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The 9 Wrong Speaking Habits - your Examiner: only "Band 6"

Nine specific, real-time signals an examiner hears — from the examiner's own side, not a self-diagnosis checklist — each one shown next to its band 7 fix.

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What this book is

Speaking, Parts 1–3, also free on this site, already names one habit worth watching for in its own Part 4 — a page written from your side, "here's what to notice about yourself." This book is different. It is a full-length, standalone treatment written from the **examiner's side**: nine specific, real-time signals an examiner hears and reacts to, none of them the habit that page already covers.

An examiner does not mark from one vague overall impression. They are listening for specific, nameable signals the whole time, and several of the most costly ones have nothing to do with grammar accuracy or vocabulary range in the way most candidates assume. This book names nine of them, shows exactly what each sounds like next to the band 7 version of the same moment, and gives a specific fix for each.

What this book is not

It is not a Speaking course. It assumes you already have the vocabulary and the ideas — *Speaking, Parts 1–3* is where those get built, if they are not there yet. This book's only job is to name nine specific things that make an examiner hear "band 6" within a few sentences. That happens regardless of how good the underlying English actually is, and each one gets a specific fix.

It does not cover Listening, Reading or Writing. Those get their own books on this site. This book is Speaking only, and even inside Speaking it covers nine habits, not every possible one.

The one promise this book makes

An examiner forms a band-6-or-band-7 impression within the first few sentences of an answer, often before the content is even fully evaluated. It is usually one of a small number of specific, nameable habits doing that work, not a vague sense of "not fluent enough." This book names nine of them and gives a specific fix for each. No single fix, on its own, is claimed to guarantee a band move — each is stated as a signal that costs marks, not the one lever that moves a whole band. Only an official test result determines your actual band.

One thing to know before you start

Every dialogue snippet in this book was written for it. None of it is a real cue card, Part 1 question or Part 3 question, and none of it is a transcription or a close copy of one. Practising against it teaches you to hear the habit; only official practice materials tell you where you actually stand.

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Part 1 — What an examiner is actually listening for



1.1 The four criteria, restated once

Every Speaking answer is marked against four criteria: Fluency and Coherence, Lexical Resource, Grammatical Range and Accuracy, and Pronunciation. *Speaking, Parts 1–3* already explains what each one covers, so this book restates them once, in plain language, only long enough to hang the nine habits ahead on them.

Fluency and Coherence is about flow and logic — speaking at a natural pace without long, unnatural pauses, and connecting your ideas so a listener can follow where the answer is going. **Lexical Resource** is your vocabulary range and how naturally you use it, including whether you reach for a precise word or settle for the nearest safe one.

Grammatical Range and Accuracy is both the variety of structures you use and how correctly you use them. **Pronunciation** covers individual sounds, but also stress, rhythm and intonation — the features that let a listener hear which words and ideas matter most.

1.2 Why delivery habits cost marks independent of content

Most candidates prepare for Speaking by working on what they will say: ideas, vocabulary, structure. That preparation matters, but it misses something the four criteria make clear: several of the highest-cost signals are about *how* an answer is delivered, not what it contains.

A grammatically strong answer, built from good ideas, can still read as band 6 if it is delivered with the wrong tense throughout, no stress on the words that matter, or a habit of asking the examiner for reassurance. A more modestly worded answer, delivered without any of those habits, can read as band 7. This is not a loophole — it follows directly from what the four criteria actually measure. Fluency and Coherence is scored on how an answer flows and connects, not only on whether it is grammatically clean. Pronunciation is scored on stress and rhythm, not only on individual sounds.

The nine habits in Part 2 are the highest-cost, most common examples of this: delivery patterns that cost marks regardless of the English underneath them, each specific enough to catch in a recording of your own voice.

1.3 2026 — what changed?

Nothing, for Speaking specifically. IELTS moved Listening, Reading and Writing from paper to computer delivery through 2026 — *The Band 7.0 Blueprint* (also free on this site) covers that shift for each of the three. Speaking was never paper-based: it is a face-to-face or video-call interview with an examiner, unchanged by the switch. None of the nine habits ahead, or their fixes, depend on it.

