

FCE Speaking - Overview

FCE Speaking is the last part of your Cambridge English: First exam. It has **4 parts** and it is about **14 minutes long**. There will normally be one other test-taker like you because some of the tasks involve interaction between candidates. It is not uncommon to have two test-takers. There will be two examiners present - one asking the questions (the interlocutor), and the other marking the answers (the assessor).

Below you will see an overview of the exam structure, sample questions and answers, tips on how to get better score and how your answer is assessed. You can use the contents list below to navigate between parts or just read the whole thing (*highly recommended* if you are new to the exam).

[1. Part 1 - Interlocutor and candidate conversation](#) (2 minutes)

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[2. Part 2 - Describing photos. Long and short turns](#) (3 minutes)

— [2.1 Part 2 sample photos with answers](#)

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[3. Part 3 - Discussion between candidates and reaching an agreement \(discussing a mind-map\)](#) (3 minutes)

— [3.1 Part 3 sample mind-map with answers](#)

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FCE Speaking Part 1 - Interlocutor and candidate conversation

Part 1 of FCE Speaking focuses on your ability to talk about topics of general interest, such as your work or studies, how you spend your free time or your plans for the future - something you are familiar with. In this part the interlocutor asks each candidate two or three questions. You are expected to listen what the other candidate says as well as the questions asked as you might be asked the same question (e.g. "And what about you?"). However, this part does not involve direct communication between candidates. **This part is about two minutes long.**

Keep your answers fairly short - two or three sentences at most. Make sure to stick to the topic at hand. They have to sound natural - do not use any memorised responses as they are easy to spot and this can often lead to a lower mark. Rehearsed answers might also be not about the question asked as there is considerable variety in the questions, even though the range of topics is quite limited.

For better or worse, there are no helpful phrases or tricks for FCE Speaking Part 1 as this part focuses on your general ability to talk about general familiar topics. You might want to see it as a warm-up before the more challenging parts of FCE Speaking.

If you want to feel more confident with Part 1 questions - find a partner to practice the sample questions. Take turns asking and answering them, write down any mistakes or recommendations for one another. Practice is the best way to improve your chances of scoring high.

Part 1 sample questions and answers

What is your hometown like?

My hometown is Viña del Mar, it's in Chile, just north of Santiago. It's a coastal town that is popular with tourists because of the beautiful gardens and the beaches.

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What do you do in your free time?

Uhm, I can't say I have any particular hobbies to talk about, I guess I'm into oil painting. I enjoy painting landscapes in my free time because our city has such pretty views, they really inspire me!

How do you celebrate special occasions?

I'm not too outgoing so I either go for a walk in the city and treat myself to some food or just stay at home and listen to the music. If it's something big, I might invite a couple of friends over, but's that's kind of a rare thing to do for me.

Do you have any plans for this summer?

Oh, definitely! The plan is to go to an art school in California, provided that I have successfully passed this exam. Another option is to study art in Santiago, that would be okay for me as well.

Quick Summary

- Part 1 lasts for about 2 minutes for each candidate
- Test-taker and examiner interaction, no interaction between test-takers
- Questions about familiar everyday topics
- Two to four questions, answers should be kept short (around two sentences)

FCE Speaking Part 2 - Describing photos

In this part of FCE Speaking there are normally going to be two test-takers - Candidate A and Candidate B. Candidate A goes first, they get two pictures from the interlocutor and a question they have to answer. The question is written on the page with the two pictures. The questions can be about how people in the pictures might be feeling, what could be the advantages and disadvantages of the situation in each picture and so on. After that Candidate A gets **one minute** to answer the question.

After this it's turn of Candidate B to answer an additional question from the interlocutor. This additional question relates to the same set of pictures. It can be either about choosing one of the pictures, like "In which might the people feel more comfortable?" or a more general one relating to the situation, where you don't have to choose a picture, for example "Is it better to study alone or with others?". Candidate B has **30 seconds** to answer the question.

