

Listening comprehension & note-taking

Introduction

Like many students, you may be initially very worried about your listening skills. Academic listening usually involves trying to follow a lecture or discussion in English and writing adequate notes on it. If you have difficulties in doing this, you may not be sure whether the problems are listening problems or language problems. In any case, much listening to lectures or similar texts is essential. There is also a need for you to be aware of the way lectures are organised, the particular kind of language that is used in lectures (Lynch, 1983) and making sure you know the language, particularly the pronunciation of familiar words, of your own subject. I think the most important skill is for you to learn to recognise the structure of lectures - the main points and subsidiary points.

You need to practise:

- How to take notes.
- Recognising lecture structure: understanding relationships in the lecture - reference; understanding relations within the sentence/complex sentences; importance markers, signposts.
- Deducing the meaning of unfamiliar words and word groups - guessing.
- Recognising implications: information not explicitly stated; recognising the speaker's attitude. Evaluating the importance of information - selecting information.
- Understanding intonation, voice emphasis etc.
- Listening skills: skimming - listening to obtain gist; scanning - listening to obtain specific information; selective extraction of relevant points to summarise text.

Advice

Your listening will improve quickly if you hear English often - so make sure you do - films, television, anything. Any kind of comprehension is also part of a circle:

- understand → learn → have knowledge → understand more → learn more → have more knowledge → understand more etc.

So read around the topic before the lecture - or read the newspaper if you want to understand the news on the radio.

Recognising lecture structure

Several studies (e.g. Chaudron & Richards, 1986; DeCarrico & Nattinger, 1988) have suggested that explicit signals of text structure are important in lecture comprehension. Listening for these signals can therefore help you understand the lecture.

Signals

The tables below show some of the most common signals used in lectures to indicate structure (Leech & Svartvik, 1975). Listen for them in your lectures.

1. Introducing
2. Giving background information
3. Defining
4. Enumerating/Listing
5. Giving examples
6. Showing importance/Emphasising
7. Clarifying/Explaining/Putting it in other words
8. Moving on/Changing direction
9. Giving further information
10. Giving contrasting information
11. Classifying
12. Digressing
13. Referring to visuals
14. Concluding

1. Introducing

At the beginning of a lecture, or a section of a lecture, the lecturer will give you some idea about the structure of the lecture. Listen for these signals as it will help you understand what the lecturer is saying.

What I intend to say is What I'd like to do is to discuss What I intend to do is to explain In my talk today, My topic today is Today, I'm going to talk about I'm going to talk to you about My colleagues and I are going to give a short presentation on Today I want to consider In this talk, I would like to concentrate on The subject of this talk is The purpose of this talk is to This talk is designed to	...
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2. Giving background information

Before the new information is given, the lecturer will often summarise what you are expected to know about the subject to be covered. This could refer back to a previous lecture or to some background reading you should have done.

As we know As we have already seen	...
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As we have all read It's clear that It goes without saying We all understand It is understood You'll remember	
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3. Defining

In a lecture, it is often necessary to define the terms that will be used. This is important as familiar words can have specific meanings in different subjects.

X	is is called is known as may be defined as is a type of Y that/which	...
By X, I mean		
This term is used generally to mean In the field of Y, the term refers to		
A type of Y which ... is X.		

4. Enumerating/Listing

The lecturer will often be explicit about the order in which new points will be mentioned. To make the order clear we use various links and connectives.

Firstly Secondly Next Then Thirdly Lastly Finally	
First of all In the first place For one thing To begin with In the second place For another thing	...
The	first second point I'd like to make is

	next last		
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5. Giving examples

In lectures, it is common to make generalisations. These generalisations are often supported with examples. These signals can help you to understand which generalisations the examples refer to.

This ...	is	shown exemplified illustrated	by	
For example, For instance, You only have to think of Remember,				...
A key experiment	shows exemplifies illustrates		this.	...
This is shown by the following examples: The following are examples of this: The following is a case in point: Let me give you a couple of examples:				...
X	is a case in point.			
Take	X	for example for instance		
...	such as	...		

6. Showing importance/Emphasising

When you are taking notes, you cannot write down every word. You need to distinguish between important and less important information. The lecturer can use these signals to draw your attention to the important points.

I want to stress I want to highlight I'd like to emphasise I'd like to put emphasis on It's important to remember that We should bear in mind that Don't forget that	...
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The crucial point is The essential point is The fundamental point is	
Furthermore, What's more, This supports my argument that, It follows, therefore, that What (in effect) we are saying is	...

7. Clarifying/Explaining/Putting it in other words

The lecturer will try to explain the meaning of difficult concepts. To do this he or she may repeat the information using different words. It is important for you to recognise that this is the same information expressed differently and not new information.

In other words, Or rather, That is to say, Basically To put it another way, If we put that another way, By which I mean Or you could say The point I'm making is That is to say, That is, Namely, i.e. That means	...
What I	'm suggesting 'm trying to say meant to say should have said
	is
Let me put it another way.	

8. Moving on/Changing direction

The lecture will be organised around several different points. It is important to notice when the lecturer moves from one point to the next. Listen for these signals.

That's all I want to say about X. OK Now All right

<p>Having looked at ..., I'd now like to consider</p> <p>I'd like now to move on to</p> <p>Turning now to</p> <p>So let's turn to</p> <p>Moving on now to</p> <p>I now want to turn to</p> <p>The next point is</p> <p>Another interesting point is</p> <p>The next aspect I'd like to consider is</p> <p>I'd now like to turn to</p> <p>Let's now look at</p> <p>If we could now move on to</p>	<p>...</p>
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9. Giving further information

These signals show that the lecturer is proceeding in the same direction and giving more information.

