TOP SCORE VOCABULARY FOR THE SPEAKING TEST

Using occasional, idiomatic or phrasal expressions in your IELTS interview can enrich vocabulary. However, they need to be used naturally and only occasionally.

‘Sounding natural’ is really important when trying to achieve a higher score. It means being fluent and using language in a way that makes the listener feel they are talking to someone who could belong to the same language community.

Below is a list of expressions, each with a meaning and an example of possible use in the Speaking test. Asterisk (*) shows the most flexible, and perhaps frequently used expressions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expression</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
<th>How to use in a Speaking test</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| * a drop in the ocean       | a very small amount compared to the amount needed | Assessor: Do you give money to charity?  
                                  You: No I don’t, mainly because I feel that my $50 donation would only be a drop in the ocean. |
| a lost soul                 | without direction or purpose                  | Assessor: Do you feel you belong in Australia now?  
                                  You: In some ways, yes, but deep down I’m still a bit of a lost soul. |
| a real can of worms         | uncovering a range of complex problems        | Assessor: Have you ever had to solve a tricky problem at work?  
                                  You: Yes, I once found out that someone at work had a criminal record and it was a real can of worms when I tried to sack him. |
| a straight talker           | someone who talks directly and openly         | Assessor: What can you tell me about your best friend?  
                                  You: My best friend, Paul, is a really straight talker; he never just tries to say what I would like to hear. |
| all at sea                  | very confused                                 | Assessor: Do you adapt well in new situations?  
                                  You: Yes, eventually, but I tend to be all at sea at first, until things settle down. |
| * at the end of the day     | finally/in the end                            | Assessor: Overall then, which is more important to you - love or respect?  
                                  You: At the end of the day, it all depends on your priorities at different times. |
| drop dead gorgeous          | very attractive                               | Assessor: Do you know a person who is very attractive?  
                                  You: Yes, a friend of mine. She’s a beauty; I mean she is drop dead gorgeous. |
| full of beans               | has a lot of energy                           | Assessor: Is it true that children have more energy than adults?  
                                  You: Oh yes, my son, for example, is always full of beans. |
| life in the fast lane | to seek many colourful experiences in order to chase success or self-improvement | Assessor: Do you enjoy taking risks?  
You: Well, you only live once, don’t you, and I’ve always liked life in the fast lane. |
| life in the slow lane | life without any excitement or danger | Assessor: How do you feel about extreme sports?  
You: Well, some people go for them, but they’re not for me - I prefer life in the slow lane. |
| nothing to write home about | mediocre/not as good as expected | Assessor: Have you seen any new movies lately?  
You: Yes, I saw the new Spielberg movie, but it was nothing to write home about. |
| * over the top | excessive | Assessor: Do you think a CEO can ruin a company?  
You: To blame one person for the collapse of the whole company seems to be a bit over the top. |
| quality time | time spent with someone without distractions | Assessor: If you could change something about your life, what would it be?  
You: I would work less and instead spend more quality time with my children. |
| * the bottom line | the final outcome | Assessor: Children these days often argue that learning in a classroom should be replaced with online studies, do you agree?  
You: The methods may vary, but the bottom line is they still need to go to school. |
| * the tip of the iceberg | the visible part of something but the main part is hidden | Assessor: Is there any corruption in your country?  
You: Yes, one of our government ministers was arrested recently for stealing public money and I’m pretty sure it’s only the tip of the iceberg. |
| tough love | helping someone to change their behavior by treating them in a very severe way | Assessor: Do you believe in strong discipline?  
You: Well my dad was really strict, but I think his brand of tough love helped me to become more responsible. |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expression (verbal)</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
<th>How to use in a Speaking test</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| *I fancy a (something)* | I would like a (something) | **Assessor:** Do you have a favourite café or restaurant?  
**You:** Definitely, there is a little cafe that I always go to when I fancy a coffee, and also the cupcakes they serve are heavenly. |
| *to be a disaster* | to end very badly | **Assessor:** Are you good at building relationships?  
**You:** No, I’m afraid I’m not. My last relationship was a (complete) disaster. |
| *to be a joke* | to be ridiculous, or ineffective | **Assessor:** Do you think the government should do more to protect the environment?  
**You:** With all due respect to the government of my country, their current attempts to protect the environment are a joke. |
| to be a waste of space | to be useless | **Assessor:** If you had a problem, would you ask your neighbour for help?  
**You:** My neighbour is a waste of space; I wouldn’t even bother. |
| to be an outsider | to be a stranger, new to something | **Assessor:** Have you got many friends in the place where you live?  
**You:** I’m still a bit of an outsider in my town, even 10 years after moving there. |
| *to be put out* | to be offended/annoyed | **Assessor:** How did you feel when you didn’t get that job?  
**You:** I was a bit put out when they sent me the rejection letter. |
| *to be up against it* | to experience difficulties created by a situation or a group of people | **Assessor:** Have you ever been in a difficult situation?  
**You:** Yes, when I had to apply for my visa and saw all the paperwork involved, I realized that I was really up against it. |
| to be up on (something) | have good, up-to-date knowledge of (something) | **Assessor:** What are your interests?  
**You:** I like sports, especially football. I’m really up on the Premier League in the UK; I know all the teams. |
| to bite the bullet | to take an unpleasant action or decision | **Assessor:** Have you ever had to make an unpleasant decision?  
**You:** Yes, I once had to quit a well-paid job. It wasn’t a good career move but I just had to bite the bullet. |
| to come together | to happen in a satisfactory way, without problems | **Assessor:** How did you feel when you found a new job?  
**You:** Like my life was finally starting to come together. |
| to do (something) up | to make improvements | **Assessor:** What would you like to change about your house?  
**You:** Everything! The whole place needs doing up. |
| to drink like a fish | to drink large amounts of alcohol regularly | **Assessor:** Do you think that drinking alcohol can be dangerous?  
**You:** Well, I suppose if you drink like a fish, you have to expect health problems. |