



GCSE

Urdu

8648/SF Speaking (Foundation)

Report on the examination

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General comments

The overall standard of work produced by students in the GCSE Urdu Speaking examination was generally good. A broad range of performance levels were observed, but most students demonstrated a solid grasp of the requirements and communicated effectively throughout the assessment. Much of the credit for this positive outcome is due to students' own efforts, alongside the consistent dedication and skill of their teachers in preparing them for the exam.

The role-play section of the speaking test stood out as an area where students performed particularly well. It was clear that many had practised extensively with past examination papers, which significantly contributed to their confidence and ability to handle the structured tasks. This preparation enabled them to respond accurately and appropriately, leading to generally high marks in this part of the assessment.

In contrast, performance in the photo card and general conversation sections was more variable. While there were numerous examples of excellent conversations—demonstrating strong interaction between student and teacher—there were also instances where students struggled to sustain a natural and coherent exchange. Despite these occasional challenges, the overall standard of performance in these sections remained positive.

The correct conduct of the test by teachers played a critical role in the success of the assessments. Many teachers demonstrated a sound understanding of the exam procedures and adhered closely to the AQA guidelines, thereby creating fair and supportive conditions for students. However, issues arose in centres where the speaking exam was conducted by native speakers or teachers unfamiliar with the AQA specification. In such cases, the prescribed sequence of tasks was not always followed, which adversely affected student marks. One recurring issue was poor timing, particularly in the general conversation section, which sometimes led to unnecessary loss of marks.

It is also important to note that the use of English by teachers during the test is not permitted under the AQA mark scheme. If a teacher prompts or questions a student in English, the student's response in that instance must be disregarded. For example, asking "Have you got a question?" in English during a role-play will render the student's reply invalid, resulting in a score of zero for that task. The only exception allowed is a prompt in the target language, such as "Have you got a question in Urdu?" expressed in Urdu, which is acceptable for helping students identify the correct task.

To ensure fair and consistent marking, examiners used the Speaking Scoresheet (SSS), which is included at the back of the AQA mark scheme. This tool helped to standardise the marking process and ensured that all students were assessed according to the same criteria.

In summary, while the overall performance of students was commendable and the efforts of many teachers were clearly effective, there remain areas requiring attention. Strict adherence to AQA procedures, avoidance of English during the test, and careful management of timing are all essential for maintaining the integrity of the speaking examination and ensuring that all students are assessed fairly.

Part 1 – Role-plays

It was particularly pleasing to observe strong student performances in the role-play section of the speaking assessment. Students generally demonstrated good command of the required language structures and coped well with the demands of the tasks. Notably, performance was strongest in tasks 1 to 4, with between 63% and 71% of students achieving the maximum available mark in these parts of the assessment. This indicates a high level of preparation and familiarity with the task format. However, performance in task 5, which required students to formulate a question independently, was, with only approximately 61% of students achieving full marks. This suggests that further focus is needed in developing students' ability to form accurate and relevant questions in Urdu.

With regard to the conduct of the role-play task, the majority of teachers followed the guidance provided in the Teacher's Booklet accurately and consistently, ensuring a fair assessment environment. Where this guidance was followed precisely, the integrity of the assessment was maintained, and students were given the opportunity to perform to the best of their ability. However, in a number of instances, teachers re-worded the scripted prompts, which rendered the corresponding student responses invalid. This issue had a direct and negative impact on student outcomes.

Several common errors contributed to the lowering of marks in the role-play section. These included the use of English, Mirpuri, or Punjabi words during the test, which detracted from the authenticity and accuracy of the language being assessed. Some students either omitted the required question in task 5, asked an irrelevant question, or used the incorrect tense in their responses. Others deviated from the prompts provided in the role-play task or asked the question that was designated for the teacher. Additionally, in some cases, teachers allowed students to give responses that were unnecessarily lengthy or, conversely, provided overly detailed replies to the student's question. These actions not only strayed from the expectations outlined in the mark scheme but also often disrupted the structure and flow of the role-play.

A further challenge noted was students' difficulty in reading specific vocabulary in Urdu. In particular, the terms corresponding to "music in Eid mela," "price of gift," and "trip in a year" proved problematic for a number of students. These difficulties suggest the need for continued emphasis on reading and pronunciation practice, especially with vocabulary that

may be less commonly encountered in everyday conversation, but which is important in the context of the exam.