2.1 Translating in your head

What it sounds like

The words are English, but the sentence is built like it started in another language. Word order is slightly off, or an idiom is translated literally instead of replaced with the English one, or a verb is used the way its nearest equivalent works at home. Nothing is technically wrong enough to call an error, but a listener can hear the effort of construction happening in real time.

Why it reads as band 6

Fluency and Coherence rewards production that flows without visible strain, and Lexical Resource rewards natural word choice, not just correct word choice. A calque — a phrase built word-for-word from another language — can be grammatically parseable and still sound like nobody actually says this, because nobody who thinks in English arrives at that exact combination. The examiner does not need to know your first language to hear it; they only need to hear that the phrasing is not how a fluent speaker would reach for the same idea.

Band 6

"For me, this is very according to the personality of the person. I am the type of person that I like to plan everything before."

Band 7

"It really depends on the person's personality. I'm someone who likes to plan everything in advance."

The band 6 version is understandable, but "very according to" and "the type of person that I like" are built from patterns that exist in other languages, not in English. The band 7 version says the same thing with phrasing that a fluent speaker would actually produce.

The fix

Learn a small set of natural connecting phrases as whole units — "it depends on," "in advance," "someone who" — rather than building them from single translated words each time. When you notice yourself constructing a sentence piece by piece instead of retrieving it whole, that is the moment this habit is happening. The fix is not more grammar study; it is deliberately noticing and replacing your own most common calques, one at a time, in practice recordings.

2.2 The safe-word retreat

What it sounds like

The candidate clearly knows more precise words — they might use one correctly earlier in the test — but under pressure, in the moment of speaking, they consistently retreat to the simplest available word instead. "Good," "bad," "nice," "a lot," "very" appear again and again where a more specific word was available and, often, was even used once elsewhere in the same test.

Why it reads as band 6

Lexical Resource is scored on range and how naturally that range is used under real conditions, not on whether a candidate can produce an impressive word once, rehearsed, in a practised answer. An examiner hears the gap between a candidate's actual vocabulary and what they choose to reach for live. Retreating to safe words every time pressure rises signals that the wider vocabulary is not yet automatic. It exists, but it is not reliably reachable in real time — and Lexical Resource marks the vocabulary that is actually reachable, not the vocabulary a candidate owns on paper.

Band 6

"The food there was very good and the service was also good. It was a nice experience overall."

Band 7

"The food was outstanding, honestly, and the staff were incredibly attentive. It was a memorable evening."

Both answers describe the same evening. The band 6 version uses "good" three times in two sentences for three different things — taste, service, overall impression — none of them distinguished from each other. The band 7 version reaches for a different, more precise word each time.

The fix

Build a short personal list of upgrades for your own most-used safe words — three or four alternatives each for "good," "bad" and "a lot." Drill them out loud until reaching for one feels automatic rather than effortful. The goal is not to eliminate simple words entirely; using "good" once, naturally, is fine. The habit worth fixing is using it every time a more precise word was sitting right there.

2.3 One tense for every answer



What it sounds like

A question asks about something that happened years ago, something happening now, or something that might happen in future. Every answer comes back in the same tense anyway, usually present simple, regardless of which one was actually asked about.

Why it reads as band 6

Grammatical Range and Accuracy scores range as well as correctness: using a variety of structures correctly, not just using one structure without making mistakes in it. A candidate who never makes a tense error but also never leaves present simple is not demonstrating range — they are demonstrating avoidance. The examiner cannot credit control of the past continuous, the present perfect, or the first conditional if none of them are ever attempted, however clean the present simple sentences are.

Band 6

"When I was a child, I live in a small town with my grandparents. I go to school every day and I play outside with my friends."

Band 7

"When I was a child, I lived in a small town with my grandparents. I used to go to school on foot every day, and I'd spend hours playing outside with my friends after class."

