

Basics

In *C21 English for the 21st Century*, you practise listening for main ideas as well as specific details. Sometimes, you need to understand the explanation(s) the speaker gives for some of their points, and this can be complicated. Being able to identify an explanation is a key part of the comprehension process.

The academic context

In talks and lectures, explanation makes up a large part of the information you need to understand. Students in all academic faculties can quickly pick up the basic facts. However, you need to understand details such as *how* or *why* something happens. Knowing how to listen for explanations when a speaker is making a quick succession of complex points is therefore very important.

Key features

Explanatory phrases

While you are listening, it is important to identify words and phrases which indicate that the speaker is going to give an explanation. There are many of these; some key ones include:

- *What I mean is ... / To explain (in more detail) ... / That is ... / By this I mean ...*
- *This is because ... / One reason ... / The (main) reason for this is ... / What this means is ...*
- *This happens as a result of ... / This is due to ... / This is caused by ...*
- *But what causes this? / Why does this happen? / What do I mean by ...?*
- *The results/findings/evidence/graph suggest(s)/indicate(s)/prove(s) that ...*
- *Therefore, ... / As a result, ... / Consequently, ...*
- *As ... / While ... / Because ... / Since ...*
- *Importantly, ... / Significantly, ... / Crucially, ... / Vitrally, ... / Notably, ...*
- *That's why ...*
- *In order to ... / So that ...*
- *Because of ... / Due to ... / Thanks to ... / As a result of ...*

Sequencing phrases

It is sometimes necessary to understand a list or a sequence of events as part of an explanation (see **Listen for the order of events**). Certain words and phrases can help you identify the order that things happen in, such as:

- *First, ... / Firstly, ... / Initially, ... / In the first place, ... / Primarily, ... / Originally, ...*
- *Next, ... / Then, ... / After that, ... / Later, ... / More recently, ...*
- *Before that can happen, however, ...*
- *When ... / As soon as ... / Once (that happens / that has been done) ...*
- *Lastly, ... / Finally, ... / Eventually, ... / Ultimately, ...*

Challenges / difficulties

The main challenge in listening for explanations is the speed of delivery. Explanations can get complicated, and it is very easy to miss vital information.

Another challenge is that, although the phrases in the Key features section are common, sometimes people give an explanation without them – instead, they simply begin another sentence. For example:

We would find it difficult to go back to life without computers. They are so much a part of our everyday life, and we use them for everything from medical care to transport to entertainment.

How can I develop this skill?

The Worksheet will give you plenty of practice. Then, teach yourself to quickly identify when an explanation is coming. You can do this by listening for supporting information after the main points and for the phrases listed in the Key features section. This will help you focus on vital information.

Learning outcome

Once you can identify explanations while listening, you will get a lot more information out of what is being said. It will help give you a deeper knowledge of the subject.

Theory to practice

Read some extracts from transcripts of talks and lectures (1–6). Then match the explanation technique the speaker uses (a–f) to the transcript. Underline the relevant sections that helped you find the answer.

- 1 ☐ Traditionally, poverty was measured simply in economic terms, but more recently there have been efforts to give a more holistic, three-dimensional picture.
- 2 ☐ Poverty levels fell only slightly in Tanzania. However, this figure is for only a two-year period between 2008 and 2010. So why are these figures important? Well, the implications of poverty are huge.
- 3 ☐ Another alternative to conventional medicine is *t'ai chi*. This ancient Chinese martial art is now practised worldwide as an exercise routine and is described as 'the perfect exercise for the elderly'.
- 4 ☐ As far as business cards are concerned, yes, they're useful. It's easier for a potential business contact or employer than expecting them to write all your details down.
- 5 ☐ Another alternative medicine commonly used is homeopathy, where patients are given a highly diluted substance in the belief that it will cause the body to start healing itself.
- 6 ☐ **A** So why have these improvements taken place?
B I think the main reason is that the pupils can learn at their own pace.

In which extract does the speaker explain ...?

- a** by providing a definition
- b** using an explanatory phrase as a clear 'signpost'
- c** by contrasting two periods in time
- d** by introducing a definition with a relative pronoun
- e** simply by starting a new sentence
- f** after asking a rhetorical question

Ways to get more practice

When listening to people delivering talks or lectures, pay attention to how they introduce an explanation. Sometimes it is a simple case of stating a point, followed by a sentence or sentences of explanation. At other times, however, the introduction of an explanation is clearly signposted using phrases like those above.