

# ORAL ENGLISH CERTIFICATION TEST GUIDE

## Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI)

The following instructions are like those you will find in the test, and the sample questions are similar to the test questions. To get the most benefit from these sample questions, try to answer them just as you would during the actual test.

### **WARM UP** (*Length 1-2 minutes*)

As soon as you sit down, the interviewer will read your test number and ask you to say your full name. Then he or she will engage in an informal conversation with you. You may be asked such questions as:

*Are you having a busy day?*

*What did you eat for breakfast this morning?*

*What are you planning to do this weekend?*

This section is intended to relax you and allow you to get used to talking with the interviewer. It is **not** rated.

### **IMPROMPTU SPEAKING: Questions 1-3** (*Preparation time -none*)

**Directions:** For these questions, you don't have any preparation time, but should answer each question as soon as you can.

**Response Length:** *2 minutes for each question (make sure you provide an extensive answer and continue speaking for these 2 minutes.)*

In the actual test, the questions will not be printed in the test book, but only asked orally by the interviewer. Answer each question right away, as in a normal conversation. Try to give a precise answer even if uncertain of vocabulary or how best to express your opinion clearly. In real life situations, you may find yourself not knowing the exact word you need and having to talk around this lack of a word. The following are examples of the kinds of questions which could be asked.

**Question 1.** *Tell me a little about your background.*

The interviewer may follow up on something you said when answering the question. For example:  
*So, what drew you to specialize in biochemistry?*

**Question 2.** *What was your most recent travel experience like?*

The interviewer may follow up on something you said when answering the question. For example:  
*Why do you prefer to travel by yourself rather than with a group of friends?*

**Question 3.** *What do you think can be done to prevent the problem of air pollution caused by cars?*

The interviewer may follow up on something you said when answering the question. For example:  
*What measures do you think may need to be taken to reduce air pollution?*

**ROLE PLAY: Question 4 (Preparation time: 1 minute)**

**Directions:** Here is the card that gives you a situation and a role-play task to carry out. I will be the other person in the situation. You have 1 minute to prepare; let me know when you are ready.

**Response Length: 2 minutes**

*Imagine yourself in a specific daily life situation that involves communication. The card you receive (see examples below) describes the situation and what you are expected to do in that situation. After one minute of preparation time, you need to perform the task with the test interviewer, who acts as the other person in the situation. You need to initiate the conversation, explain the situation, and carry out your task. If the situation is problematic, you need to find a solution. You may need to ask questions. You need to respond appropriately to what your interlocutor says. Your conversation should continue for about 2 minutes.*

<b>Role-play card (Example 1)</b>
<u>The situation:</u> You are at the post office in Ames. You want to mail a gift package to your parents.
<u>Your task:</u> Talk to the clerk and explain what you want to do. Ask questions to find out what you need to know to mail the package.

<b>Role-play card (Example 2)</b>
<u>The situation:</u> You need to reserve a study room at the library to meet with your team members who are working together on a class project. Everyone is free to meet from 7 to 9 pm tomorrow.
<u>Your task:</u> Call the library information desk and explain your situation. Reserve a study room for your group.

## TEACH

TEACH aims at assessing prospective ITAs' ability of to use English in the classroom, teaching a topic in their field of study. The TEACH test lasts 10 minutes, is video-recorded, and consists of three parts:

1. Preparation time (2 minutes): you write notes on the board (e.g., outline, diagram, formulas, etc.) and get ready to begin teaching the mini-lecture.
2. Mini-Lecture (5 minutes): you teach or explain an aspect of the chosen assigned topic, clearly and in words that an undergraduate class would understand; you can write while teaching if necessary.
3. Question-Answering (3 minutes): the "class" audience asks you questions about the content of what you presented and about typical class procedures, such as homework or attendance.

When you arrive one hour before the test, you will be given a list of topics in your discipline and asked to choose one topic. The topics come from basic undergraduate course textbooks in your academic field. We will lend you photocopied pages on the topic to help you prepare your mini-lecture. You may also use your own knowledge. The topics vary in complexity and length, but generally you will want to choose only part of it to talk about, as 5 minutes is a short time to cover a lot of complex material. The textbook pages must be returned to the test proctor immediately after your test, along with your notes. (Do not write on the photocopied pages.)