The question asks about childhood — clearly past. The band 6 answer stays in present simple throughout, which is both a tense error and a missed opportunity to show range. The band 7 answer uses past simple, "used to" for a repeated past habit, and "would" for another one — three different past forms doing three slightly different jobs.

The fix

Before answering, notice the time frame the question actually sets — a past experience, a current habit, a future plan. Choose the tense family that matches it before you start speaking. Practise "used to" and "would" specifically for repeated past actions — these are the structures candidates default away from most often, even when the tense itself is otherwise correct.

2.4 The over-correction spiral

What it sounds like

The candidate notices a small error mid-sentence — a wrong article, a slipped verb ending — and stops to fix it. Then notices the fix itself was imperfect, and corrects that. The sentence restarts two or three times chasing a minor error, and by the time it finishes, the original idea has been buried under repair work.

Why it reads as band 6

This habit trades a small Grammatical Range and Accuracy gain for a much larger Fluency and Coherence cost, and the exchange rate is bad. A minor article error, left alone, might cost very little — native-like speech is not error-free either. But repeated self-correction breaks the flow an answer needs to be scored well on fluency, and it often draws attention to an error that a listener would otherwise not have registered at all. The fix becomes more noticeable than the mistake it was fixing.

Band 6

"I think, I think the — sorry, a main reason, the main reason is — is that people, people today are, are busier than before, than they was, than they were before."

Band 7

"I think a main reason is that people today are busier than they used to be."

The band 6 speaker is chasing a small subject-verb error ("they was" to "they were") through three restarts, and the repeated words and false starts do far more damage to fluency than the original error ever would have. The band 7 version simply keeps going.

The fix

Set a rule for practice: one self-correction per sentence, maximum, and only for an error that actually changes the meaning. A minor slip in a word you have already moved past is cheaper to leave alone than to chase. If you notice yourself correcting the same type of error repeatedly, that is useful information — fix it in your next practice session, not mid-sentence, in the exam.

2.5 Flat delivery

What it sounds like

Every word gets roughly the same weight, the same pitch, the same speed. Nothing in the delivery signals which part of the answer actually matters — the key point and a minor supporting detail arrive sounding identical.

Why it reads as band 6

Pronunciation is not only about producing individual sounds correctly. It also covers stress, rhythm and intonation — the features that let a listener hear which words carry the meaning. An answer with perfectly clear individual sounds can still score poorly on Pronunciation if it never uses stress to mark what matters, because a listener has to work to find the point rather than being guided to it. Flat delivery also tends to read as lower Fluency and Coherence, since natural speech uses rhythm partly to signal where one idea ends and the next begins.

Band 6 (read flat, equal weight throughout)

"The biggest change was that my company moved to a new office and it was actually quite far from where I live so now my commute takes much longer than before."

Band 7 (stressed words in bold — the ones a speaker would actually emphasise)

"The **biggest** change was the office move — it's **much** further from where I live, so my commute takes **way** longer now."

Both sentences say something similar. The band 7 version is also shorter, and its stress pattern tells a listener exactly which three facts matter: this was the biggest change, the distance grew significantly, and the effect was on commute time. The band 6 version delivers the same information in one long, evenly-weighted run where every word competes for the same attention.

The fix

In practice, before answering, decide on the one or two words in your answer that carry the actual point, and deliberately stress them — a small increase in volume, a slight pause before the word, or a shift in pitch. Recording yourself and listening back for whether a stranger could identify your main point from stress alone, without following every word, is a fast way to catch flat delivery.

2.6 Asking the examiner for reassurance

What it sounds like

The candidate ends an answer, or a part of one, by checking in — "Is that okay?", "Do you know what I mean?", "Does that make sense?" It sounds as if the examiner were a conversation partner who might reply.

Why it reads as band 6

The Speaking test is not a conversation in the ordinary sense: the examiner asks, listens and moves on, and does not confirm, correct or reassure. A candidate who asks for reassurance either does not know this, which suggests unfamiliarity with the test format itself. Or they know it and ask anyway, out of nerves. Either way, the question goes unanswered, which makes the habit visible and slightly awkward rather than useful. It also signals uncertainty about whether the answer given was adequate — the opposite of the confident, self-contained delivery Fluency and Coherence rewards.

