



Five Oral Exam Strategies to Move Students from Grade 5 to Grade 9 in Spanish

By Ana Ramos · A practical guide for Spanish teachers and educators



Why Grade 5 Students Plateau — and How to Break Through

THE GRADE 5 CEILING

Students communicate basic ideas but **rely on memorised phrases**, limited tenses, and simple vocabulary — enough to pass, not enough to excel.

WHAT GRADE 9 LOOKS LIKE

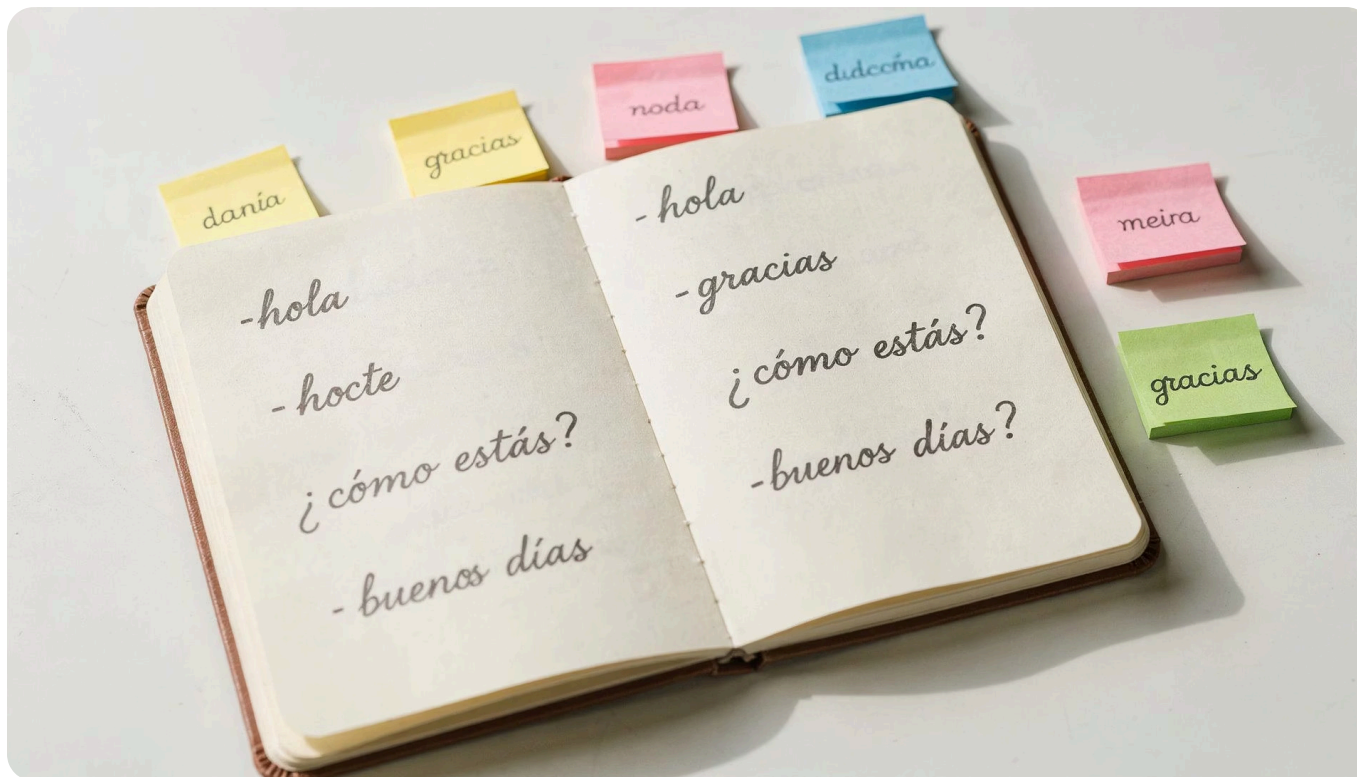
Spontaneous, accurate speech across tenses; complex structures; **genuine interaction** with the examiner. Quality of responses matters — not just length.