After Candidate B has answered, they change roles. This time Candidate B gets two pictures, a question from the examiner and one minute to answer it. After that Candidate A gets 30 seconds and one related question.

One important thing is that answering the question is only part of this task. You also have to describe both pictures, speculate on them (see below for clarification) and compare them. Continue reading for detailed explanation of each aspect.

FCE Speaking Part 2 tips and useful phrases

In FCE Speaking Part 2 you have to achieve **three things**:

- 1 - **compare** (what is similar and what is different in the photos)
- 2 - **describe** (give brief description of what you see, usually description goes hand-in-hand with speculating)
- 3 - **answer the question**

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1. Compare

Comparing is essential in Part 2 of FCE Speaking. You have to mention at least one thing that is common between the two photos and one that is similar. One of each should probably be enough as you only have 1 minute for your answer.

Talking about similarities	Talking about differences
In both pictures there is... Both pictures display/show... Pictures one and two have... Pictures one and two are similar in the way that there is/are... in each one. Just like in the left picture, the right one has... These two pictures have several things in common, such as/like...	Unlike the left picture, picture on the right has/shows/displays In contrast with the right picture, picture on the left is ... Picture one..., while picture two... Picture two has a different idea of ... if we compare it to the first photo While the second picture takes place in ... Contrastingly, these pictures show different takes on *some topic*

2. Describe

First thing to remember is to switch between various phrases that introduce picture description. Don't reuse the same expression, switch between them, for example:

In the first photo, we can see/there is/ ... is shown

The second picture shows/displays/demonstrates ...

One big mistake that test-takers make is using the wrong tense. The only tense you should be using to describe pictures is Present Continuous! Failing this leads to lower mark.

Another common mistake is spending too much time on describing. I've had student who would spend a whole minute on talking about what's in the picture. Remember - do not spend more than 15-20 seconds on that. Another helpful technique is to include comparison in your description.

Finally, it is "**in** the picture", not "~~on~~ the picture" - a very shameful mistake to make!

*"The first picture shows us a group of friends, having a good time. **Contrastingly**, in the second picture we see colleagues who are having a business lunch."*

The part in **bold** text shows comparison, underlined text is the usage of Present Continuous.

3. Answer the question

When you answer FCE Speaking Part 2 question ideally you would want to do so for both pictures at the same time. You should answer it together with comparing because otherwise you might not have enough time to do comparison separately. Have a look at the sample answers to get a better idea of including comparison in your answer.

