

BBC Learning English

Talk about English

Academic Listening

Part 2 - Lectures: Introduction



This programme was first broadcast in 2001.

This is not an accurate word-for-word transcript of the programme.

ANNOUNCER:

It's time for **Academic Listening** - a series for students at English-speaking universities. Many students find that lectures are the most daunting aspect of their university life. In this programme we'll start to look at a range of techniques to make listening to lectures easier - with presenter Susan Fearn and members of the World Service class of 2001.

CLIP: Lecture

“Taxes, Quality of Life and Happiness”

In this talk, I will first note a recent political emphasis on "quality of life". Secondly, I will suggest that this contrasts with economic growth as a main - or the main - concern of government ...

Susan: Do you, like me, wish you had second chance to hear those university lectures?

CLIP: Lecture

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Susan: Sadly it's never quite like that in real life! You can re-read a book; you can replay a cassette, but you can't rewind a lecturer.

CLIP: Simon Williams

The main point of a lecture for students must be to acquire information on a topic in a quick and efficient way.

Susan: Simon Williams teaches English in the Language Centre at University College London.

CLIP: Simon Williams

Of course, they could get a photocopy from another student later and not turn up, but it's one way of knowing how the subject is viewed by people in your department: whether it's thought to be old-fashioned or crucial and very modern, contemporary, and how controversial it may be: seeing where fits into whole syllabus.

Susan: Lectures can be important social occasions, a chance to meet with the other students on your course. But, of course, they're also an important way of getting an overview of your subject or a particular element of your course. This is something you may not be able to achieve through self-study or by reading

someone else's notes.

University teachers also have specific aims and objectives when they lecture.

Simon Williams again.

CLIP: Simon Williams

The purpose of a lecture is probably to stimulate students to do work by themselves. The end result of a course must be to try and make a student autonomous, happy to find things out for themselves, not being given things to accept uncritically. Learners need to know that's the aim of their course – that they'll become individual and independent learners. So a lecturer will aim to present just part of a topic and stimulate student to want to find out more. May be there's a good reason – may be a written assignment on that topic. So that's another reason for paying attention. But it can only happen if you know what to pay attention to – you can't pay attention to everything all at same time.

Susan: Understanding the aim or purpose of a lecture helps you decide where to focus your attention. This is useful because you can't concentrate on everything at once. You may already be using large amounts of mental energy to cope with other problems, as these students can confirm.

CLIP: Students

Two students describe their problems understanding the language of lectures. (Transcript is not available.)

Susan: And that's only the start of it! It can difficult to hear what a lecturer is saying because you're sitting in a large, echo-ey [does this word exist?] hall. Speakers may have a strange accent; they might speak too quickly or too quietly. Some might use unfamiliar technical or academic vocabulary.

Christine Reeves teaches at Bell Norwich, a language school in the East of England.

CLIP: Christine Reeves

I think one of the main problems is the really difficult skill of listening for the the main points, understanding the main points and processing the main points and actually taking notes at the same time. This is definitely what the students have expressed most difficulty in to me - as a teacher.

Susan: Does that sound familiar?

Well, if you have problems in lectures, what can you do? Skilful listening involves being able to select important information from the rest. Fortunately, as Simon Williams explains, lecturers have various techniques to help guide you through their lecture and to highlight key information.

CLIP: Simon Williams

You can often recognise the different bits, parts of a lecture by three things. First: lecturer's intonation. The sound of their voice is going to fall, quieter at end of a topic – rather like my voice is fading and getting quieter now. Then they might use marker words, such as “right”, “OK”, “good” – the sort of thing you often hear teachers say in a school classroom. Then there'll be a marker phrase such as: “I'd like to move on now”, or “turning now to”, or “let's now consider” – the speaker is self-consciously saying what they're going to do next in speech terms, in language terms. So you can think of those markers as signposts on the journey through the lecture.

Susan: Good lecturers guide listeners through their talk. Their intonation and stress patterns act as pointers to important information.

Falling intonation helps you know when a speaker has finished one idea or topic, and is about to move on to the next -- at a higher pitch. This is, if you like, the spoken equivalent of the full stops and paragraph breaks in a book. Speakers tend to stress important points by speaking more clearly - perhaps a bit louder, more slowly and with greater care.

This lecture was originally given by Don Hill of University College London, and focuses on the relationship of wealth and happiness. Don't worry too much about the specific content of what he's saying: listen instead to the way he says it. I'd like you to try to spot any signals that guide you through the talk or help you identify key points.

What do you consider to be the most important piece of information here - and why?

CLIP: Lecture

OK that brings me to the end of that second main part of this little talk on some contrasts with traditional economic views.

Right: let's go on to the third part which I've called - "What Price Happiness?"

So I now want to raise some questions about happiness. The effect of the questions will be ...

Susan: The speaker has reached the end of section two of his talk. His intonation falls - the pitch and music of his voice get lower - and he gets quieter before he introduces the next section.

His intonation then rises again; he gets louder and speaks carefully as he highlights what he considers to be an important point: and that's the title of the next section of his lecture: "What Price Happiness?".

Listen again.

CLIP: Lecture

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Susan: The speaker also uses a number of what Simon Williams calls "marker phrases" such as: "That brings me to the end of the second part of this little talk" and "Let's go on to the third part". These are like mini-announcements, or signposts within the lecture.

You'll hear more examples of these markers as the lecture continues.

The speaker has a number of questions. But what's the most important question he wants to ask? Listen out for clues in his intonation and stress.

CLIP: Lecture

So I now want to raise some questions about happiness.

The effect of the questions will be, I think, to cast further doubt on traditional views of the desirability of uncontrolled economic growth

The first question is this. Can we really make a direct link between cash and happiness? We have seen that the traditional economists' view of rational economic man is that he tries to satisfy his desires, and these desires are taken to be for money and what money can buy, and as much as he can get of each.

Susan: The speaker invites his listeners to focus on this important question: "Can we make a direct link between cash and happiness?" His intonation – the higher note, the slower speed and careful stress all indicate that we should pay

attention to these words. Two marker phrases: “So, I now want to raise some questions” and “the first question is this” also point us in this direction.

ANNOUNCER:

And that brings us to the end of today’s programme - and these are the three key points: understanding the purpose of a lecture can help students know where to focus attention; preparation can help students understand the language and content of a lecture; and we’ve demonstrated ways in which speakers can guide listeners to important information, using intonation, stress and marker phrases. Join Susan Fearn again next time for more **Academic Listening**.