A course in spoken English for academic purposes

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DISCUSSION SKILLS

Giving your opinion
The main purpose of academic discussion – for example, tutorials and seminars – in the Western educational tradition is for individuals to exchange opinions on the topics being studied. This is true at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels of study. You are expected to express and justify your own views, not simply to repeat information you have been told in books and lectures. The focus of this Unit is expressing opinions about controversial topics. Unit 2 will deal with expressing agreement or disagreement with other people in the discussion.

Useful language

more formal

It is my view that...
I take the view that...
I believe...

neutral

I think...
What I think is...
I’d say that...
It seems to me that...
It seems clear/obvious/evident to me that...
I have to say that...
I’m (not) persuaded that...

less formal

As far as I’m concerned,...
To me,...

You may be surprised to learn that one expression which is not very common in spoken discussion is In my opinion...! Non-native speakers of English seem to use this expression much more than native speakers do.
Practice
In small groups, practise using these expressions by quickly giving your opinion about:
• smoking
• public transport
• cloning animals
• the Internet
• the state of the economy
• crime in your country
• spiders
• politicians
• traffic in your cities.

Discussion point 1: What work means to you
Preparation (individual)
Which of these factors would be most important to you in choosing a job? Decide on your top three priorities, and rank them in order (1 = most important, 2 = second most important, 3 = third most important).
• high salary
• job security
• interesting work
• pleasant working environment
• good relationships with colleagues and superiors
• opportunities for promotion and career development
• enough holidays and free time
• short journey to work

How would you complete this sentence?
‘For me, work is…
…the way to achieve the lifestyle I want.’
…the way to ensure financial security for myself and my family.’
…my main interest or purpose in life.’
…the fulfilment of my years of study and training.’
…just something everyone has to do.’
…how I can achieve status in society.’
…how I gain recognition and respect in my professional field.’
…how I can do my duty to my country.’
…something else.’ Give details.
Discussion

1. Form a group with other students. Compare your answers to the above questions.
2. Do you think your parents would have given similar answers to you? And your grandparents? Give reasons for your answer.
3. Do you think workers in your country suffer discrimination because of either gender or age?

Discussion point 2

Preparation 1 (individual)

Read this excerpt from a BBC radio programme about changes in working practices in Britain. After the presenter’s introduction, two retired men describe what working life in manufacturing industry was like when they were young. (Some vocabulary is explained on page 38.)

John Fortune (presenter)
Travelling on the train down to Bristol, the man opposite me gets out his mobile and rings his secretary to say, “We’re just passing Reading. Can you ring me if there’re any emails?” This is the new way of working – clean, high-tech, industrious – with none of those shoddy practices of the past. Does it really matter no-one’s too sure what we actually do? We’re an ‘enterprise culture’, a ‘knowledge economy’, and our fastest-growing job-market is in – call centres, which employ more than all the men and women in mining, steel and car-production combined. But something had to change…

(Noise of machinery)

Dave Bannon (retired worker)
Back in the early sixties, there must have been close to, nearly 2,500 people on this site. Not the site we’re currently on now, but across the way, in the old smelter. Blimey, the site was huge!

John Goddard (retired worker)
You just wondered where all these people worked! It was almost like they came in, got paid, and went home again.

John Fortune
Down at the head of the River Avon, there’s a huge zinc smelter, where Dave Bannon and John Goddard both started work. Or is ‘work’ the word I mean?

John Goddard
You could certainly get away with having a kip in the afternoon. There were several guys who I can remember used to regularly nod off in the afternoon, and this guy, I remember, used to smoke Capstan Full Strength cigarettes, and his ledgers was always covered in burn marks where he’d dropped his cigarette, or lines across it, what we called ‘zizzers’ back in those days, where he’d nodded off, and the pencil or the pen had gone straight across the ledgers there. But people just accepted it.

Transcribed from British manufacturing: my part in its downfall.
Preparation 2 (individual)
You are going to discuss the following question.

*What have been the most significant changes in working life in the last 10–20 years?*

Think about the situation in your country. It may be helpful to consider the aspects of work listed here:
- the type of work available
- employment rates
- working hours
- attitudes to work
- pay and conditions
- participation of women
- working age
- effect of technology.

You may think of other aspects. Have these changes been for the better?

Discussion
1 Now work in a group with other students. Compare your ideas on the question above. Do you think the situation in your own country is typical of the world in general, or a part of it?
2 What changes in working life do you expect to see in the next 10–20 years?
3 The recorded talk in the *Presentation skills* section of this Unit is on the topic of work and family. Is it possible for a woman to be a successful mother and have a successful professional career? Should society encourage or discourage women from combining the two?
PRESENTATION SKILLS

Structuring your presentation

Being clear about your objective

Being clear about your objective is the first and most important rule for giving an effective presentation. If you yourself are not clear about the main message of your presentation, then your audience will find your presentation confusing.

When you are deciding on your objective, you have to take into account both what you know about the topic and what your audience knows. You also need to take into account the context and purpose of the presentation. Here are some examples.

