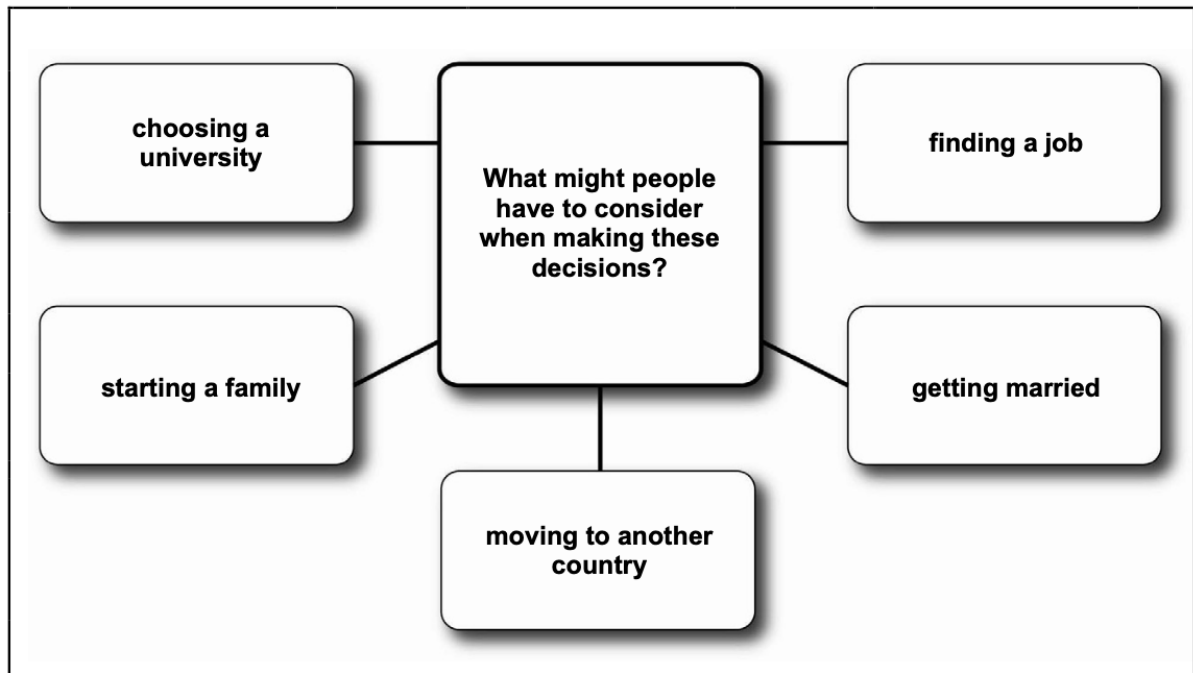
⌚ 2 minutes
(3 minutes for groups of three)

Interlocutor Thank you. Now you have about a minute (*2 minutes for groups of three*) to decide **in which situation it is most important to make the right decision**.

Candidates

⌚ 1 minute
(2 minutes for groups of three)

Thank you. (Can I have the booklet, please?) *Retrieve **Part 3** booklet.*



You should see how Global Achievement or Task Achievement is important here. This is about how you were able to use English to complete a communication task and I think that is a really important thing to be included in the exam and for people taking the exam to consider. Remember what language is for - it is for achieving things and completing tasks effectively.

If you can do that, you'll get a good score for Global Achievement.

So this means that having good English is not only about the individual words being used, the accuracy of the grammar or the accuracy of the pronunciation. It is about those things, but it is also about whether you organised your ideas correctly and clearly, whether you listened carefully to the other person, understood their intentions and responded with relevance to what they said, and that you were both able to complete the task.

It's not about any one single thing, any one single aspect of English. It's about *all* of them, in combination.

Ultimately, communication is a means to an end (a tool for a job). The means (the tool) is the language, but the end result is to actually make an agreement, make someone feel something, make someone understand something, organise something with someone, and successfully complete a specific task.

So, Santi didn't pronounce some words and sentences "correctly" or in the same way that I would, but in the grand scheme of things, it didn't matter.