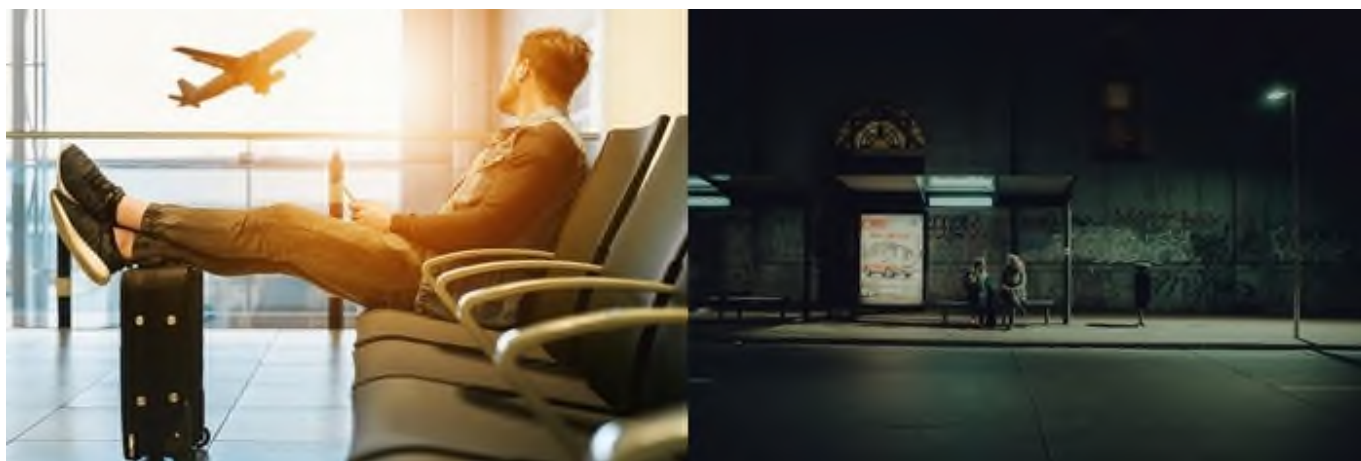
Part 2 sample questions and answers

FCE Speaking Part 2

Here are the photographs. They show people waiting for something.

I'd like you to compare the photographs, and say in which picture the waiting feels longer.

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Model answer

Candidate A: *The left picture shows a man expecting his flight to arrive to the airport. In the picture on the right we see a couple of people waiting for their bus at a rather late hour. While both pictures convey the same idea, the people at the bus stop are probably much less comfortable as it is at night and it could be quite cold.*

I guess that for the man at the airport gate the wait feels much longer. Air travel is a thrilling, even scary experience for most of us. The anxiety he might be experiencing could make the time go really slow for him. Also, flights can get late and generally you have to wait for quite some time before your plane is ready for boarding.

Examiner: **Candidate B**, how can one pass the time while waiting?

Candidate B: *Well, there are many tried and true ways. In the past, people would read books or magazines, this was the most popular way of killing some time. Nowadays what almost everyone does is stare at their phone screen, either texting or looking at funny videos online.*

Keep in mind that **you should use Present Continuous when describing pictures** (i.e. "This picture shows people hurrying to their work in the early morning hours"). More on [tenses in English](#).

Another tricky bit is the preposition. You should use **"in"** when talking about something shown by the picture (i.e. **"In** this picture we see a man strolling down the alley"). See this short [note on prepositions](#) for more examples.

Quick Summary

- Part 2 is 1 minute 30 seconds for each candidate
- Test-taker and examiner interaction, using another test-taker's pictures for the second part of the answer
- Describing and comparing two pictures, answering a question related to them
- 60 seconds answer about your pictures (long turn), 30 seconds - additional questions about the other test-taker's pictures (short turn)

FCE Speaking Part 3 - Mind map discussion between two candidates

In Part 3 candidates receive a mind map which contains a question and five prompts (also called aspects) to be discussed. They have 15 seconds to study it and then have to decide who starts the discussion.

The candidates' task is to discuss the topic using the given prompts. FCE Speaking Part 3 consists of two smaller parts. In the first part you should provide relevant responses on the topic, listen to and comment on the other candidate's answers and transition from one idea to another in a logical way. This part lasts for about **two minutes**.

In the second part of this task you are given an additional question and have to choose one of the prompts and the answer providing reasoning and either agree or disagree on the chosen prompt. You get around **one minute** for this part.

Part 3 tips and useful phrases

There are **three important aspects** of FCE Speaking Part 3:

- 1 - Initiating the dialogue
- 2 - Going from one idea to another
- 3 - Coming to an agreement

1. Initiating the conversation

When you start FCE Speaking Part 3 one of you has to start the conversation. The key here is to be polite and allow your partner to choose, especially if they are shy or silent. You can either initiate this yourself or wait for your partner to go first:

Starting the dialogue	Responding
Do you mind if I go first? Would you mind going first/starting? Care to go first? Should I begin, or would you like to go first? Would it be okay with you if I started this? Is it okay for you if I start?	Yeah, sure, go ahead. Okay, I will! I'd rather you went first, if that's okay with you. By all means, go ahead. Sure, not a problem

A common rule is to allow whoever starts first begin the conversation. Another thing that makes sense is to allow the other person initiate the dialogue in the second part.