### **When you prepare your mini-lecture, you must assume several things:**

1. You are teaching an undergraduate class to ISU students.
2. Your lesson is happening sometime during the course of a semester rather than at the very beginning. It is not the first class of the semester so you should NOT begin your presentation by saying "*Welcome to this course. My name is...*"
3. The students in your class may find the content difficult as some of them may not have had good preparation in this area; therefore, you should put this lesson in context and may need to give some background information to the topic. Begin by announcing the topic that you will be teaching. Remember that students generally need examples and details to help them understand more abstract ideas.
4. The "class" has been told to ask questions about the content of your presentation and also about classroom procedures during the Question-Answering section. Since this lesson is part of an imaginary semester-long course, your "class" may also ask you different kinds questions about the course, such as the kinds of questions that will appear on the next test.

### **ADVICE:**

Your TEACH test will take place at a typical university classroom, which has either a chalkboard or a whiteboard. You are encouraged to use it to give a better explanation of your topic. You may write as you speak, but remember – talk to your class, not to the board, and speak loudly enough so that the students in the back of the room can hear you. Write high on the board and large enough so that students can easily see what you have written. You may use notes for your presentation, as well as the photocopy of textbook material. However, reading is not a good way to present material to a class and will lower your score, as will learning by heart or memorizing the script of your presentation. PowerPoint and overhead transparencies may not be used for this test, even though they can be excellent teaching aids, because TEACH focuses on your spoken language ability.

Remember to speak clearly and not to rush through your topic; it takes time for students to absorb new material. It is better to cover part of your topic thoroughly than to go quickly through the entire topic and confuse your students. However, do not oversimplify the material so that it has little content and is more suitable for an elementary or primary school class than a university one.

In the Question-Answering section, you are not being tested on whether you have the precise knowledge to answer every difficult question, but on whether you can handle typical student questions in a U.S. teacherly

way. We want to see how easily you can understand questions and respond appropriately and how freely and clearly you can explain ideas without preparation time. Before answering, be sure you understand the question and, if needed, ask for it to be repeated or clarified.

## **RATING YOUR SPEAK and TEACH PERFORMANCE**

The evaluators are professionals in the field of teaching English as a second language, language assessment, or education.

At least two evaluators independently rate each section of the test; i.e., one person will not know the scores being assigned by the other(s). If they do not agree within 30 points, another evaluator will rate the video recording. Some recordings in each room are also evaluated by a third rater to ensure fairness between test rooms.

Evaluators give a score in one of seven bands between 0 and 300 for the overall effectiveness and comprehensibility of the spoken language. Generally, they are not judging the content of your ideas, but the way you express them, i.e., 1) how easy and appropriate your communication is for an audience of ISU undergraduates and 2) how much American English you can control and how fluently and accurately you can speak. These are some points they are considering as they listen to your performance:

- a) How freely and fluently can you express yourself? How comprehensibly can you function using English? Do you understand and speak English almost automatically?
- b) Do you have sufficient vocabulary and grammar to explain your ideas clearly? Are you able to use these in a controlled way to express your points precisely?
- c) How easy to understand is your pronunciation of American English words, phrases, and sentences?
- d) Does your delivery (the way you speak) make it easy to comprehend your ideas and words?
- e) How much effort are the evaluators making to understand your words and follow your ideas?
- f) Are responses logically organized and connected together so they can be easily followed?
- g) Do you have clear main points and support them with evidence such as details and examples?
- h) Are your ideas expressed in a way that is appropriate for your audience?
- i) Did you understand questions and answer them clearly and precisely?

In the OPI, raters evaluate each question and average their scores.

In TEACH, raters give one score for the whole test, but also evaluate and comment on the communication skills listed below, which influence communication in a teaching situation.

- a) Handling and answering student questions appropriately
- b) Presenting the topic clearly and developing it with supporting evidence
- c) Teaching skills, such as eye contact, use of the chalkboard, showing interest in your subject, students, and teaching
- d) Awareness of culturally appropriate US classroom behavior, such as teacher-student relationships

## **REPORTING TEST RESULTS**

Results are distributed through the Academic Communication Program website: <http://acp.grad-college.iastate.edu/>.

In the left column you will see the link: **Student Access to Scores**.

After clicking on this link, you need to enter your ISU NetID and password to login.

When your results are ready, you can see and print them. You will also be informed if you need to take an English 180 class to improve your speaking proficiency.

Note: If you log in too early, it will say you have no test results. If you cannot access your results, please let us know at [itas@iastate.edu](mailto:itas@iastate.edu) so we can tell you the results in an alternative way.

**OPI and TEACH scores are combined to give results** at one of 4 levels of English oral proficiency. This is reported to you and to the academic programs(s) considering you for a teaching assistantship or teaching duties. An explanation of the 4 levels may be found on the [Academic Communication Program](#). If you are working as a TA and do not receive Level-1 full certification, you are expected to take English 180 during or before your first semester on appointment.