

BBC Learning English

Talk about English

Academic Listening

Part 6 - Lectures: the conclusion



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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. Join Susan Fearn and members of the World Service class of 2001 as they continue to discuss the skills and techniques needed for listening to and understanding a lecture.

CLIP: Lecturer

... and that brings me to the end of my series of lectures on the plays of Shakespeare. Now, to end this session, has anyone any questions about today's lecture or the series as a whole? Yes, Mohammud ...

Susan: We've focused on the important role of the introduction and the main body of a lecture, and now we turn our attention to the content and function of the final section of a lecture – the conclusion.

CLIP: Simon Williams

In the conclusion of their lecture, lecturer is summing up, going through main points, indicating how important various bits of evidence are.

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

CLIP: Simon Williams

And a good lecturer's going to indicate where students should go next - in thinking and activities, in what they're going to read up on in library - maybe if they're going to take that topic as essay topic. The lecturer might also talk about what they weren't able to do in that 50 minutes - what they've had to leave out ... and therefore what students can go away with and discover for themselves, if they're interested.

Susan: The concluding section of a lecture acts as a summary of the main points. It's a final chance to make sure you've made a note of what the lecturer considers to be the most important things to remember. It might also give you clues about what you can do or study next.

But how do you know when the lecturer has reached their conclusion? Well, as these WS class members point out, with practice, it becomes quite easy to spot the signposts and marker phrases that guide you through a lecture.

CLIP: Student Ana

Most of the time when the lecture is finishing the 'in conclusion' or these sorts of markers, or even 'summarising', are going to appear. You can understand when it's the end of the introduction, when it's the end of the main point and when the conclusion is coming.

CLIP: Christine Reeves

He would signal when he's going to finish speaking by introducing a summary - he might use a phrase like 'well, in conclusion', and then what he would normally do. And to help you again - if you missed the main points in the body of the lecture - he would repeat what the main points were again. All of these features of organisation should help you to follow the lecture.

Susan: We've discovered during these programmes that there are several things you can do to help you understand lectures. We've suggested that it's important to prepare before the lecture by looking at the course outline and learning specialist vocabulary, for example. We've said that thinking about the purpose of a lecture can help you know where to focus attention. And we've offered clues about how lecturers organise their material and highlight the main points. It should be clear by now that listening to lectures is a busy task – it's not just the lecturer who's doing the work! And, as Simon Williams suggests, there's a speaking role for students as well.

CLIP: Simon Williams

There might be Q&A session at that stage, and lecturers are delighted if people ask questions to demonstrate they've been listening and interested in the topic. Because if lecturer is interested enough to deliver something on a particular subject, I guess that means they've got a genuine interest. And they'll be delighted that the students return that interest and share in it. It means the lecturer has been successful in stimulating and motivating the students.

Susan: Many speakers use the final moments of their lecture to answer questions from the audience. This is a chance to show that you've been interested in the topic, and also to make sure you've understood properly. Simon Williams again:

CLIP: Simon Williams

Sometimes it's difficult to know what sort of questions are welcome. Knowing when to ask, and what sort of questions to ask is an important skill to develop. It's always a good idea to ask questions. Firstly, it helps you to clarify things in your mind – in order to get a question ready – therefore helping you to digest information and to order it. Secondly, it shows the lecturer they've managed to get over information and stimulate the students.

Susan: In fact, Simon Williams believes that thinking of questions **before** the lecture is a useful and important way to prepare.

CLIP: Simon Williams

Preparing questions in advance is a really useful activity, because it's going to focus student's minds on what to listen out for in the lecture. And any questions that don't get answered in the body of a lecture can come up at that point. They can ask the lecturer to fill in gaps.

Susan: Knowing what to ask your lecturer is one thing – it can often be more difficult to know **when** to ask ... Here's some advice from one of our World Service class members.

CLIP: Student

[NB: very rough transcript] If I think it's something very important, I ask the lecturer, and in another situation I can ask my classmates. Sometimes it's not easy to ask - you might feel shy...

Susan: Asking questions is not the only way to participate.