2. Going from one idea to another

One thing that lowers your score in Part 3 is simply waiting for your turn to speak, not paying much attention to whatever the other student has to say. Such behaviour is penalised - in fact it is assessed in one of the [marking criteria](#)! A good approach is to include some points of your partner's answer into your own. Another important thing is natural change from one idea (prompt) to another as you talk should be organic rather than a set of stand-alone sentences. Below are some ways to make your ideas better connected.

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Introducing an idea	Supporting or including an idea
What about... I believe that .. deserves mentioning/being mentioned If we're talking about (topic), then... is definitely... I'm not sure that... is really important, however... A point worth discussing is...	Speaking of... You've mentioned..., which is interesting because... I'd like to add another point regarding... There is one more thing about... Another aspect of... is that...

3. Coming to an agreement

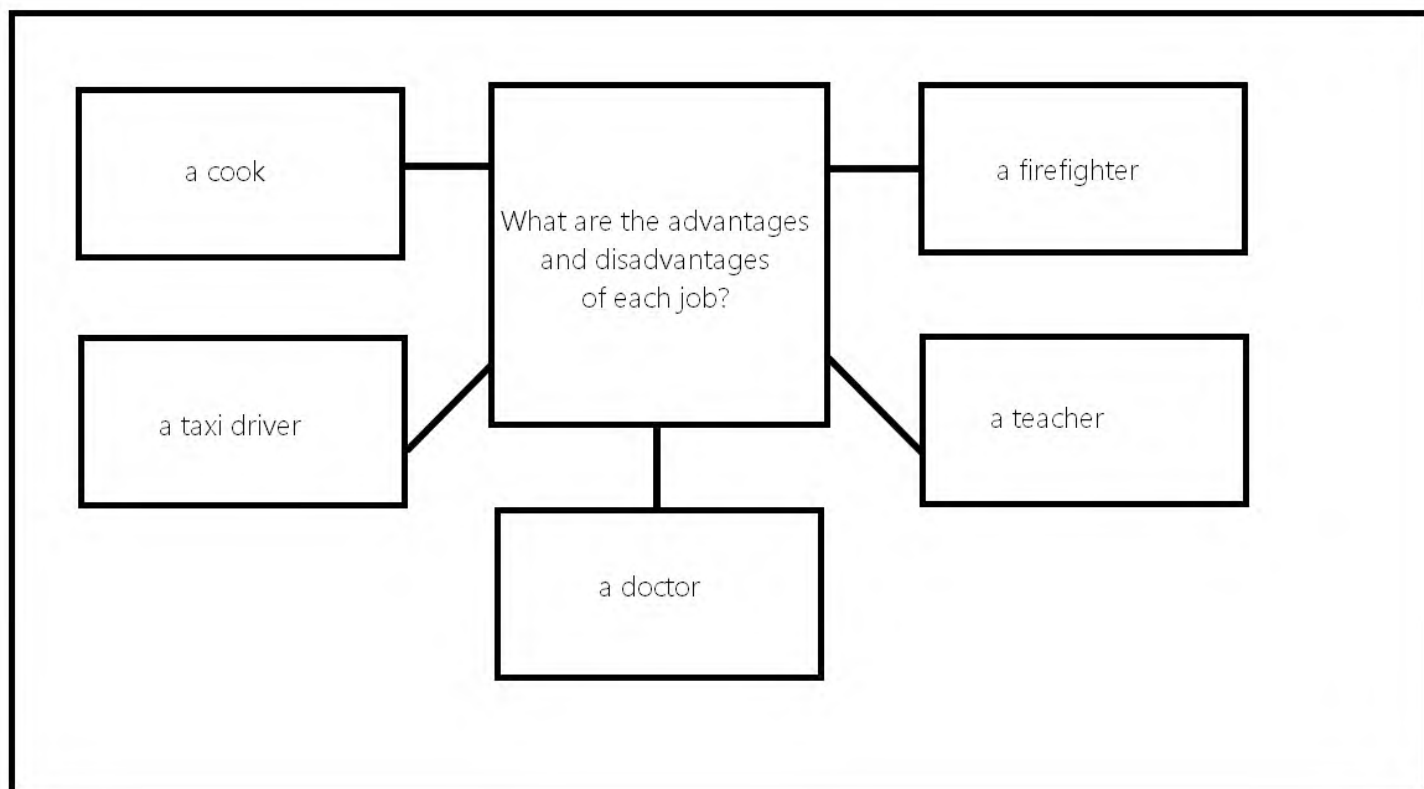
In the second half of FCE Speaking Part 3 your task is to choose one of the aspects (prompts) in connection with the given question and either agree or disagree whether it fits best. Agreeing is not mandatory, you are free to disagree, but do with respect to each other. Here are some useful phrases for suggesting, encouraging a conversation, agreeing and disagreeing:

Agreeing	Disagreeing (politely)
I totally agree with your point... I'm with you on that one... Your arguments are very compelling I had a different idea, but your arguments sound very convincing Your points are very persuasive, and I side with you on that one	I see what you mean, however... You make some valid points, but let's consider... With all due respect, I can't agree/I have to disagree Your logic here is flawless, but another point to consider is...

Suggesting ideas	Inviting to join
... is probably one of the things we should take/consider/mention, since... I think/believe that... is worth nominating/considering/mentioning/pointing out Let's not forget about... Additionally,... should probably be included, as...	Where do you stand on...? What's your take on...? Please share your thoughts on this matter? What about your idea on? That's what I think, but what about you?

Part 3 sample task and answers

Here are some different types of occupation people might choose to have. First you have some time to look at the task. (15 seconds)



Now, talk to each other about the advantages and disadvantages of each of these occupations.

Model answer

Candidate A (Juan): *Should I go first?*

Candidate B (Marian): *Yes, please do.*

Juan: *I think that working as a chef at a restaurant or some other place is great. It is a creative occupation and you can express yourself through the dishes you make.*

Marian: *I get your points about expressing yourself and I totally agree. However, I guess with time it can get a bit repetitive - cooking day in, day out. Now working as a doctor is never the same, would you agree?*

Juan: *Yeah, I guess so. You face new challenges every day, it is a lot of responsibility, and the salary must be really high. You have to know a lot though. What about being a teacher, you have to be pretty knowledgeable too, right?*

Marian: *Yes, definitely. I don't think teachers make as much money as doctors do, but the job itself might be even more rewarding!*

Examiner: Thank you. Now you have about a minute to decide which profession would be more suitable for a younger person.

Marian: *Oh, maybe a driver? You need a lot of energy to stay behind the wheel all day, and young people tend to be much more energetic than older ones. What would you say?*

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Juan: *I was thinking about teaching as the best choice for young people, but I guess you have to have more experience to be good at this. So yeah, I'd go with your option of a taxi driver!*

Quick Summary

- Part 3 is about three minutes long
- Interaction between two test-takers, taking turns to express and justify their opinions
- A discussion topic with five aspects is represented as a mind map in the first part
- An agreement between test-takers on one of the aspects has to be reached in the second part

FCE Speaking Part 4 - Topic discussion

Last part of FCE Speaking is similar to Part 1 - you are asked questions related to topic from Part 3 that you have to answer. However, there are three major differences in comparison with the first part. First of all, the questions are going to be more abstract than those in Part 1 and you will have to talk about things in general rather than your own experience. Secondly, your answers should be longer and more detailed - at least two or three longer sentences. Finally, the examiner will at some point encourage you and your partner to discuss one or two of the questions - so pay attention to your partner's answers to be ready for a dialogue with them. This part of the exam lasts for up to **four minutes**.

Part 4 sample questions with answers

Examiner: Juan, what is more important when choosing a job - how enjoyable it is or the salary?

Juan: *I'd say that it really depends on your age and your life situation. Sometimes we might really need the money, while others can afford to work for fun, experience in social connections. I guess that ideally you need to find good balance between these things. Yeah, I'd say the right balance in most important*

Examiner: Thank you. Marian, what do you think?