Band 6

"So basically it's a place where I go to relax after work, you know? Like, does that make sense?"

Band 7

"It's basically the place I go to unwind after work — somewhere I can switch off completely."

The band 6 version's closing question adds nothing the examiner can respond to; it only signals that the candidate is checking their own performance rather than simply delivering it. The band 7 version ends on the content itself and stops.

The fix

Treat every answer as complete the moment you finish your last sentence — no check-in, no trailing question aimed at the examiner. If you have a habit of using "you know?" or "does that make sense?" as filler, practice a different ending instead: a falling intonation on your last word. It signals completion without needing a question to do it.

2.7 Parroting the question back

What it sounds like

The answer opens by restating the question almost word for word: "You asked me about my hometown, so now I will tell you about my hometown." Only then does it actually answer the question. That opening sentence carries no new information at all.

Why it reads as band 6

This habit is often taught as a way to "buy time" while thinking, but it costs more than it buys. Fluency and Coherence rewards an answer that moves forward with purpose. Restating the question adds a sentence that goes nowhere, and a listener notices the answer has not actually started yet. It also reads as a rehearsed strategy rather than natural speech — almost nobody restates a question this way in ordinary conversation, and that works against the natural, spontaneous delivery the test is trying to assess.

Band 6

"You're asking me about a time I helped someone, so I will tell you about a time I helped someone. Okay, so, there was this one time..."

Band 7

"That's a good one — there was this one time..."

The band 7 version buys the same beat of thinking time with four words instead of a full restated question, and then moves straight into content.

The fix

If you need a moment to think, a short, natural phrase — "that's a good question," "let me think for a second," "hm, okay" — buys the same time without the wasted restatement. The test for whether you're doing this: if your opening sentence could be deleted entirely without losing any information, it should be deleted.

2.8 Part 3 answered like Part 1



What it sounds like

Part 3 asks an abstract, discussion-style question — about society, trends, or general causes rather than the candidate's own life. The answer comes back short and factual anyway, the same shape and length as a Part 1 answer about a personal routine.

Why it reads as band 6

Part 1 and Part 3 are testing different things. Part 1 rewards a natural, personal answer of moderate length. Part 3 specifically asks for reasoning, comparison and opinion on a broader topic. A short factual response leaves that entire dimension untested. It does not read as neutral — it reads as underdeveloped, because the examiner asked for something the answer did not attempt to provide. Lexical Resource and Grammatical Range also suffer indirectly. Abstract discussion naturally calls for structures and vocabulary — hedging language, comparison,

cause and effect — that a short factual answer never gives a candidate the chance to use.

Band 6

"Do you think older and younger people have different attitudes to saving money? Yes, I think so. Older people save more."

Band 7

"Definitely — I think older generations tend to be more cautious with money because they grew up with less financial security, whereas younger people have grown up with easier access to credit, so saving doesn't always feel as urgent to them."

Both answers agree with the premise. The band 6 answer stops at the agreement. The band 7 answer goes on to reason about *why* the difference might exist and compares both groups explicitly — the kind of development Part 3 is actually asking for.

The fix

Hearing "why," "how," or a comparison word ("compared to," "whereas," "unlike") inside a Part 3 question is a signal to reason, not just to state a position. A useful habit: after giving your opinion, add one sentence that starts with "because" or "the reason for this is," even if you have to build the reason on the spot.

2.9 The unmanaged long turn

What it sounds like

In Part 2, the candidate keeps talking past the point where the examiner stops them mid-sentence, with no natural closing point in sight. Or they run out of things to say after twenty seconds and stop well short of the full one-to-two minutes, leaving an awkward silence before the examiner moves on.

Why it reads as band 6

Neither direction of this habit is really a content problem — it is a time-management problem, and the examiner can hear the difference.

