

Successful speakers... make sure they understand

At Trinity College London, we have studied the scripts from hundreds of our speaking exams. We wanted to find out what makes some test takers more successful than others. One thing that test takers who perform better do is to make sure they understand what the examiner is saying.

Trinity tip

In the GESE Interactive task and the ISE Collaborative task, the examiner starts a conversation by describing a situation. It is important that you understand the situation so that you can continue the conversation.

Activity 1

Read the conversations between a test taker <TT> and an examiner <E> aloud. Which test taker is properly checking that he or she has understood the original statement?

Corpus extract

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| <p>A</p> <p><E> Okay – a friend of mine asked me to lend him some money recently. I understand his situation but I'm not sure if I should do it.</p> <p><TT> Some money?</p> <p><E> Mm</p> <p><TT> Can you repeat, please?</p> <p><E> Yeah. A friend of mine...</p> <p><TT> A friend...</p> <p><TT> A friend of mine asked me to lend him some money recently...</p> <p><E> Uhu...</p> <p><TT> I understand his situation but I'm not sure if I should do it.</p> <p><E> Erm...do you think your friend is having a bad time?</p> <p>B</p> <p><E> Alright...erm...my neighbour often uses the train without paying for a ticket. He doesn't see anything wrong with it but I'm not so sure.</p> <p><TT> Is your daughter...oh, sorry, it's...</p> <p><E> My neighbour...</p> <p><TT> Yeah. But you are her mother...you're her mother and she needs...I don't know...</p> | <p>C</p> <p><E> A friend of mine has been offered a great job abroad. Her family don't want to go and I'm not sure how to advise her.</p> <p><TT> It's interesting. And what is the job?</p> <p><E> A professorship at the University of Vienna.</p> <p><TT> And is it a good opportunity for him?</p> <p><E> Absolutely – she's been trying for years to get a position like this.</p> <p><TT> And why does his family oppose it?</p> <p><E> I guess the kids are just used to their environment, their friends...they don't want to go.</p> <p><TT> Okay. And how old is he?</p> <p><E> She's thirty five.</p> <p><TT> Has he got a family?</p> <p><E> Mm</p> <p><TT> And has he got a wife?</p> <p><E> Erm...no she hasn't.</p> |
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Activity 2

In dialogue B, what has the test taker not understood?

In dialogue C, what has the test taker not understood?

How to check that you have understood:

a) Say 'Can you repeat that, please?'

b) Ask questions about what you think you have heard

For example: *Did you say your daughter?* [Then LISTEN to the reply]

c) Check that you have understood by 'echoing' what the examiner has said and then, again, LISTEN to the reply

For example:

<E> A friend of mine has been offered a great job abroad. Her family don't want to go and I'm not sure how to advise her.

<TT> Her family?

<E> Yes, her family.

d) if you are still not sure, ask another checking question

For example:

<TT> Her family?

<E> Yes, her family.

<TT> Is your friend a woman?

<E> Yes.

Trinity tip

It is very important that you fully understand the situation which the examiner describes. Take time to check and ask questions if you are not sure.

Activity 3

Talk and check. Student A: Write down five facts about someone you know or an imaginary person. Think about: occupation, place, possessions, food, habits. Try to think of unusual or funny things. Now tell student B about this person.

Example: builds houses from recycled rubbish / lives on a Scottish island / has two dogs – both dogs are deaf / only eats green food / only sleeps for four hours a day.

I've got a friend who lives on a Scottish island. He is amazing – he makes houses from recycled rubbish. He's got two dogs and both of them are deaf. He only eats food which is green and he doesn't sleep much – he sleeps for four hours a day.

Student B: Check that you have fully understood what student A is saying by asking questions. Then swap roles.