

FINDING YOUR VOICE: ANSWER KEY

Below is what the Educators think about the statements;

“You cannot learn to speak fluently without practising.”

We agree totally with this statement. It is true that you can learn a lot about speaking by listening and reflecting on what other people say, but to develop confidence and fluency in speaking you need to practise, both in and out of class. Try to develop friendships with British students and international students from other countries and practise with them.

“The important thing about speaking is communicating your ideas, so it does not matter if you make grammar mistakes.”

We agree with this statement, ...but only up to a point. Some students will not start speaking until they have mentally rehearsed what they want to say, and are confident they have the grammar right, so placing too much emphasis on grammatical accuracy can have a negative effect on fluency. Many grammar errors have no significant effect on the listener’s ability to understand, and many native speakers make this type of error when they are speaking. However, some grammar errors do have an effect on comprehension, so accuracy is important. So you have to find the right balance between fluency and accuracy, so communicate effectively.

“An extensive range of vocabulary is crucial in order to articulate your ideas with the utmost clarity and precision.”

Again, we agree with this ... up to a point. If you have prepared for IELTS, you will probably have been told that you will get higher marks if you show that you can use a wide range of vocabulary accurately and appropriately. However in academic writing, using the right vocabulary is more important than using unusual (low-frequency) words. To give you an example, if the statement had been written “A wide range of vocabulary is important to express your ideas clearly and precisely” it would have been just as effective.

“I want to speak English with a British accent.”

Our view is that if you want to speak with a British accent, that’s a great objective, but it may be difficult to achieve and it’s not really necessary. It’s important that your pronunciation is good enough to be understood, but if you speak English with an accent that is typical of people from your country, that’s fine. In any case, there are many different “British” accents in the UK, so which one would you choose?

“When I am practising English outside the classroom, no-one corrects my mistakes, so how will my English improve?”

As we said before, practising your spoken English is essential if you want improve it. It’s useful to remember that sometimes students will self-correct when they realise they have just made a mistake. In addition, people you are speaking to will sometimes correct you, particularly if there is a breakdown in communication – but they often do this indirectly (e.g. they will say something

like “Sorry, do you mean ...?”). If you want more correction from your friends and classmates, why not ask them to correct you, perhaps just for 10 or 15 minutes a day?

“I’m worried about speaking in seminars, when a large number of people are listening. I don’t know the academic language I should use, and I’m afraid that people will think I’m stupid.”

This attitude is very understandable, and some British students would feel exactly the same! However, in UK higher education a lot of emphasis is placed on active participation by students, so you need to try to overcome this fear. In addition, teaching staff are generally very sympathetic and will encourage your attempts to communicate. One strategy is to plan what you want to say in advance and practise it mentally before you speak.