

EXAM NERVES: HOW TO OVERCOME THEM

Curated by



Exam nerves: How to overcome them

One of the biggest challenges students face in oral exams is remaining calm and performing to the best of their ability.

Nerves can get the better of all of us. No matter how prepared we think we are, all that changes when we are forced out of our comfort zone. Think about the last time you spoke in public, did an interview, or took a test. Unless you are highly confident, there's a good chance your heart was thumping, your hands were sweaty, and your mouth dry, making it near impossible to come out with what you had planned.

When you remember that students have to do this in another language and face enormous pressure to pass, it's no surprise that it can often end in tears (literally).

As the busy exam period begins and many of you start thinking about teaching intensive courses. Here are some tips to beat exam day nerves, focusing on the Cambridge advanced qualifications.

Know the exam

The better your students know the different parts of the speaking paper and what is expected of them, the less likely they will face any nasty surprises.

Students should remember that there will be two examiners in the room. The *interlocutor* reads the exam script and interacts with the students and the *assessor* listens carefully and marks the students based on their performance. Candidates do the exam in pairs (or occasionally in a group of three if there's an odd number of candidates and their exam is at the end of the session).

Regarding the structure of the speaking section, the First and Advanced exams are almost identical.

Part 1 of the research involves a conversation between the students and the examiner. They will ask questions about interests, studies, careers, etc. This part lasts two minutes.

Part 2 known as *the long turn*, requires students to talk about two pictures on their own, for about a minute.

In the Advanced exam, they must choose two pictures from a choice of three, whereas in the First, they have to compare and contrast the two photos they are given.

To help students, the question they have to answer during this part is printed at the top of the exam materials. Once they've finished the long turn, their partner is asked a question related to the theme, and then they swap.

The third part of the exam (*the collaborative task*) is when the students start interacting with each other. They have two minutes to discuss the prompts given and then another minute to decide on something.

The exam finishes with *the discussion* phase. Students are given questions related to the theme in part three and are required to talk about them together in more detail. In the First exam, part four lasts four minutes, and the advanced, it lasts for five minutes.

Four techniques to help you keep cool

Before the exam

Familiarisation

Understanding the different parts of the speaking exam is one thing. However, if you really want your students to remain calm, they need as much practice as possible. The more you work on the different parts of the exam in class, the more automatic it will become. It would help if you also organised mock exams where they do the full test with

another teacher who they are not as comfortable with. This will be the nearest thing to the actual exam.

You should also show them the exam videos so they know what to expect. Below is an example of the B2 First and C1 Advanced speaking exams.

Tip: Students can often choose their partner in the exam. If they do it with someone, they know and have practised with before, it will be much easier than doing it with a stranger.

Visualisation

You can take familiarisation to the next level by practising visualisation with your learners. This is where you get them to rehearse mentally the day of the exam. The idea is for them to imagine what it will be like. What they will see, hear and feel. This will be much easier if they've practised the exam and watched the videos above.

Have the students sit down in silence with their eyes closed. Then read the following script or adapt it to fit your learners.

Imagine you are sitting outside the exam room. It's your turn next. How do you feel? What do you see? Who is there with you? What are you talking about?

The pair before you leave the room. They look happy. The exam must have gone well.

You enter the exam room. The examiners welcome you with a smile and invite you to sit down. What do they look like? How do you feel now? What are they going to ask you first?

How does the exam progress? What goes well? What do you find challenging? What do you wish you'd practised more?

The time is up. The exam is over. You are free to leave. How do you feel as you walk out of the door? How will you celebrate?

By focusing on the positives and helping students to identify anything they may be worried about, you can help reduce anxiety in the lead-up to the exam.

During the exam

Non-verbal communication

One way to look and feel more confident is by using body language. Please encourage students to use their hands to make a point they feel strongly about. Remind them to make eye contact with the examiners and their partners. Smiling, laughing and nodding at appropriate times will help show interest in what the others are saying, and it may also help boost their marks for *interactive communication*.

It's important to practice this in class so that it is done naturally.

Breathing

Even for the most confident and well-prepared students, there may be a time during the exam when they get stuck. Something as simple as forgetting a word in English can really affect a candidate's confidence. If nerves get too much during the exam and they start to panic, the best thing they can do is a pause, take a couple of deep breaths and then either try again or simply move on to the next part of the question or exam.

Here is a technique we recommend you try with your students in class:

1. Take a long, slow breath in through the nose, filling the lower lungs first and then the upper lungs.
2. Hold your breath for 2-3 seconds.

3. Breathe out slowly through pursed lips, trying to relax the muscles in the face, shoulders and stomach.

This is also a great way to prepare students mentally for the visualisation techniques we mentioned before and can really help calm nerves.

Things to remember:

- The examiners are listening for things students CAN do rather than what they CAN'T. If students notice they've made a mistake – they should either correct themselves or just move on and forget about it.
- Marks are given on the performance of the WHOLE exam and not individual parts. Even if a candidate completely freezes and cannot complete the long turn, for example, it doesn't necessarily mean they won't pass.

Article by Richard Cleeve

Source:

