

7.1: Academic listening strategies

Teacher's notes

Background

Students need to explore strategies for listening beyond their competence, and experiment with a variety of ways to retrieve the information they need from lectures. The experimental research design of this exercise – in which one group (the control) just listens, while the other group (experimental) has additional support from reading material – encourages students to take a systematic approach to the exploration of listening strategies.

Aims

- to evaluate prior reading as a listening strategy
- to provide an academic, i.e., research-based, focus for post-listening discussion
- to enable students to reflect on their performance in a listening task

Material

A listening passage from an EAP course book, which you consider to be challenging for the level of the class, together with reading material connected with the topic (probably from another source)

Procedure

- 1 Before the lesson, explain that you are going to carry out an experiment with the class to evaluate the usefulness of reading about a topic before listening to a talk about it. Divide the class into two groups, and explain that one group is the control, listening in the normal way, and one the experimental group. Give the reading passage to the experimental group, and ask them to prepare it outside class so that they understand the main points and any key vocabulary. This should be done at least one or two days in advance.
- 2 At the start of the lesson, divide the class into the control and experimental groups. If some students in the experimental group have not done the pre-reading, transfer them to the control group. Explain that the purpose of the exercise is to decide whether both groups experience the same degree of difficulty understanding the listening passage, i.e., the reading preparation makes no difference to understanding.

Use your own pre-listening activities or those suggested in the course book to orient the students to the topic of the listening. At this stage, do not refer to the material read by the experimental group.

- 3 All students listen to the passage and complete any tasks designed to check their understanding. If these require listening for gist and then detail, the students should listen for the required number of times. However, at this stage they should not check their answers.
- 4 Still in their initial groups, students should discuss their answers to the tasks, and how confident they are that their answers are correct. They should say what percentage of the listening passage they think they understood. The experimental group can also discuss whether the reading passage helped them to answer any of the questions.

- 5 Students then pair with a member of the opposite group and compare their answers, again saying how confident they are that the answers are correct. The class then checks the answers with the key. Each pair notes which of them has the most correct answers, and who was justified in being confident that their answers were correct.

If prior reading makes no difference to listening comprehension, then there will be no difference between the pairs. If there is a difference (as expected), then prior reading is a useful listening strategy.

- 6 If there is no difference between the scores for some of the pairs, students can be asked to speculate whether there were any variables which interfered with the experiment. For example, students in the experimental group may not have prepared the reading as well as requested; students in the control group may have already been familiar with the topic of the listening, or had a more advanced level of skills than others in the class.

Follow-up

It is possible to set up control and experimental groups to evaluate other listening strategies, e.g., prior learning of vocabulary items; listening with or without note-taking; listening with or without supporting handouts. Students should also be encouraged to decide for themselves which strategies work for them, and to make use of these when listening to live lectures on their courses.

7.2: Seminar awareness

Teacher's notes

Background

The purpose of seminar discussion is to deepen knowledge about a topic and examine different points of view through analysis and negotiation of ideas. The topic in this seminar is cultural attitudes to group discussion. Students talk about the difficulties of seminar discussion for them personally, and try to decide what key factors might prevent them from contributing. The task is designed to explore and value students' ideas, which neither the teacher nor the students necessarily know in advance. It is not intended for language work.

Aims

- to explore reasons for silence in group discussion
- to reduce anxiety about contributing in seminars

Material

Tasksheet with reasons for reluctance to participate in discussions, which have been identified from research into cultural attitudes

Procedure

- 1 Elicit from the students the purpose of seminar discussion and the value it is thought to have in the UK education system. Ask students if they would feel comfortable contributing to discussion with other students they do not know well. Try to elicit some reasons for their responses.
- 2 Explain that researchers have studied discussion groups and found that some students are reluctant to contribute, and often remain silent during discussion. Researchers have suggested a number of explanations for this, but they do not know which are most likely. The purpose of this discussion is to evaluate these reasons and decide which are most important.

Arrange the students in groups of four or five, and hand out the discussion tasksheet. Check that students have understood the reasons listed in the tasksheet. Explain that the discussion outcome is to rank the reasons why students do not contribute in class or in seminar discussion and to give some justification for the ranking chosen.

- 3 Monitor the groups, and note down any key ideas or insights which you hear to bring into the plenary session later on. Do not be tempted to use this discussion for language feedback as it is intended to show students that their ideas are important. Once the discussion seems to be complete (or the preset time limit is reached), groups should be asked to prepare a presentation of their ranking and a justification for it.
- 4 Listen to each of the presentations. Respond with any questions to clarify the points being made and draw out additional ideas (that you noted earlier). Encourage students from other groups to ask questions or challenge the ranking of each group. As a class, agree on the two most important explanations for lack of contribution to discussions.

Follow-up

In turn, consider each explanation agreed on as most important by the class, and examine it using ‘rational emotive therapy’,* which involves identifying an irrational belief, e.g., ‘I must speak good English before I can contribute in group discussion’, and then asking students to identify what evidence exists, from their own experience or from analysis of authentic discussions, for the falseness or the truth of this belief.

*Foss and Reitzel (1991) cited in Liu, Ngar-Fun and Littlewood, W. (1997) Why do many students appear reluctant to participate in classroom learning discourse? *System*, 25/3 371–384.

Tasksheet: Discussion

The issue: in English-speaking academic culture, spoken participation is valued and is thought to promote deeper understanding of a subject. However, students from some cultures appear reluctant to speak out in class or contribute in seminar discussion with a lecturer present. Researchers have suggested a number of reasons for this, but there is no clear explanation for it.

In your group, consider each of the explanations below, and rank them on a scale from 1 (most likely reason) to 6 (least likely reason) for each situation, to show which explanations you think are most relevant. Try to justify your ranking by thinking about your own experience.

Possible reasons put forward for reluctance to speak during class:

- 1 Some traditional cultural values require people to respect those in authority and to remain unnoticed. Speaking out in class can be seen as boastful and self-conceited.
- 2 Some traditional cultural values promote a strong sense of solidarity with a social group, whose needs are valued more than the needs of each individual. Choosing to speak out in class can be seen as individuals valuing themselves more than the group.
- 3 Some educational cultures value the transmission of knowledge from one who knows (the lecturer) to those who do not know (the students). Speaking in class is not valued by lecturers, and students are not asked to contribute.
- 4 In some educational cultures, there is a large distance in power between lecturers and students. If a lecturer in an English-speaking context tries to reduce this power distance and encourage informality, students feel uncomfortable.
- 5 Students do not have confidence in their speaking skills, and feel anxious about contributing in class. They are unhappy about taking risks.
- 6 Students do not see the point of speaking in class because it is not usually assessed. They are not interested in the contribution of other students.

Possible reasons put forward for reluctance to speak in seminar discussion:

- 1 Some traditional cultures value silence and avoid challenge or argument in groups.
- 2 English-speaking educational culture seems to value an ability to work instantly with strangers, whereas students from other cultures need a longer group-forming process before they feel comfortable.
- 3 English-speaking educational culture seems to value the ability to respond quickly and spontaneously to new ideas put forward in seminar discussion. Students from other cultures need to know in advance what questions will be asked, and need time to prepare answers.
- 4 Students can feel their cultural values are being challenged or dismissed when they are asked to adapt to different ways of learning such as seminar discussion so they are reluctant to participate.
- 5 In English-speaking educational culture, there are unwritten rules and conventions for contributing to seminar discussion (e.g., when and how to take a turn to speak), which students from other cultures are aware they do not know and are afraid of breaking.
- 6 Students feel embarrassed making mistakes (either in language or ideas) in front of other students, as they are afraid of being misunderstood or appearing foolish.