Overall, while the role-play section remains an area of relative strength for many students, there are clear areas for development both in terms of teacher conduct and student preparation. Closer adherence to the scripted format, targeted practice in question formation, and reinforcement of vocabulary and pronunciation should contribute to even stronger outcomes in future speaking assessments.

Part 2 - Photo cards

Students generally appeared well prepared for the photo card element of the speaking assessment. Just under 30% of students achieved marks within the top band, with a further 36% scoring within the 10–12 mark band. This reflects a strong understanding of the expectations for this task among a significant proportion of students. Most students were able to give a reasonably well-developed response to the first, prepared question (“What is in the picture?”), and many showed evidence of having practised this format.

However, among less able students, responses to the first question were often brief and basic, typically limited to naming objects or providing short, undeveloped sentences. In contrast, stronger responses were those in which students applied the PALMS technique—describing Physical, Action, Location, Mood, and Something else. This approach helped to structure and enrich their answers, allowing students to demonstrate greater linguistic range and spontaneity. At foundation level, some students attempted to describe activities using the present continuous tense, though in some cases this led to inaccuracies due to incorrect verb formation or structure.

The range in the quality of answers to subsequent questions on the photo card demonstrated effective differentiation and highlighted the discriminating nature of the task. Many students appeared to have been well trained in line with the marking criteria outlined on page 20 of the mark scheme. Centres where teachers had clearly studied this guidance and shared it with students saw stronger overall performance. Teachers who are less familiar with the mark scheme are strongly encouraged to read page 20 and to consult the example answers given on pages 21 to 28. These examples offer valuable insights into the standard expected for each mark band.

Despite the general strength of student responses, certain questions proved more challenging for many students. These included:

- How do your friends celebrate Mother’s Day? (Card B)
- What is your opinion about a visit to the countryside? (Card C)

- Do you give away spare household items to a charity shop? Why/why not? (Card D)
- Is it appropriate to sanction students for poor behaviour in schools? Why/why not? (Card E)
- Do you have to work hard in schools? Why/why not? (Card F)

These questions often required more abstract thinking, manipulation of tense, or reference to less familiar vocabulary, which posed difficulty for some students.

The majority of examiners conducted the photo card task well and in accordance with AQA expectations. However, a number of factors were observed that negatively impacted student performance:

- In some cases, the **student's version of the photo card** was used to guide the questioning, resulting in the omission of **points 4 and 5**, which form a crucial part of the assessment.
- Some teachers **allowed students to give excessively detailed responses**, sometimes including 12 or 13 pieces of information for a single question. This goes beyond the requirement, which is for **a maximum of three clear pieces of information**.
- The **questions were not always asked in the correct order**, which may have disrupted students' prepared responses or affected their confidence.
- There were instances where **tense usage** by the teacher was incorrect, leading to confusion or inaccurate student responses.
- The **third-person verb forms**, where required, were not always used.
- Both **students and teachers occasionally used English, Punjabi, or Mirpuri words or phrases**, which should be avoided in order to maintain the linguistic integrity of the assessment.
- Some teachers asked **irrelevant questions** or deviated from the **prescribed script in the Teacher's Booklet**, which could disadvantage students and undermine the validity of the test.

In summary, while student performance on the photo card task was broadly strong, particularly where guidance had been followed, continued attention to exam format, tense accuracy, question order, and strict adherence to the AQA script remains essential. Addressing these issues will ensure students are given the best possible opportunity to demonstrate their ability and achieve the marks they deserve.

Part 3 - General conversation

Student performance in the general conversation section of the speaking assessment was very good overall. A significant proportion of students demonstrated strong linguistic ability, with 48% achieving a mark in the top band (9–10) for communication and 54% doing so for range and accuracy of language. Similarly, 54% of students attained the highest mark (band 5)

for pronunciation and intonation, while 54% achieved top marks for spontaneity and fluency. These figures indicate that a large number of students were confident, articulate, and well prepared for this component of the test.