Running past the natural end signals the candidate never planned a structure with an ending, only a starting point. Stopping short signals either an unplanned structure that ran out of material, or bullet points on the cue card that were never touched at all. Both read as a failure to manage the specific task the long turn presents. Fluency and Coherence is scored partly on whether an answer is organised as a coherent whole, and a long turn that trails off, or one cut off mid-idea, has not achieved that.

Band 6 (trails off with no ending, examiner has to interrupt)

"...and that's basically why I chose that gift, and, um, yeah, I think, um, that's kind of it, I guess, um..."

Band 7 (a deliberate closing sentence, timed to land near the end of the minute)

"...and that's why, even years later, it's still the gift I remember best."

The band 6 speaker has run out of planned content and is filling time until the examiner steps in. The band 7 speaker has planned a closing line in advance and delivers it as the natural last beat of the answer, landing near the end of the allotted time rather than running out or being cut off.

The fix

During your one minute of preparation, sketch what to say for each bullet point. Also sketch roughly how much time each one should get. Write yourself a one-sentence closer in advance too — a specific line that wraps up the topic, not just "yeah, that's it." Practising the two-minute long turn against a visible timer trains the ending as its own skill. It teaches you what the last ten seconds should sound like, rather than leaving that to chance.

Part 3 — The one-recording self-check

3.1 What to listen for, in order

Speaking, Parts 1–3 already gives a general two-minute check for listening back to your own practice — record one answer, then work through a short list of general questions about it. This is not a second, competing method. It is a checklist specific to the nine habits in this book, meant to be used alongside that general one, not instead of it.

Record yourself answering one question — any question, from any part of the test — then listen back and check for these nine, in order:

1. **Any calques or awkward literal phrasing?** (2.1) Does anything sound built word-for-word from another language rather than retrieved as a natural English phrase?
2. **Any safe-word retreat?** (2.2) Count how many times you used "good," "bad," "nice" or "a lot." More than once or twice for different things is worth noticing.
3. **Did the tense match the time frame?** (2.3) If the question was about the past, did you actually stay in past tenses throughout, or drift back to present simple?
4. **Any over-correction spirals?** (2.4) Count restarted sentences chasing a minor error. More than one per answer is worth fixing.
5. **Was there any stress at all?** (2.5) Could a listener tell, from tone alone, which one or two words carried your main point?
6. **Any reassurance-seeking?** (2.6) Did you end any sentence with "you know?" or "does that make sense?" aimed at the examiner?

7. **Did you restate the question before answering it?** (2.7) Could your opening sentence be deleted without losing any information?
8. **If this was a Part 3 answer, did you reason or just state a fact?** (2.8) Is there a "because" or a comparison anywhere in it?
9. **If this was a Part 2 long turn, did it end on a planned sentence?** (2.9) Or did it trail off, or get cut off mid-thought?

Do this with one recording a week, the same frequency *Speaking, Parts 1–3* recommends for its own check. Checking for nine specific things in a five-minute answer takes real attention — doing it occasionally and honestly beats doing it constantly and mechanically.

The end

You started this book able to produce grammatically reasonable English. You finish it with nine specific, nameable habits an examiner listens for, each one shown next to its band 7 alternative, and a fix for each.

None of these nine habits are about knowing more grammar or more words. They are about what happens to the English you already have, the moment you speak it under exam conditions. Which tense you default to. Whether you reach for your best word or your safest one. Whether your delivery has any stress in it at all. Catching even two or three of these in your own recordings is worth more than adding new vocabulary you will not reliably use under pressure.

About the dialogue snippets. Every paired example in this book was written for it. None of it is a real cue card, Part 1 question or Part 3 question, and none of it is a transcription or a close copy of one. Practising against it trains you to hear the habit; it is not the same as sitting the real test.

About the fixes. No single fix here is claimed to guarantee a band improvement on its own. Each is stated as reducing one named signal that costs marks — only an official test result determines your actual band.

Good luck with the test, and with whatever it is a step toward.

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