7.3: Academic seminar strategies

Teacher's notes

Background

The purpose of seminar discussion is to deepen knowledge about a topic and examine different points of view, with the aim of reaching a consensus through negotiation of ideas. It is important that all students are involved and contribute. In this exercise, students simulate a seminar discussion using familiar topics so that they can also adopt a particular role in the seminar and monitor their performance. This requires them to operate on two levels, paying attention to content and strategy.

Aims

- to encourage students to participate fully in seminar discussions
- to raise students' strategic awareness of the variety of roles in a seminar
- to enable students to monitor and reflect on their performance

Material

Sets of role cards for the seminar with instructions for typical moves in a discussion
Possible topics for the discussion, supported by background reading material if needed

Procedure

- 1 Elicit from the students the purpose of seminar discussion and the kinds of moves (described on the cards) that members of a seminar group might typically make. Discuss whether there are some moves which only the tutor can make, and establish that it is the responsibility of everyone in the seminar to promote discussion of the topic, not just the tutor. If necessary, elicit some of the language that could be used for each of the moves described on the cards. Try to keep this as simple as possible; the focus of the activity is seminar performance not language.
- 2 Divide the class into groups of around seven students and, if possible, arrange the seating so that students can sit in a circle and all see each other. Ask the students to nominate some topics for discussion, and agree on several along with the order in which they will discuss them. Allow time for thinking about the topics individually and making notes to support the discussion.
- 3 Each group agrees which topic they are going to discuss, and then takes a set of role cards, shuffles these, and deals one to each member of the group. Explain that the purpose of the task is to keep the discussion going as long as possible, with each student following the instruction described on their role card as many times as possible. It may be necessary to try the first discussion, and then intervene to point out who is or is not playing their role effectively.
- 4 Monitor the groups and where a student is silent, check their role card and help them to get into the discussion using appropriate language for the move. Then leave them with the floor to continue the discussion. If discussion seems to have stopped, suggest that the group changes to a new topic. They should reshuffle the role cards and deal them again so that each member has a different role to play in the discussion for each topic.

- 5 Monitor the performance of the groups, using the instructions on the role cards as a checklist of communicative strategies. Note any particularly effective performers so you can comment on their performance afterwards.
- 6 After the discussion, ask students to reflect on how effective their discussion of each topic was, and how easy or difficult it was to play their role in the discussion. They should also decide who in their group was most effective in particular roles, and what they can learn from that person. Ask students whether they would be able to use the same strategies in a real seminar in their degree studies.

Follow-up

Set up more complex seminar discussions, which students have to prepare in advance through reading or listening materials. Use the same set of cards to encourage them to monitor their activity in the discussion, and prompt them to be more active contributors. You can increase the number of students in the seminar group by using duplicate cards for some of the roles, e.g., *introduce ideas*; *remind someone of a point*; *reformulate a point*.

You can also show recordings of authentic seminar discussions (if available), and use the statements on the role cards to evaluate the performance of individuals in these seminars.

Sample exponents

Start discussion	OK, we've decided to talk about ... I think ...
Introduce other ideas	According to [name of researcher] ... [name] suggests that ...
Elicit ideas	What ...? How far ...? Do you feel there is ...?
Respond to ideas	Can I pick up on what you said about ... You mentioned the possibility of ... Did you consider ...? Wouldn't you agree that ...? But what about ...?
Justifying an interruption	Just out of interest ... I'm just curious about ...
Taking the floor directly	Can I just say [+ pause] This halts the discussion and gives the interrupter the floor.
Showing importance	But the important point here is ... The point I'm making ...
Ask for more information	I'm not clear about ... Can you say a bit more about that?
Ask for clarification	I'm not sure what you meant when you said ... Do you mean ...
Summarize point	You say ... You focused on ... [title for point or topic]

Summarize discussion	Well, so far we've talked about ... Would you agree ...?
---------------------------------	---

Role cards

These can be customized to suit the level of your students. You should, however, try to avoid writing them in terms of simple functions such as agreeing and disagreeing, but try to formulate them as moves in the discussion.