He might have conjugated some verbs wrongly (like getting a few ED endings wrong, or forgetting 3rd person S or even just using present tenses when he should have used past tenses, sometimes) but in the grand scheme of things, it didn't matter.

Now, those things are still important to get right - don't misunderstand me. I'm not saying that you don't need to be correct in grammar or pronunciation or that it doesn't matter which words you're using. Santi would get more points in an exam if he improved some of those little errors.

Of course those things are important. The point I'm making is that it's about the bigger picture and there are plenty of other factors involved.

Specific IELTS Speaking Band Descriptors

I'm going to get really specific now. Let's look at the specific IELTS speaking band descriptors.

What the hell does that mean Luke?

IELTS scores are given in bands.

Band 0, Band 1, Band 2, Band 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9.

9 is high, 0 is low.

Cambridge English (IELTS.org) publishes a list of “descriptors” for each band score. These describe what the different bands mean in terms of specific speaking skills. This should reveal the ways in which speaking is assessed in IELTS.

You can consider your English as we talk about these “descriptors”.

We're going to look at them all in a moment, on a PDF from the IELTS website.

First, let's picture the IELTS speaking test.



Image: <https://ielts.com.au/australia/prepare/ielts-preparation-material/speaking>

How do IELTS examiners assess someone's spoken English?

I've done IELTS training before and I've done mock IELTS tests quite a lot of times. I've also done the same with FCE, CAE, BEC Vantage, BEC Higher etc. They're similar.

If I was doing a mock IELTS test with my students and I was the examiner, I would interview the candidate, give them speaking tasks to do and at the same time I would have to work out their score.

On the desk in front of me I would have a script for me to follow, different tasks and questions for the test and some paper and a pen for writing the person's score.

But it's not just a single score for speaking.

I wouldn't just have a single category on that paper called "Speaking" with a space for a number.



IELTS SPEAKING TEST

Candidate's name: _____

Date: _____

SPEAKING	
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Instead, I would have a piece of paper in front of me with at least 4 sub-categories on it.

IELTS SPEAKING TEST

Candidate's Name: _____

Student number: _____

Date: _____

Time: _____

FLUENCY and COHERENCE	
LEXICAL RESOURCE	
GRAMMATICAL RANGE and ACCURACY	
PRONUNCIATION	
Notes: IELTS 7.5 Task achievement?	

Overall score / average: _____

I'd give a score in each category and then work out an average across the 4 categories.

I'm not an official IELTS examiner, I'm a teacher who is trained to prepare students for IELTS, so that's just the way I do it.

But I know for certain that the examiners use at least 4 sub-categories when assessing a candidate's speaking.

Here are those categories.

- Fluency & coherence
- Lexical resource
- Grammatical range & accuracy
- Pronunciation

Note that accuracy is only *half of one of those categories*.

What do the categories mean?

Let me talk about what those categories actually mean, and then we will look at the descriptions of different scores for each category. What's the difference between an IELTS 6 and IELTS 7 for example.

This information is from IELTS.org again 📌

[Speaking test: How are bandscores awarded for Speaking?](#).

What is “Fluency & Coherence”?

Fluency and coherence refers to the ability to talk with normal levels of continuity, rate and effort and to link ideas and language together to form coherent, connected speech.

The key indicators of fluency are speech rate and speech continuity.

The key indicators of coherence are logical sequencing of sentences; clear marking of stages in a discussion, narration or argument; and the use of cohesive devices (e.g. connectors, pronouns and conjunctions) within and between sentences.

What is “Lexical Resource”?

Lexical resource refers to the range of vocabulary the test taker can use and the precision with which meanings and attitudes can be expressed.

The key indicators are the variety of words used, the adequacy and appropriacy of the words used and the ability to circumlocute (get around a vocabulary gap by using other words) with or without noticeable hesitation.

What are “Grammatical range and accuracy”?

Grammatical range and accuracy refers to the range and the accurate and appropriate use of the test taker's grammatical resource.