CLIP: Simon Williams

Being an active learner is tremendously important. You need to know why you are doing something, you need to have a purpose. And that means not simply reading a text, or an article, it means knowing what you want to do with it. For example, you'd never write a letter of complaint and not say somewhere what you wanted to happen as a result of your letter – you wouldn't be very successful if you didn't do that. In the same way, when you study, it's good idea to know what you want to get at the end of it.

Susan: According to Simon Williams, good students are active learners - they have a purpose, they know what they want to achieve. And it's the same whether they're reading an academic text or attending a lecture. It's also important to be what Simon Williams calls a critical listener.

CLIP: Simon Williams

The critical student might always think of two questions as they're reading the text or listening to the lecture. Why is the person saying this thing at this moment – where does it fit into the whole structure? And – so what, what does it all mean? The two questions are helping in two ways. “Why this now?” is a kind of signpost telling you where you are on your journey through the lecture or through the book. Knowing where you are can be very reassuring. People feel nervous if they feel a bit lost. Secondly, “so what?” - this question shows how significant the point is, whether it's just an aside, or whether it is crucial to argument making, to the point of the talk.

Susan: During these programmes we've described an ideal situation – where speakers deliver clear, well-organised lectures. Now, as many of you will know, reality is not always like this!

CLIP: Student Emma

At the beginning during lectures it was sometimes difficult because you get different visiting lecturers, and some of them might be good journalists - since I'm doing journalism. We always looked at them and after the class said - he's a good journalist but he's not a speaker, or he might be a good journalist but he's not a good lecturer. Sometimes and we spent most of our times sleeping in class!

Susan: Well, if that's a situation you recognised, here are some practical suggestions that might help. First, try sitting near the front of the lecture hall. If the lecturer can see your face, they might notice that you're looking puzzled or confused and offer further explanation or examples.

CLIP: Student Ana

When the lecture is speaking, they will look at the audience and we can look at them as well, and there is a communication there. It's not just the communication, the non-verbal communication, the eye contact and things like that, but the intonation, the pauses and some colloquial things - it's difficult sometimes to understand the colloquial language, but it's more a talk and not just a formal communication, which can help.

CLIP: Simon Williams

Never sit at the back of a hall: it's warm, it's dark, it's very tempting to pass notes and to cut off from the main activity. So sit in the middle or near the front, so you can get into some interaction – even if you're nodding or looking bored – at least you're giving some feedback to the speaker.

Susan: A second piece of advice is to team up with other students. Many people find that this is a good way to cope with a lecturer who delivers a lot of information: one of you can take notes while the other copies a diagram off the board for example. And you can check understanding by comparing your notes after the lecture.

CLIP: Simon Williams

Another way of coping with the difficulty of studying in a second or further language might be to team up with a native speaker. There are things two people can do that will help them get much more out of something. For the language learner it might be help with understanding missing bits. For the native speaker it might be an area of expertise that the language learner is familiar with. In that kind of relationship, it's a two-way exchange of information - different kinds of information.

Susan: Finally, if you still find you're having problems understanding a particular speaker, Simon Williams suggests the best thing to do is to have a quiet word with the lecturer after the session.

CLIP: Simon Williams

If you feel your lecturer hasn't been a good lecturer and the whole thing's been a bit disappointing, or you haven't understood as much as you would like, then go up to the lecturer, talk to them afterwards and explain. I think most lecturers will be pleased you've taken the trouble to tell them how they could perform better. It might be as simple as projecting, or giving more examples. Some lecturers might be surprised – maybe because that has not happened before. But when they had a chance to think about it, they'd welcome the chance to improve. Be brave and tell the lecturer when you've not understood, or want them

to do something else. Often a small group might help. You might also ask for practical things – e.g. diagrams that have been shown or a copy of the notes themselves.

ANNOUNCER:

And that brings us to the end of this programme, in which Susan Fearn focused on the final section of a lecture, and on the role of the student. As we've heard, it's important for students to participate as active and critical listeners, and to be prepared to ask questions.