⊗ The Three Biggest Barriers

According to Chief Examiner reports, students consistently lose marks due to:

- ① Insufficient vocabulary
- ② Inability to structure sentences
- ③ Over-reliance on memorised material

Strategy 1: Ditch Memorisation — Build a "Phrase Bank" Instead



The Problem

Memorised scripts **collapse under unexpected questions** — examiners can tell immediately.

The Fix

Build a bank of **adaptable structures** — flexible sentence frames, not full answers:
Aunque... / Si pudiera... / Lo que más me gusta es...

Grade 9 Structures to Embed

Subjunctive clauses · conditional "si" sentences · idioms · complex connectors

⚠️ **Common Mistake:** Students memorise answers to predicted questions but freeze when the conversation goes off-script.

Strategy 2: Master the Tense Ladder



Present

Voy a la playa



Past

Fui a la playa



Future

Iré a la playa



Conditional

Si pudiera, iría a...

i **Grade 5 Reality:** Students default to the present tense — past and future feel risky under pressure.

✓ Assessment Impact: Examiners reward manipulation of language **across a range of contexts** — tense variety is the fastest route to higher marks.

For every topic, practise answering in present → past → future → conditional — **in sequence, every time.**

Strategy 3: Train for Spontaneity with "Curveball" Questions

What Separates Grade 7 from Grade 9

The ability to respond **fluently to unexpected follow-up questions** — not just rehearsed topics. After every prepared answer, ask one unpredictable follow-up: students must respond without pausing to translate.



Common Mistake:

Students go silent or switch to English when surprised. Teach them: silence is **more costly** than an imperfect answer.

Recovery Phrases to Teach

Buena pregunta...

En realidad...

Depende de...

Lo que quiero decir es...

These phrases **buy thinking time** without breaking fluency.



Strategy 4: Use the PALMS Technique for Photo Card Tasks



From Grade 5 to Grade 9

Grade 5 Approach

Describes only what is seen literally: *"Hay dos personas."*

Grade 9 Approach

Speculates, justifies, and connects to wider themes:

"Parece que... / Esto me hace pensar en... / Podría ser que..."

- ✔ **Assessment Criteria:** Top marks require students to **exchange and justify opinions**, not merely report observations.

Strategy 5: Record, Review, Refine — Weekly Speaking Logs



The Method

Students record a **2-minute spoken response** each week, listen back, and self-assess against the mark scheme — before the teacher gives feedback.

⚠ Common Mistake: Skipping self-review. Students who only record without listening back miss the **metacognitive benefit** entirely.

1 Record

A timed spoken response on a set topic each week.

2 Review

Listen back to identify mispronunciation, tense slips, and filler words.

3 Refine

Log vocabulary range, tenses used, and fluency score — visible progress motivates continued effort.

Your Grade 9 Action Plan

A focused **10-week sprint** from audit to exam-ready performance.

Weeks 1–2: Audit

Assess each student's tense range and phrase bank
– identify specific gaps before introducing new strategies.

1

2

Weeks 3–6: Build

Introduce Tense Ladder drills and PALMS for photo tasks. Begin weekly recording logs for self-review.

3

Weeks 7–10: Stretch

Run curveball question sessions. Replace memorised scripts with flexible phrase banks across all topics.

4

Final 2 Weeks: Perform

Full mock orals under exam conditions – focus on recovery strategies and spontaneous interaction.

- ❑ The goal is not perfection – it is **flexible, confident communication** that demonstrates genuine linguistic range under pressure.

Sources

- [Pearson — Conducting the GCSE Spanish Speaking Exam Walkthrough](#)
- [Institute of Education — Spanish Oral Masterclass Revision Notes](#)
- [TES — Spanish IGCSE Oral Exam Speaking Preparation Booklet \(Edexcel\)](#)
- [NSW Government — Marking Guidelines for Oral Exams](#)
- [Language Gems — GCSE Spanish Speaking Exam: 5 Essential Tips for a Top Grade](#)