<p>Furthermore,</p> <p>An additional point</p> <p>Another point</p> <p>A further point</p> <p>A similar point</p> <p>In addition</p> <p>Moreover</p> <p>Similarly</p> <p>Apart from,</p> <p>Not only ..., but</p> <p>We can add</p> <p>I could add that</p> <p>Further</p> <p>As well as,</p> <p>Besides</p>	<p>...</p>
<p>...</p>	<p>also.</p> <p>too.</p> <p>as well.</p>

10. Giving contrasting information

These signals show that the lecturer is proceeding in a different direction and giving unexpected or contrasting information. It is important to listen to this.

<p>Although</p> <p>However</p> <p>On the other hand</p>	<p>...</p>
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Whereas Despite Nevertheless But Alternatively	
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11. Classifying

When we classify, we arrange members of a group. The lecturer may use the following signals to show that a classification is being made.

There are		types kinds		: Y and Z. . These are Y and Z.
The	N	classes categories sorts varieties	of X	are Y and Z.
X	consists of comprises can be divided into	N	categories classes kinds types varieties	. These are Y and Z. : Y and Z.
Y and Z are	classes kinds types categories varieties		of X.	
X may be classified	according to on the basis of depending on		...	

12. Digressing

Sometimes the lecturer may leave the main subject of the lecture for a while and then come back to it.

Incidentally By the way While I remember Before I forget	...
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13. Referring to visuals

The following signals can be used to refer to a handout or an OHT or PowerPoint slide.

<p>On this graph, Take a look at this. Let's have a look at this. I'd like you to look at this. I'd like to draw your attention to Here we can see The ... shows The graph illustrates The horizontal axis represents The vertical axis represents As you can see, If you look closely, you'll see</p>	<p>...</p>
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14. Concluding

The lecture should end with a summary of the main points made. The following signals will help you to identify this.

<p>So, We've seen that First we looked at ... and we saw that Then we considered ... and I argued that In short, To sum up In conclusion, I'd like to emphasise that</p>	<p>...</p>
<p>That completes my lecture.</p>	

Understanding reference

To understand a lecture or talk, it is not enough just to understand the important information in each sentence. It is also necessary to understand how the sentences are related to each other. Every text has a structure. It is not just a random collection of sentences. The parts that make up the text are related in a meaningful way to each other. Recognising the way in which a text has been organised will help you to understand it better. In order to understand the text, it is necessary to understand how the sentences are related. Words like "it", "this", "that", "here", "there" etc. refer to other parts of the text. You need to understand these connections or links.

Look at the following text:

1. The implications of - er - von Neumann's concept of the computer were, first of all, that one needed a large internal memory. Erm - you had to store **data** that you weren't actually operating on. You'd got to staticize **it** and keep **it** in a store.

The highlighted "**it**", in this case, refers to "data".

Substitution and ellipsis

Substitution is the replacement of one item by another and ellipsis is the omission of the item. If speakers wish to avoid repeating a word, they can use substitution or ellipsis.

5. But essentially in a digital computer, we do things serially, one operation at a time. And the original **reason** for that was very much a reliability-based **one**.

Here, "one" means "reason". The speaker has substituted "reason" with "one". Other words that can be used are "one", "ones", "do", "so", "not".

Conjunction

Conjunction shows meaningful relationships between clauses. It shows how what follows is connected to what has gone before.

9. And in 1929, the American physiologist Cannon coined the term, 'homeostasis'. 'Stasis', as in static, 'homeo', the same, and **therefore** it really means 'remaining the same'. Homeostasis. Now what Cannon actually wrote was this. Erm, 'The constant conditions', 'The constant conditions which are maintained in the body might be termed 'equilibria'.' So, in other words, this constancy you could call 'equilibria'.' That word, **however**, has come to have fairly exact meaning as applied to relatively simple physico-chemical states. In closed systems, where no forces are balanced.' **So** in other words, he's saying that you could use the term equilibrium, but really equilibrium tends to be concerned with such things as chemical equations, chemical reactions, and he wants to use another term which perhaps has less overtones to it.

The words "therefore" and "so" are used to show that the lecturer is giving reasons. The word "however" shows that this statement is opposite to the ideas that have come before. Other words used are "for example", "as a consequence of this", "firstly", "furthermore", "in spite of this", etc.

Lexical cohesion

This is a way of achieving a cohesive effect by the use of particular vocabulary items. You can refer to the same idea by using the same or different words.

10. **The laws** he formulated are now known as **Newton's Laws of Motion**. There are three **laws**. The first is that every body - a body is a material object of any sort in this term - every body continues in a state of rest, or of uniform motion in a straight line, unless it is acted upon by a force. That's **Law One**. That, left to its own devices, a body continues in a state of rest or of uniform motion in a straight line, assuming there are no external forces such as the force of gravitation acting on it. **Law Two**: when a force acts on a body, the rate of change of momentum - the rate of change of momentum - is proportional to the magnitude of the force, and takes place in the direction in which the force acts. Then we have **the third law**, which you will remember is normally simply stated as 'action and reaction are equal and opposite'.

11. If you've done any biology at all, of course, you'll realize that every living organism is a machine. Some such machines, such as unicellular plants and unicellular animals, such as amoeba, are very simple. On the other hand, you've only to consider the functioning of, say, an insect, or a mammal, or a flowering plant, to realize that it is extremely complex.