Role cards

Start the discussion by presenting facts, arguments or opinions about the topic.	Introduce ideas from an article you have read which are relevant to the discussion.	Remind someone of a point they made earlier, and try to get them to take it further.
Remind someone of a point they made, and try to take the idea further yourself.	Admit that you are unsure about something, and ask for information.	Reformulate another speaker's point to check if you understood it.
Elicit ideas from someone who has not contributed much to the discussion.	Take the floor politely so you can make your own point in the discussion.	Summarize the discussion and try to take it in a new direction.



Start the discussion by presenting facts, arguments or opinions about the topic.	Introduce ideas from an article you have read which are relevant to the discussion.	Remind someone of a point they made earlier, and try to get them to take it further.
Remind someone of a point they made, and try to take the idea further yourself.	Admit that you are unsure about something, and ask for information.	Reformulate another speaker's point to check if you understood it.
Elicit ideas from someone who has not contributed much to the discussion.	Take the floor politely so you can make your own point in the discussion.	Summarize the discussion and try to take it in a new direction.

7.4: Mini-presentation skills

Teacher's notes

Background

The main difficulties students face in giving presentations are likely to be choice of an appropriate structure and content, anxiety about performance, and achieving clear and accurate delivery which will be interesting for an audience. These exercises help to develop students' confidence in small steps, using a simple introduction to an academic presentation. If this is rehearsed so that it becomes automatic, students' anxiety about beginning their talk can be reduced.

Aims

- to model an appropriate introduction for a presentation
- to support students in working on appropriate delivery for a presentation

Material

Brief presentation prepared by the teacher about his or her academic institution, which might form an introduction to an exhibition of the institution at an Education Fair in a country targeted for recruitment. You should give your presentation a clear organization from general to specific information. An example tasksheet is given for Heriot-Watt University which you can adapt to suit your own institution.

Procedure

- 1 Elicit from the students the reasons why they chose to come to your institution, and what aspects of it should be included in a recruitment presentation.
- 2 Students listen as you give the presentation, and note the main points of interest. You may have to deliver it again to encourage them to concentrate on the organization, which moves from general to specific ideas.
- 3 Once they have understood the presentation, students analyze the word stress of key words in the presentation. These words will have received more prominence in your delivery so students should not need your support for this task, but they might like to do it in pairs or small groups. They can also discuss useful words or phrases they want to pronounce clearly.
- 4 Individually, students prepare a parallel presentation of their former university campus in order to convince their classmates that it would be a good place for a student exchange. Once the students have prepared their presentations, the class is divided in half, with the students in one half, the audience, seated at tables equally spaced around the room. Individual presenters then move from one table to another, repeating their talk at timed intervals of three minutes. The audience and presenters then change roles and repeat the activity. At the end, there can be an evaluation task for plenary discussion, e.g., students can decide which campus sounded most attractive for an exchange visit.

Follow-up

You can create mini-presentations about your role within your faculty or department, and your main research or teaching interests. These can be used to analyze pauses or stress and intonation patterns over longer sections of speech. Students can then prepare similar presentations about themselves to use as the introduction to an academic talk, and practise them until they can say them fluently. This reduces the need for spontaneous production at the beginning of a talk when they are likely to be most nervous.

Tasksheet: Mini-presentation skills

Heriot-Watt University has an exhibition about the university at an Education Fair in a South-East Asian country. The representative is giving a brief introductory presentation to a group of visitors who are about to enter the exhibition.

Task 1

Comprehension and organization

Listen to this brief presentation. Take notes on the information below.

Student facilities mentioned:

Courses or faculties mentioned:

What are the three main topics?

How has the speaker organized the information about each topic?

