

Basics

The ability to agree with and build on someone's point of view, or disagree with it diplomatically and constructively (which is often more difficult), is essential in any social group, whether personal, academic or professional. Being able to truly listen to others and react to their opinions ensures meaningful and productive interactions with those around you.

The academic context

Why do we agree or disagree with ideas as part of an academic discussion? In *C21 English for the 21st Century*, Level 3, you learn why it is important to question opinions in order to evaluate an argument. The same is true in an academic discussion, for example in a seminar or tutorial. By agreeing or disagreeing with others' arguments, you demonstrate critical thinking skills, you show that you are following the different threads of the discussion, and you show your ability to link ideas together in a logical way.

Key features

Do	Don't
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prepare for discussions by thinking carefully about the topic. • Do any relevant reading and make notes. • Note your first reaction to the topic, but be prepared to change your view based on new evidence. • Consider different perspectives on the topic. • Think about exactly which aspects of an argument you agree/disagree with. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don't arrive for a discussion unprepared if you can avoid it. • Don't just stick to your first reaction to the topic. • Don't only read/research material that supports your view. • Don't prepare exactly what you plan to say. • Don't rely on quoting information from your reading; think about your own comments and reactions.

Challenges / difficulties

Challenge	Solution
You don't have an opinion on the topic.	Academic discussions aren't just about your personal opinions. You need to research the topic and evaluate the evidence. Note down possible arguments and think about which one seems strongest and why.
Challenge	Solution
Someone else 'steals' your main idea before you have a chance to speak.	That's fine, you can agree with them. Did they mention all the points you had prepared? Can you agree and then add an extra point or a different example?
Challenge	Solution
You want to agree/disagree with something someone says, but you aren't quick enough and the discussion moves on.	It's OK to refer back to a previous point. Wait for a pause in the discussion and make it clear what/who you are referring to: <i>I agree with what Max said a bit earlier; I'd like to go back to the point Ellie made about ...</i>
Challenge	Solution
Halfway through the discussion you realize that the opposite view is actually stronger.	It's OK to change your mind. It shows you're thinking critically. Academic discussions are about helping everyone develop their ideas, not about who 'wins' the argument.

How can I develop this skill?

You can sharpen your ability to react to other views by not agreeing or disagreeing with them at first sight. If you agree in essence, are there any aspects of the issue that you have reservations about, or maybe the opinion wouldn't be valid in a given situation? If you don't agree, is there any circumstance that would make you think differently? You might end up agreeing/disagreeing without reservation, but the mental exercise of looking for exceptions forces you to evaluate the issue critically and thoroughly.

Learning outcome

If you are able to react critically to other people's opinions, not only will you be able to contribute significantly to discussions, but your own opinions will also be more appreciated and respected.

Theory to practice

Look at the discussion topic below. Then read the student's notes and what they said in the actual discussion. Answer the questions that follow.

The observer's paradox

It's very difficult to observe someone's natural behaviour for the purposes of research because they behave differently when they know they're being watched. This is known as the observer's paradox. And because it's unethical to record people without informed consent, that makes it almost impossible to collect research data about natural behaviour.

'It is impossible to collect data about people's natural behaviour.'

Do you agree or disagree with the statement?

• Agree?

People self-conscious even with discreet recording techniques

Academic research must use ethical methods or it won't get funding / be published

• Disagree?

Record for longer & people forget

Depends on context – people more self-conscious about some things than others

Is it OK to tell people you're recording for one thing, when you're actually looking at something else?
e.g. focus group about opinions, but actually observe interaction

'Yes, I agree that modern technology means you can record people much more discreetly, but you still have to get their permission first, don't you? So they're still going to be self-conscious to a degree.'

'That's a good point, Jack. So, for example, if you wanted to record a language class, say. If you set up a camera at the start of term and got permission from everyone, but then you left the camera there for several weeks, they'd soon forget about it and act normally.'

'I understand all the ethical rules around permission, but I wonder if it's possible to tell people you're going to record them, say, for a focus group about a particular topic. But what you're actually interested in is not their opinions, but for instance, their gestures and body language during the discussion. Is that still ethical? You tell them the real reason after the recording, obviously, and check they're still OK with it.'

- 1 How would you summarize this student's opinion? Do they mostly agree or disagree with the discussion statement?
- 2 What do you think came before their second comment in the discussion? How do they deal with the situation?
- 3 Do they mention all the points in their notes during the discussion? Why do you think that might be?

Ways to get more practice

In academic discussions, quite often students are just waiting for their turn to give their opinion, i.e. they are not really listening to others. Try to start your contributions by reacting to what some else has said. After you have agreed or disagreed with them and stated why, you can move on to present your own contribution to the discussion.