That said, there were a number of factors that adversely affected student performance in some cases. One of the most prominent issues was the selection of incorrect themes or a failure to manage the timing of the conversation effectively. In some instances, students lost marks because they did not ask a question, a requirement that contributes directly to the communication mark. Another concern was the mismatch between student ability and the level of questioning, with some teachers failing to differentiate appropriately. In a small number of cases, the conversation was conducted partly or entirely in English, which is a serious procedural error and one that undermines the validity of the assessment.

For many students, the general conversation was the section in which they felt most comfortable and were able to perform to the best of their ability. However, several recurring issues were noted that prevented some students—often highly capable ones—from accessing the highest marks:

- In some centres, only one theme was covered in the general conversation. This led to the immediate loss of half the available communication marks for otherwise strong students.
- The use of English, Punjabi, or Mirpuri during the conversation detracted from students' ability to demonstrate proficiency in Urdu.
- Students were sometimes inadequately prepared for the second theme chosen by AQA, which limited their ability to sustain a detailed response.
- A number of students did not ask a question during the conversation, which is a requirement of the assessment.
- In some cases, teachers failed to ask questions designed to elicit a range of language skills such as expressing opinions, giving justifications, or demonstrating control of a variety of tenses.
- There was often a lack of genuine interaction between teacher and student. In these cases, the test resembled a series of disconnected questions rather than a natural, flowing conversation.
- Teachers frequently relied on closed questions, which limited students' opportunities to expand on their answers and showcase their language ability.
- Some students gave responses that were overly lengthy, which occasionally led to repetition and a loss of focus.
- Teachers sometimes used the same set of questions for both foundation and higher-tier students. This one-size-fits-all approach meant that questions were not always appropriately pitched for the student's ability level.
- There was limited evidence of differentiated questioning, which is essential for enabling all students to perform at their best.

- In some instances, the conversation was not conducted for the required minimum length, which may have restricted students' ability to demonstrate the full range of their skills.

Overall, while a considerable number of students performed strongly in the general conversation, continued improvement depends on consistent, specification-aligned teacher practice. Differentiated, interactive questioning, careful timing, strict adherence to the requirement of covering two themes, and the exclusive use of Urdu are all essential components of successful delivery. Attention to these areas will help ensure that all students are provided with a fair and supportive environment in which they can demonstrate their spoken language skills effectively.

Advice to teachers

To ensure fairness and consistency in the conduct of the speaking assessment, it is essential that all teachers and examiners adhere closely to AQA's prescribed procedures. A number of best practices and key requirements have been identified which, when implemented effectively, help to safeguard the integrity of the exam and provide students with the best opportunity to succeed.

Before beginning assessments, teachers should conduct a short test recording to verify that the recording equipment is functioning correctly and that audio levels are clear. Ensuring optimal microphone placement is vital; the recording device must be positioned in such a way that student voices are picked up clearly and distinctly throughout the assessment. Poor audio quality can compromise marking and may necessitate referral to AQA's Irregularities Team.

At the start of every student's recording, teachers must follow the introduction format exactly as outlined in the Instructions document. This includes stating in English: *"GCSE Urdu examination, June [year of exam]. Centre number [], candidate name [], candidate name []. Role-play number [], photo card letter [], general conversation theme chosen by student: Theme [1, 2 or 3]."* This structured introduction is essential for clear identification and moderation of the student's work.

Once the formal introduction has been completed, teachers must use **only Urdu** throughout the remainder of the test. This applies to all parts of the speaking assessment, including role-play, photo card, and general conversation. The use of English, Punjabi, or Mirpuri within the assessment is not permitted and may result in the invalidation of student responses, particularly if teacher prompts or questions are given in a language other than Urdu.

Teachers must also ensure that **everything they say is clearly audible**. Whispering or speaking too quietly during the assessment can lead to concerns about transparency and may trigger investigation by the Irregularities Team at AQA. Similarly, any noises that suggest the teacher is writing during the test—such as rustling paper or tapping—should be strictly avoided, as this can compromise the integrity of the recording.

By following these guidelines carefully and consistently, teachers not only uphold the standards required by the examination board but also contribute directly to the fairness and accuracy of student outcomes. Thorough preparation, careful adherence to the mark scheme, and professional delivery remain critical to the success of the speaking component.