- If you have been asked to present a topic to a seminar group, you will provide a basic overview, with suggestions for further reading.
- If you are presenting your own research at a conference, you will explain the background to your research question, outline your method, state your main results, and then offer a brief comment on the results before inviting questions.
- If you are presenting your research to members of your own department, you may not need to explain the background to the research question, but on the other hand you may wish to demonstrate to your tutor that you have read the relevant literature; and you may wish to take the opportunity to have members of the group discuss questions you have about the research method or interpretation of results.

So it is important to be clear about the objective of your presentation, so that you can focus the content appropriately for the context.

Organising the information

Academic presentations are not like after-dinner speeches. Their main function is not to entertain but to provide information. So it is vitally important that the information is presented clearly. Ways of organising the information include:

- chronological sequence
- most important to least important
- general to particular
- one point of view compared with another point of view.

Using familiar information structures like these helps the audience to follow your presentation more easily.
Signalling the structure
Planning a well-structured presentation is not enough. When you actually give your presentation, you must make its structure clear to the listeners. Remember: you may have a plan and know the structure of your talk, but the listeners do not know it unless you tell them! They need to be guided through the spoken information. To do this, you need to use what are often called *signposts* and *language signals*.

‘Signposting’ gives an advance view of the organisation of the whole presentation, or of the next section.

### Examples of ‘signposting’

1. **Organisation of the whole presentation**
   
   *First I will tell you something about the historical background, then I will present the two main theories which are currently under discussion, and finally I will add some personal comments deriving from our recent research.*

2. **Organisation of the next section**
   
   *There are three reasons why we do this: these are economic, legal, and psychological. The economic argument is...*

*Language signals* are words and phrases that tell the listener where you are in the presentation, where you are taking them next and where they have just been. They may signal either: the topic of the whole talk; the beginning or end of a section of the talk; a new point in a list; a contrasting point; an example; or a point of special importance.

### Examples of language signals

1. **The topic of the talk**
   
   *I want to focus on*

2. **A complete section**
   
   *And now I’d like to turn to the issue of long working hours*

3. **A new point in a list**
   
   *Secondly, unemployment causes social unrest*

4. **A contrasting point**
   
   *However, others believe that a woman’s place is in the home*
The distinction between signposting and language signals is not important. Indeed, some people use the terms interchangeably. But taken together their function is important. If the main points of your talk are well-organised AND clearly signalled, you are well on the way to making an effective and clear presentation.

For more examples of the signposts and language signals that are frequently used in academic presentations, see Checklist 3 on page 122.

Analysis
The listening extract on the cassette comes from one of a series of presentations and workshops on the subject of work. The talk is organised as follows.
1 The speaker signals the topic for this talk, ‘work-family balance’, and gives definitions and examples.
2 She speaks more particularly about one aspect of research on work-family balance – how to gather the views of children – and gives an example from her own research.
3 She signposts the route ahead, saying what she plans to do for the rest of the seminar session.

FIRST LISTENING
As you listen, indicate to your teacher when you hear the start of each section.

SECOND LISTENING
As you listen, write down the words and phrases used by the speaker:
• to signpost
• to signal examples.

Check your notes with your partner. Then the teacher will collect the phrases and write them on the board. You might like to listen a third time to hear the phrases again in context.
Presentation practice

STAGE 1: PREPARATION
Plan a short talk (two to three minutes) on the topic of work.
EITHER choose one aspect from the following:
• working hours
• equal pay for men and women
• sick leave
• holidays
• work and child care
• work and family time
• child labour
• job security
• interesting or boring?
• unemployment
• manual work and office work
• work and personal fulfilment
• self-employment
• retirement from work
OR you may plan your talk on any other aspect of work that you prefer.

Plan what you will say about the aspect of work that you have chosen. Make very short notes – just a word or two – under each of the following headings:
• Introduction (state your choice of topic)
• Main point 1 (plus example)
• Main point 2 (plus example)
• Conclusion

The Conclusion can be signalled with So, or Finally, or To conclude.

For the other sections of your talk, choose from the examples of signposts and signals in the boxes on pages 40 and 41, or in your notes from the listening activity.

STAGE 2: PRACTICE
1 Practise your talk by speaking to one other student. They should take notes of your main points.
2 When you have finished your talk, look at their notes.
   • Have they understood all your main points?
   • Have they recognised your language signals?
3 Discuss what you should do to make your meaning clearer.
   • Should you change the structure (plan) of the talk?
   • Should you change the details of the talk?
   • Should you signal your main points more clearly?
4 Then exchange roles with your partner.
STAGE 3: PRESENTATION
Now work with two other students (not with the same partner as in Stage 2) and take turns in giving your talk a second time. Pay particular attention to the way you signal a move to a new section. Check afterwards whether the listeners’ notes match what you intended to say. Is any essential information missing from their notes?

STAGE 4: EVALUATION
What did you find when you looked at the other students’ notes? Which of the following did you discover?
a) They both understood all your main points.
b) They differed in what they had understood.
c) They had misunderstood one or more parts.

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<th>SUMMARY</th>
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<tr>
<td>Important steps in achieving an effective presentation are:</td>
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<tr>
<td>1 Specify the objective to yourself, precisely.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2 Select the content.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3 Organise the content in a clear and logical order.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4 Use signposts and language signals to present the organised content clearly to your listeners.</td>
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