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Communicating in Academic Situations Being a successful student

In this unit you will:

- reflect on your experience of speaking in an academic context;
- analyze your strengths and weaknesses in speaking;
- identify and practise language for agreeing and disagreeing;
- consider aspects of a successful presentation;
- give a short informal mini-presentation.

There are a number of different situations in which you will need to communicate orally in English on your academic courses. The main situations are presentations, classes, and discussions. In academic culture, students need to express their views clearly on different issues related to their subject area. These views are often based on a critical reading and evaluation of written texts. The more you study and engage with your subject area, the more your ideas will develop and change. This will help you to develop your critical thinking skills, which are a key part of academic study. It is also important that you develop the language skills that will enable you to express your ideas most effectively.



Task 1: Your experience of speaking English

1.1 Look at the following list of situations which require you to speak on academic courses. Which situations have you experienced either in your own language or in English? Put a check (✓) in the appropriate box.

		English	Own language
a	Giving a formal presentation.		
b	Participating in a class (group discussion).		
c	Leading a class (group discussion).		
d	Discussing and giving your opinion in a class on pre-assigned articles you have read.		
e	Speaking with an academic advisor in a one-on-one advising session, e.g., about an essay plan.		
f	Discussing feedback on your written work with a tutor in a tutoring session.		
g	Discussing your studies with other students.		
h	Other? (Please state.)		

1.2 Compare your experiences with a partner using your answers to Ex 1.1. Give details of:

- a) where you had each experience;
- b) how it was organized, e.g., how many students were involved and how long the speaking turns were;
- c) what kinds of topics you covered.

1.3 Discuss your attitude to the situations in Ex 1.1. Which ones do you find, or think you will find, the most difficult to do in English? Can you say why?

This course will help you develop the confidence and the skills necessary to participate effectively in the academic situations outlined in Ex 1.1.

Task 2: Your attitude to speaking English

2.1 Look at the following statements. Do you agree or disagree with them? Which statements are important to you?

- a) I want to speak English with a perfect native-speaker accent.
- b) I want to speak English without a single grammatical mistake.
- c) I feel as though I am a different person when I speak English.
- d) My pronunciation is not as important as grammatical accuracy.
- e) If I can communicate my meaning effectively, it does not matter if I make mistakes.
- f) I don't like working in groups during English lessons because I may learn incorrect English from my classmates.
- g) I want to speak English for social reasons as well as for academic reasons.



2.2 In groups, discuss each statement from Ex 2.1. Appoint one student to note which statements are the most controversial for your group, i.e., which statements caused the most disagreement.

2.3  **1 Listen to another group of students reporting back on their discussion of the points in Ex 2.1. Which statements do they refer to?**

2.4 The following words were used in the recording in Ex 2.3. Mark the stress.

Example: co'mmunicate

discussion controversial disagreement provoke

Study tip

When reporting back to the class, try to keep comments clear and to the point. Get used to using standard expressions for agreement and disagreement.

2.5 Report back to the class on the most interesting/controversial points from your discussion in Ex 2.2.

Useful language: Reporting back

Our group thought the most controversial point was ...

Point X provoked the most discussion.

Point X was the most controversial point.

There was some disagreement about point X.

Task 3: Agreeing and disagreeing

3.1 Read the following statements. Do you agree (A), disagree (D) or partly agree (P) with each one?

- a) ____ If you want to succeed at university, you really need to manage your time well.
- b) ____ It's important to do a lot of reading around before you choose a focus for your essays.
- c) ____ The best time to revise for exams is just before the exam, when the pressure is on.
- d) ____ The same study skills are necessary on both undergraduate and graduate courses.
- e) ____ If you've completed an academic course in one country, you should be able to cope with a course in another country.
- f) ____ People have different learning styles. It helps you learn more quickly if you're aware of how you learn best.

3.2  **2 Listen to two students discussing these statements. Does the second speaker agree, disagree or partly agree with each statement? Underline the correct alternate in the *opinion* column below.**

	Opinion	Useful language
a	agree/disagree/partly agree	
b	agree/disagree/partly agree	
c	agree/disagree/partly agree	
d	agree/disagree/partly agree	
e	agree/disagree/partly agree	
f	agree/disagree/partly agree	

3.3  **2 Listen to the discussion again.**

- a) In the *Useful language* column above, write down the exact words the second speaker uses to agree, disagree or partly agree.
- b) Try to say the phrases as they are pronounced in the recording.

3.4 Look at the statements in Ex 3.1 again. Work with a partner as follows:

Student A: Read a statement.

Student B: Respond, using one of the *Useful language* phrases from the table in Ex 3.2.

Give your own opinion and a supporting reason.

Task 4: Study skills for success

You are going to hear a conversation between two students, discussing the challenges of studying at university. The female student is a native speaker of English. The male student is an international student who studied on an ESL course.

4.1  **3 Listen and number the points below according to the order in which the students discuss them.**

- a) ____ Plan ahead and begin working early.
- b) ____ Choose areas to study that you are interested in.
- c) ____ Find out what is important on your reading list.
- d) ____ Ask a peer to read your work before submitting it.
- e) ____ Use reading strategies to help you read quickly.
- f) ____ Deal with stress by finding time for relaxation.



4.2 **Think of your own study suggestions to add to those mentioned in the recording, and write them below.**

- a) _____

- b) _____

Task 5: Prioritizing study skills

5.1 **In groups, discuss the study skills you will need at university.**

- a) Come to an agreement on the study skills your group thinks are the most important for success at university.
- b) Now list your choice of the five most important skills.

Build on the ideas from Ex 4.1. Make sure you are able to justify your choice. Remember to use the language for agreeing and disagreeing from Task 3.



