

# TOP TIPS FOR A-LEVEL STUDENTS

## | SPEAKING |

1

### BE PREPARED

- This sounds very obvious but it is the most important piece of advice we can give you! You can't become a good communicator overnight. It takes a lot of practise (and revision!!)
- Practise speaking in front of whoever you can - even if they don't speak Spanish you can at least work on your confidence.
- Record yourself speaking! This can really help you to identify areas for improvement (pronunciation of words, clarity, accent, etc.)
- Expect to be nervous! Nerves are a normal part of the process and feeling nervous does not mean that you're unprepared. Make sure you have water with you in case you get a dry mouth and try to keep calm. Positive thinking = positive results.
- Remember that oral exams are very tiring - give yourself a break from other activities before and after the exam.

2

### CONFIDENCE

Confidence is key! Don't be put out when the examiner challenges/questions you - they're supposed to do this to help you develop responses. Always reply with confidence because if you sound like you're not convinced by your answers, the examiner won't be either.

And have these "stocking filler" expressions on hand in case you need to buy time. It's better to say something than open and close your mouth soundlessly like a fish!

**LINK** [interview stocking fillers](#)

If you don't understand a question, it's okay to ask the examiner to repeat or rephrase it. This is much better than guessing and potentially wasting time. **Have these slick expressions on pat to turn a wobbly moment into a wow!**

Don't get flustered about previous answers! Each question is a fresh chance to impress so don't dwell on an answer once it's done. Generally, you are marked on the overall quality so don't be upset over one or two lower quality sentences.

3

### CLEAR COMMUNICATION

- You should aim for clear, understandable pronunciation and intonation! Try not to rush or mumble, and don't be embarrassed to put on your Spanish accent!
- Silences are okay (within reason!) If you need a few seconds to think/breathe/move between points that's perfectly normal. Take a moment to compose your thoughts. And use the stocking filler buy time expressions!
- Do not make up words!! Always try to rephrase something if you do not know the exact vocabulary. **Use these wonderful "one size fits all" words for those tricky words you just can't think of a swift synonym for.**
- Develop your answers! There's a big difference between making a point and developing a point. Nothing will be a yes/no answer so always expand your points, ideas and opinions to the best of your ability.

## 4

### USE NON VERBAL COMMUNICATION

- Smile! When you arrive, look happy to be there. It will make a good first impression and will help you to feel confident.
- Use your facial expressions! React to what you're saying to show that you understand your own comments. For example, if you're discussing something serious show that you understand this – i.e. don't grin but incline your head thoughtfully! You should also look interested in what the examiner says and asks, and react accordingly.
- Eye contact! Looking at the examiner shows good communication skills and confidence. You risk appearing rude and unprepared if you look away the entire time.
- Keep your hands in your lap or clasped in front of you rather than fiddling with your hair, face, good luck necklace.

## 5

### BE ENTHUSIASTIC AND OPEN MINDED

- With external examiners – expect the unexpected! It can be quite scary facing an oral exam with a stranger. Be aware that they may have an unusual accent or they may seem intimidating. Don't be put off and don't take it personally! It's all part of the experience – the important thing is your attitude, your accent and your confidence.
- Everyone is different! Your friends may prepare in a completely different way to you (they may not even prepare at all!) The main thing is to do whatever it takes to make you feel confident and prepared. Everyone has their own technique, don't copy others, find out what suits you.
- If you feel you need some extra help you might think about some Skype lessons with ISLA. The video-conference element simulates exam tension... but at the same time the teachers are very friendly and helpful when it comes to improving your oral performance.

**NOTE:** It is important to remember that the content of the speaking exam varies between exam boards. Make sure you do your research in order to know exactly what the exam entails, and what is expected of you!

# | READING, WRITING AND LISTENING |

## 1

### REVISE

- It may seem obvious but it is SO important! In order to do well in your exams you really need to know your stuff. As well as revising vocabulary, you need to nail each topic/theme and each text/film in great detail. Aim to be an expert!
- Don't just skim through the books and fast forward the films! All 4 main exam boards ask for a "detailed knowledge and understanding" of the texts and films. This means you need to have a real knowledge of them. The only way to do this is personal study and revision.
- Have opinions! Make your response first hand and thoughtful. Learn expressions that help you to express your opinions and personal reactions in an intelligent and articulate way. But – stay relevant to the questions.
- Grammar! Exam boards are also looking for a variety of complex grammatical structures so when you're revising, really push yourself to practise a range of structures. The more you use them, the more natural it will feel!
- Past papers – use them! Before sitting the exam you should do every single past paper and practise essay available. Feedback from these is invaluable to help you identify areas for improvement.

## 2

### LEARN VOCABULARY

- You are expected to have a wide range of vocabulary for each theme/topic. Learning words and expressions can be tiring but it all pays off in the end.  
- *Why not check out ISLA's A-Level vocabulary lists!*
- Top tip: LOOK, SAY, COVER, WRITE, CHECK. Start with a list of vocabulary (English – Spanish) then...
- Look at each word – really see the word, look at the shape, visualize it. Say the word to really get it into your head! Cover it – no peeking, try to visualize the word. Write it. Check it!
- Make learning proactive rather than passive...rather than acknowledging words and translating them into English, do it the other way round, speaking Spanish translations of words out loud, and writing them down. This will make for accurate spelling and correct accenting.
- Make things more interesting! Challenge yourself to come up with synonyms and antonyms (opposite of word) too . See if you can put each word into a sentence. Try to think of different ways of saying key phrases and concepts, e.g. how many different ways can you say "I think" in Spanish?

## 3

### LISTEN MORE SPANISH

- Listening exams can be made up of passages that include different levels of formality (eg colloquial, formal, specific and so on) accents, speeds, and both male and female speakers. The best way to prepare for this is to listen to a range of Spanish audio sources in the run up to the exam.
- Top tips: Swap your usual music for a Spanish playlist. Listen to some Spanish radio. Watch Spanish TV/Films. These are all really easy ways to get used to listening to different styles of speaking.
- Be in control! Some exam boards let you control the audio in the exam – use this to your advantage! Take your time and repeat sections that you feel are important.
- (Hint: if you're really struggling with a fast section of audio, on windows media player you can actually reduce the speed! But be warned, this can make it harder to hear!)

# 4

## BE PREPARED

- Again, very obvious, but we can't stress this enough - you can't prepare for a language exam overnight! Revising vocabulary, studying texts and films, practising writing essays... all these skills take time to be developed.
- Research! Each exam board is different, it's important to understand what your exam entails. Knowing what's expected of you will help you to revise and prepare in a suitable way.
- Timing! It can help to have an idea of how long you want to spend on each section of an exam. Do past papers to help work out what suits you best. This is really worthwhile because knowing how long you have on each section can help keep you calm in the exam.

*"Examiners take a positive and flexible approach [...] [they] reward evidence of knowledge and especially any signs of understanding and careful organisation."* (CIE Examiners' notes)

- - Similar notes can be found across all exam boards. The message to take away is that as long as you are prepared with knowledge and understanding of the topics/texts/films, and present your work well, then you are prepared for the exam!

**NOTE:** As previously mentioned, the content of the written exams varies between exam boards. Make sure you do your research in order to know exactly what the exam entails, and what is expected of you!