Marian: *Yes, I believe Juan is absolutely right. You don't want to work just because you like it very much if you don't get adequate financial compensation for your efforts. The opposite is true as well - working for money alone with no fun involved won't get you far.*

Examiner: Marian, in your opinion what kind of jobs are going to be in demand in the future?

Marian: *It's really difficult to say, I mean who knows what future holds for us. I'd say that something to do with computers - after all, our society gets more and more dependent on computers and technology in general. Maybe something to do with robots. I'm not very good at predicting things!*

Examiner: Juan, what's your opinion?

Juan: *Marian has made a very good point about computers. We rely on computers a lot and I think eventually most professions will get replaced and automated in some way. With that in mind we can say IT industry will stay relevant and grow considerably in the coming years*

Candidate Discussion

Examiner: Now I'd like you two talk about the following question: how can the government help people find employment?

Marian: *Would it be ok with you if I went first?*

Juan: *Sure, go on.*

Marian: *For one, I would suggest including mandatory on-the-job training for high-schoolers. This way they would*

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have an idea of what work actually is and make more educated decision when choosing their career and major to study at college. Another way the state could help is to pay the employers to employ people without experience - this would give young people more chances to land a job. What else do you think they could help with?

Juan: *These are very nice suggestions. However, they are mostly aimed at younger job-seekers. To include older applicants, I think the government could create free trade courses so anyone could learn a set of skills like plumbing or basic electricity. This would allow them to get their foot in the door with more companies looking for specialists.*

Marian: *Yes, this does sound like a good idea! I wonder if something like will ever be implemented though...*

Examiner: *Thank you. That is the end of your FCE Speaking part.*

Quick Summary

- Part 4 is about four minutes long
- Interaction between the examiner and two test-takers
- More abstract questions, answers are expected to be longer than in Part 1 (three sentences and more)
- The examiner invites the test-takers to discuss the questions together

FCE Speaking marking criteria

A good thing to keep in mind is the marking criteria for FCE. Knowing it helps you find weak spots of your language - like grammar, vocabulary or the way you pronounce words.

There are two people on the exam responsible for marking. The person sitting in the back uses 4 Cambridge criteria that determine your proficiency of spoken English:

1. Grammar and vocabulary
2. Discourse Management
3. Pronunciation
4. Interactive communication

The interlocutor (one asking the questions and giving the cards) has one additional marking criteria called "Global achievement". We shall look at all and explain the criteria later.

Each one is scored individually from 0 to 5 in 0.5 increments. They are then combined to get the average of six.

1. Grammar and vocabulary

What is assessed

Grammar - how appropriate, accurate and varied your grammar is:

- Various clauses, like verb and noun clauses
- Usage of active and passive voice
- Verb patterns (infinitives, to-infinitives, gerunds)
- Usage of tenses to highlight a point, i.e. longer action when a short action takes place (Past Cont. + Past Simple)
- Ability to produce longer, multiple-clause sentences
- Conditional sentences

Vocabulary - range, flexibility and accuracy of your words and phrases:

- [Collocations](#) and [prepositions](#)

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- Ability to rephrase in order to clarify a point, especially if your partner does not understand you
- No words repetition, good knowledge of synonyms and rephrasing

How to score higher

- Don't just stick to one tense - learn and use many of them. For instance, use Present Continuous to talk about plans that somebody else knows about or Past Perfect + Past Simple to highlight how one thing in the past happened before the other.
- Conditional sentences are a great way to talk about results (both real and imaginary) of actions or events that did or did not take place.
- Show likelihood of something with modals (*could, might, must*) or phrases (*probably, likely, seems to be, appears to be, looks like*).
- Use both active and passive voices. Passive voice works great to show more impersonal and objective view - great for FCE Speaking Part 3!
- Show your ability to rephrase - if you feel that you might not have expressed yourself in a clear way, introduce the idea in different words starting with a phrase like 'In other words' or 'Basically'.