The key indicators of grammatical range are the length and complexity of the spoken sentences, the appropriate use of

subordinate clauses, and the range of sentence structures, especially to move elements around for information focus.

The key indicators of grammatical accuracy are the number of grammatical errors in a given amount of speech and communicative effect of error.

What is “pronunciation”?

Pronunciation refers to the ability to produce comprehensible speech to fulfill the Speaking test requirements.

The key indicators will be the amount of strain caused to the listener, the amount of the speech which is unintelligible and the noticeability of influence from the test taker's first language.

Now let's have a look at some of those descriptions from IELTS.org
<https://www.ielts.org/-/media/pdfs/speaking-band-descriptors.ashx>

Perhaps use my level of French as an example, also Santi's English.

We could compare the different levels (maybe the difference between 5 and 7) across each sub-category.

Which categories are the most important?

The 4 categories are of equal importance in the exam, I expect, but if I had to choose, I would say that they go in order of importance from left to right, but of course if any one of those categories is significantly weak, they will drag down the overall level. For example, if you are unintelligible in pronunciation, it sort of doesn't matter how many words you know or if you don't pause to think.

Grammatical accuracy is mainly significant if errors cause misunderstandings, but I guess errors can give the wrong impression.

Interestingly, I feel like pronunciation, grammar and lexis all help us to achieve fluency. Fluency is where those three systems combine. Without a wide range of words which we can recall and use instantly, we can't express ideas quickly, specifically and coherently.

Without grammatical structures, we can't link ideas together clearly and express complex things without our speech breaking down and falling apart.

Without pronunciation we can't get our words out fluidly and clearly, with words linked, and yet stressed to give emphasis and impact.

Assessing Santi's English (I hope you don't mind Santi!)

I wonder what score Santi would get if he took an IELTS speaking test.

I shouldn't really speculate about that, but I can say that his weak spot is probably *pronunciation*, (although this is still at a good level because I was able to understand him and after all he is Spanish and so it's normal that he has a Spanish accent)

and then perhaps *grammatical accuracy* (he made a few grammar mistakes which probably stuck out because we were looking for them - I bet a lot of people listening were focusing intently on his English and judging him a lot - and he handled that very well),

but he really makes up for his weak spots by having:

- **Good grammatical range.** He was able to employ a range of structures which allowed him to have control over what he was saying and to express some complex ideas.
- **Strong Lexical resource.** He was able to find just the right words, he used words which were appropriate for the conversation (switching from bits of slang when it was appropriate, to more formal language to describe his work etc) and generally used some very nice, descriptive, idiomatic and frequently used expressions, phrases and words.

- **Excellent fluency and coherence.** He organised his ideas with clarity, he didn't seem to struggle any more than someone might in their first language, he didn't pause excessively, he was able to keep going and going, linking one idea to the next.

So there you have it. Some things to think about.

Conclusions

Being good at English is not all about having “a British accent” or never making a grammar mistake. There are plenty of other things involved in being “good at English”.

Of course, it is up to you. If your goal is to have a British accent (which one?) then I'm not going to stop you, but I do want you to put that in perspective and to realise all the many other things which you can focus on.

And finally, at the end here, I just want to give you a message of encouragement, because one of the main lessons learned from my conversation with Santi was that perseverance, positivity and practice are 3 of the most important factors in this game that we call learning English.

So keep your chin up! Keep practising!

Don't stop, even if it seems difficult!

Don't let your weaknesses stop you! There are other areas where you can be strong.

Don't worry about achieving perfection!
Just keep going and do your best and you might find that is enough or more than enough!

And enjoy it! You only get one life and it's happening right now, so what are you waiting for - go ahead and use English and make some connections with people.

Be curious about others, be keen to connect with them and be kind. Be kind and generous with your time and your attention, to other people you meet and talk to, and be kind to yourself as well.

Don't judge other people's English too harshly. It's not a competition.

I hope you've enjoyed this episode.

If you did, and you found it useful - give me a like or a comment or a review.

Have a nice morning, afternoon, evening or night and I will speak to you soon.