Presentation skill: When giving a presentation, you need to help your audience follow your presentation by using *signpost language*. You also need to deliver your presentation clearly. Tasks 6 and 7 deal with these aspects of presentations.

Task 6: Tips for successful study—a mini-presentation

Now that you have looked at various aspects of being successful as a student, consider what advice would be useful for new students. You will give a mini-presentation to the class, explaining why the tips you chose in Task 5 are important.

6.1 You are now going to start preparing your presentation, thinking about signposting language you could use.

- Write your five points from Task 5 on a poster, PowerPoint slide, or OHT. Use key words, not whole sentences. You need to identify the key words for each of your tips for study.
-  4 Now listen to a student presenting his top five study tips. Are any of the points the same as yours?
- Look at the *Useful language* expressions from the recording. These expressions signal when you are moving from one point to another. Use them in your presentation.

Useful language: Signpost expressions

There are five main points that we consider important for successful study.

Our first point is ...

Fourth, we think ...

Next ...

And finally, our last point is ...

Moving on to our third point, ...

Presentation skill: Signpost expressions are important for:

- opening a presentation;
- guiding an audience through the main points;
- helping an audience understand the organization;
- closing a presentation.

See Appendix 1 for a more extensive list of signpost expressions.

6.2 Now think about how you will deliver your presentation. Look at the following list of important aspects in delivering a presentation clearly.

- pronunciation of sounds and words
- intonation
- volume
- speed
- eye contact

Study tip

There are many skills involved in a successful presentation. These include: language, pronunciation, organization and style of delivery.

Presentation skill: The delivery of your presentation is of equal importance as the content. If your audience cannot understand what you are saying, e.g., because your pronunciation is poor or because you speak too fast, then the content is wasted.

6.3 In your group, discuss the organization of your presentation.

- a) Decide who will give the presentation; either one group member or two or more group members.
- b) Practice the presentation, focusing on the points in Task 6.2. Your group should give you feedback on these areas, e.g., *You need to make more eye contact with the audience.*

Study tip

It can be useful to record yourself in your own time. When you listen to yourself, you often see possibilities for improvement.

Presentation skill: Presentation skills develop with practice, so you will not do everything perfectly from the beginning. Listen carefully to group feedback, as it will help you improve.

6.4 Give your presentation to the class.

Complete a presentation assessment form (Appendix 9a) for each presentation. At the end of each presentation, compare your assessment forms in groups.

6.5 At the end of all the presentations, give each presenter the assessment form you completed for their presentation.

- a) Read and think about the feedback you receive from other students.
- b) Decide as a class which presentation was the best according to the criteria on the assessment form.

Task 7: A successful presentation

7.1 Think about the following points related to the delivery of a presentation. Which would you consider appropriate or inappropriate, and which depend on the presentation? Check (✓) the relevant box.

	Presentation skill	Appropriate	It depends	Inappropriate
a	The presenter puts as much information as possible on each slide.			
b	The presenter uses color and sound to liven up her/his slides.			
c	The presenter reads from a script.			
d	The presenter memorizes a script and recites it.			
e	The presenter uses notes.			
f	The presenter pauses after each main point.			
g	The presenter reads all the information on the slide.			
h	The presenter stands in one place all the time.			
i	The presenter speaks at the same speed all the time.			

7.2 In groups, discuss your completed table.

Task 8: Review

Research into language learning has shown that reflecting on the process of learning has a strong impact on its effectiveness. One way of doing this is through keeping a diary. Either this can be private, or you can share its contents with the instructor.

Before you fill in your first diary entry, complete a self-assessment questionnaire on your speaking skills.

8.1 Look at the following range of speaking skills. Indicate which of these you feel to be easy or difficult for you (5 = I can do this well; 1 = I do not feel competent at all). Put a check (✓) in the appropriate box.

Speaking skill	1	2	3	4	5
I can speak accurately, without making too many grammatical mistakes.					
I can speak without hesitating too much.					
I can find ways to communicate my meaning, even if I cannot find exactly the right words.					
I can usually find the words I need to say what I want.					
Most people can understand my pronunciation.					
I can speak confidently in front of an audience.					
I can contribute effectively in group discussions.					
I can talk confidently in my own subject area.					

8.2 Read the student's diary questions and example diary entry below.

Student's diary

- What areas of speaking English do you feel you need to work on?
- What can you do to improve in these areas, either inside or outside the classroom?
- How do you feel about the speaking you have done so far in the lessons on this course?
- Remember that thinking or reflecting on how you learn can improve the learning process.

Student's diary July 3

I think my main problem in speaking is my pronunciation and my limited vocabulary. I also feel very nervous when speaking in front of the class. I did a presentation on good study skills in the speaking class and was really worried before I spoke. I think I need to do more practice of this type, so that I get more confidence. I also need to spend more time practicing individual sounds—maybe I could do this in the learning center ...

Make an entry in your student's diary, answering the questions. Think about your strengths and weaknesses in speaking English as identified in the self-assessment form in Ex 8.1.

Unit Summary

In this unit you have looked at the speaking skills you need in academic situations and thought about your own strengths and weaknesses.



1 Complete the sentences below in any way you want so that they are true for you.

a) I find speaking in English difficult when _____

b) I find using English at university can be different from other situations. I think it is important to be able to speak _____ but some people feel

c) I agree with others in the class that _____

2 Think about the discussions you have had while working on this unit. Discuss the following questions and agree on a suitable answer for each one.

- a) To what extent did other students agree in the discussion in Task 2 about attitudes to English?
- b) Which discussion statement in Ex 2.1 about study skills did students find most controversial?
- c) What do you think are the key points to remember when giving a presentation?

For web resources relevant to this unit, see:

www.englishforacademicstudy.com/us/student/speaking/links

These weblinks will provide you with further practice for becoming a successful speaker of English, as well as useful study tips.