Don't feel bad about making a mistake - if you know you have made one, just correct yourself. Ability to 'fix' a broken phrase is something they expect of you at Cambridge English: First exam.

2. Discourse Management

What is assessed

Your ability to speak at length, connect your ideas, make your speech easy to follow and understand. Usage of discourse markers is expected of the student to get high score.

- Vocabulary related to the topic discussed
- Aspects of language that make your speech easier to follow (i.e. personal pronouns, accurate usage of articles and other means of making the idea more clear)
- Discourse markers (phrases like "What I mean is...", "The thing is...", "Well, that is a good point..." and others that people only use in spoken, not written English)
- Cohesive devices (see below)
- Not digressing (keeping the discussion on the same topic, not going too far away from it)
- Giving full answers (Express-explain-exemplify - state your idea, explain what you mean and give some examples. That is of course not the only way to approach it, but it should give you the basic idea)
- Introducing new ideas (rather than going over the thing you have already said)

How to score higher

- Know and use cohesive devices. They can be roughly grouped into 'adding or elaborating' (*in addition, also, moreover, as well as*), 'showing consequence or result' (*as a result, consequently, so, thus, therefore*) and 'sequencing or ordering' (*firstly, first of all, to begin with, secondly, finally*). These help structure your speech, making it both connected and easier to follow.
- Expand your vocabulary. It is pretty sad to see FCE candidates struggling to come up with any relevant words on topics as simple as Food, Holidays or Career. There is no way around it, learn new words! Here is a good [vocabulary link](#) that groups words and phrases in a nice way.

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- Make sure to know the basics of [articles](#) in English. Use them to your advantage. Don't forget about possessive pronouns and adjective to make your speech more cohesive (*it, this, that, one*).

3. Pronunciation

What is assessed

First of all, *elephant in the room* - it is not about your accent. As long as your accent is easy to understand, you will do fine. This part checks other things, namely:

- Clearly pronouncing all the sounds that should be pronounced (more on that below)
- Placing the stress correctly, both in individual words and generally within the sentence (this is a common mistake with FCE test-takers)
- Correct usage of intonation to underline key points in your speech

How to score higher

- Make sure you know how words are pronounced - if you do, then you will sound much more confident. Some candidates are unsure about certain words and can pronounce them "under the breath" - not clearly. This can cause misunderstanding and get in the way of communication. Another quick tip is not to use shortened forms of words: for instance, say "I have done" instead of "I've done" to make sure the examiner and your partner understand you correctly.
- Learn and use intonation. At this level you should be able to intone to your advantage. More information in an [article on this topic](#) by British Council.

4. Interactive communication

What is assessed

How well you can support a conversation, connect ideas and come to an agreement. This is what the examiners look at:

- How well you can start and support a dialogue by suggesting and discussing relevant points
- Including your partner in the conversation and encouraging exchange of ideas
- Rephrasing or explaining your point if you see your partner struggling to understand you
- Sharing the time in the conversation equally and fairly, not "hogging" it

How to score higher

- Short answers do not give enough information to accurately assess your level of English. To give your examiners something to work with you should come up with at least two long or three shorter sentences in Part 1 and about three to four longer sentences in Part 4.
- Be sure to include your partner! There are [some phrases](#) that you might find useful for that.
- More phrases to [initiate](#) the dialogue and to [support](#) it with your ideas
- Do not take up too much time in FCE Speaking Part 3 - remember that you only have two minutes in the first half and one minute in the second.

FCE Speaking Tips

- There is a number of [typical Speaking mistakes](#). Know them to avoid embarrassment and guarantee a higher score.
- Do not attempt to answer other student's question even if you see them struggling - you might get penalized for that. However, you might help them by paraphrasing your ideas in the collaborative task.
- Keep practicing. The most effective way to improve your speaking is using the language, you can do so by either having live conversations or by writing.