Task 2

Identifying stress patterns in English words

Look at the words in bold in the transcript. Try to decide which stress pattern each word uses. Add the word to the table in the correct column.

/.	/..	./.	./..

Example transcript

[with example words for the exercise in bold]

Heriot-Watt University is situated at the **Riccarton campus** on the western **outskirts** of the city of **Edinburgh**. The main academic buildings are grouped around the student halls of **residence** and student **facilities** such as the sports centre, bank and shops. There is also a student **refectory**, near the main **reception** area. The buildings are **surrounded** by beautiful **landscaped** grounds which **incorporate** a loch and natural woodlands.

The university consists of a number of **faculties**, which are known as schools: for example, the School of **Management** and **Languages**, and the School of Mathematical and Computer Sciences. The university is particularly known for research and courses in **technical** and applied subjects, such as **Petroleum** Engineering and Actuarial Mathematics. It also has a Sports Science centre and a Faculty of the Built **Environment**.

Students from all over the world come to Heriot-Watt to study at postgraduate or undergraduate level, particularly from the Middle East and China. There are also students from Europe who spend part of their university study as exchange students in various departments. Students learn together through a combination of lectures, **tutorials** and **seminars**. However, private study and reading also form an important part of the learning process.

Task 3

Find out for yourself

Find these names and write them together with the **stress pattern**.

- 1 The name of the school where you are studying

- 2 The subject you are studying

- 3 The name of the hall of residence where you are staying (or the street and district in the town or city where you are living)

- 4 Any other useful words that you need people to understand when you speak to them

Task 4

Mini-presentation

Prepare a mini-presentation on the campus, facilities, types of study available, and any other points of special interest at the college or university where you have studied previously. The presentation should be aimed at convincing students to study there. It should be between two and three minutes long.

7.5: Presentation titles

Teacher's notes

Background

At the beginning of a talk, when students are likely to be nervous, they need to be able to pronounce the title of their talk clearly and loudly. This communication game provides practice in introducing the topic of a presentation in a clear and comprehensible way, using a delivery that does not put a strain on the audience. It raises students' awareness of the role of the listener, as well as identifying areas of pronunciation which require work.

Aims

- to enable students to say the title of their presentation clearly for an audience
- to identify individual pronunciation weaknesses which impede understanding

Material

The following sentence fragments or similar, presented for students to copy and complete:

Today, I'm going to talk about ... or *My main research interest is ...*

Procedure

- 1 Students complete one of the sentence fragments with a complex noun phrase which forms the title of their presentation, e.g., *Today I'm going to talk about the importance of brand management in the international luxury goods market*. They practise saying this quietly to themselves until they can do so without referring to the written sentence.
- 2 The class is divided into two or more teams of around six to eight students. Teams stand at the back of the classroom, as far away from the board as possible. In turn, a student from each team goes to the front to write on the board, while another student from the team announces the title of their presentation at normal speed. The scribe writes it on the board.
- 3 The teacher keeps the score and adds one point each time the scribe has to ask the speaker to repeat the title. The opposing team can challenge if they think the presenter is speaking at dictation speed rather than normal speed, and a penalty point can be given. Students from alternate teams announce their presentations, with a different scribe each time, until everyone has had a turn and the complete list of titles is on the board. The team with the smallest number of points, i.e., the fewest repetitions, wins.

Follow-up

The list of titles can be discussed to identify which words and phrases caused difficulty for the scribes and why. Appropriate pronunciation, stress and intonation for the title can be provided by the teacher for students to practise. If students have included expressions, e.g., company names in a particular context, which are outside the general knowledge of the listeners, these can be decoded and given a frame of reference for the audience. For example, a student announced a talk on peegee which the scribe could not understand. This turned out to be Proctor and Gamble (PG). As a result of the follow-up discussion, the student decided to change the opening of his talk to I'm going to talk about the well-known international company Proctor and Gamble, or PG as it is called in China.