Key aspects of good practice for teachers, examiners and centres

The successful and fair administration of the speaking assessment depends not only on students' preparation but also on the consistency and professionalism of teachers, examiners, and centres. Good practice begins well before the first student sits the test and should be embedded throughout every stage of the process.

First and foremost, it is essential that native speakers involved in the assessment are trained thoroughly to ensure full understanding and application of the AQA specification. This includes correct use of the set themes, strict adherence to exam timings, use of Urdu throughout the test, and following the script exactly as it is written—without paraphrasing or improvisation. Deviation from the script can result in students' responses being invalidated. Technical preparations should also be made in advance. All recording equipment must be checked prior to the day of the first test, with particular attention paid to sound quality and volume levels. Centres must ensure that a suitable application, website or programme is used for recording, and that student responses are clear and audible. Background noise, low recording volume, or interference from poor-quality devices can affect marking and may require further investigation.

During the assessment, teachers should ensure they have all necessary materials immediately to hand, including the role-play card, photo card, and the examiner's version of the Sequence Chart. This chart outlines the Role Play, Photo Card and nominated General Conversation theme for each student and is invaluable in maintaining correct sequencing and avoiding errors.

It is imperative that the test is conducted entirely in Urdu, including the introduction to each section. Teachers must not use English or any other language at any point once the initial formal English introduction has been given. Students should also be reminded that they must respond only in Urdu, as the use of English will not be credited.

Teachers conducting the assessment should be qualified and competent in both Urdu and the structure of the exam itself. A clear understanding of how to conduct the test and how to guide students to higher marks is critical. For example, asking open and relevant questions

that elicit opinions, justifications, and the use of different tenses will allow students to demonstrate a broader range of skills.

Attention to timing is essential. Teachers are strongly advised to use a timer to monitor the length of the general conversation, ensuring it meets the minimum required duration and does not overrun. It is also best practice to invite the student to ask their required question during the conversation well before the closing moments of the test, to avoid a rushed or forgotten attempt.

Another point of concern in recent exam series has been a lack of attentiveness on the part of some teachers. There were instances where a teacher asked a question that the student had already answered moments earlier, which led to confusion and disrupted the flow of the assessment. Active listening and responsive questioning are therefore essential skills for examiners to employ.

Finally, examiners and teachers must make it a priority to read and follow all guidance issued by AQA, including the Teacher's Booklet and the mark scheme. These documents are carefully structured to ensure consistency across centres and provide clear examples and explanations to support accurate delivery and assessment of the speaking test.

By adhering to these key principles of good practice, centres and teachers can ensure a fair, smooth, and professional assessment experience for all students. This, in turn, allows students to perform to the best of their ability and ensures the integrity and reliability of the exam process.

Advice to students

Students are strongly encouraged to make full and effective use of the preparation time provided before the speaking assessment. The 12-minute preparation period offers a valuable opportunity to organise ideas and ensure readiness for both the role-play and photo card tasks. During this time, students are permitted—and advised—to write down exactly what they plan to say in response to the role-play tasks and the three prepared questions from the photo card. This can help boost confidence and ensure structured, accurate responses.

When preparing for the photo card section, students should aim to produce responses of **at least three sentences per question**, ensuring that each sentence includes a **clear verb**. This not only helps to meet the assessment criteria but also allows students to demonstrate their grasp of different tenses and sentence structures.

Students should also listen **very carefully** to all questions asked by the teacher. In the role-play and photo card tasks, particular attention should be paid to the **unprepared questions**, which cannot be scripted in advance. During the general conversation, students must be attentive throughout, as these questions require spontaneous responses and often test a range of language skills.

A solid understanding of **common Urdu question words** is essential. Words such as *what, how, where, when, and why* form the basis of many exam questions, and recognising them will greatly assist comprehension and response.

If a student does not understand a question during the test, they are permitted to ask for repetition in any part of the assessment. However, this must be done **in Urdu**. A simple and appropriate phrase such as “سوال دُہرا دیں؟” (“could you repeat the question?”) is acceptable and ensures the request does not affect the student's marks.

By following this guidance, students can approach their speaking exam with greater confidence and control, demonstrating both their linguistic ability and exam awareness.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the [Results Statistics](#) page of the AQA Website.