

## Basics

Discussions are conversations that involve expressing opinions, agreeing and disagreeing. They can be formal, but most of the time they are informal and, because there are often many people speaking in quick succession, they can be challenging to understand and participate in.

## The academic context

Discussions are a key element of seminars, workshops and tutorials, and take place in almost all academic contexts. Being able to join them, first by listening to other people and then by responding to their opinions with your own, is an important part of academic life.

## Key features

There are several techniques that we use during discussions to express opinions and present arguments.

These include:

- asking open-ended questions
- asking for clarification
- expressing your opinion at the right time
- paraphrasing to show or get understanding
- rephrasing to clarify
- using short phrases to show you understand
- agreeing
- disagreeing

## Challenges / difficulties

- 1 Expressing an opinion in a discussion can require a high degree of self-confidence, but practice will develop that confidence.
- 2 Thinking about and developing complex arguments is difficult in your first language, but, of course, much more difficult in another language. Planning your main arguments and anticipating the counterarguments before the discussion starts is an effective way to prepare and increase your self-confidence.

## How can I develop this skill?

As mentioned above, preparation is key. If you already have a good idea of what you want to say, you can focus on how to say it when taking part in a discussion. Read up on the subject beforehand, and think about how you would respond to different arguments. Would you agree? If so, what could you add? If you would disagree, what counterarguments could you present? You will end up having conversations with yourself. (These could be in your mind or, even better – if there's no-one around – out loud!) This is called mental rehearsal, and it will not only make you more confident in discussions, but also improve your overall level of English. Don't forget to include phrases from the Factsheet in your mental rehearsals.

## Learning outcome

Students will be able to demonstrate they can discuss ideas effectively.

## Theory to practice

Match the phrases (a–r) to the functions (1–8).

- |   |  |       |       |       |
|---|--|-------|-------|-------|
| 1 | asking open-ended questions                | _____ | _____ |       |
| 2 | asking for clarification                   | _____ | _____ |       |
| 3 | expressing your opinion at the right time  | _____ | _____ |       |
| 4 | paraphrasing to show or get understanding  | _____ | _____ |       |
| 5 | rephrasing to clarify                      | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 6 | using short phrases to show you understand | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 7 | agreeing                                   | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 8 | disagreeing                                | _____ | _____ | _____ |

- a *That's a good point.*
- b *What do you mean, exactly?*
- c *I'd like to say something here.*
- d *True ...*
- e *What I'm trying to say is ...*
- f *I see.*
- g *I'm not sure what you mean by ...*
- h *So you are saying ...?*
- i *Absolutely.*
- j *Hmm, that's interesting.*
- k *Can I just add something here?*
- l *I see. When was that?*
- m *I don't see it like that.*
- n *And so you think ...?*
- o *Just to clarify, I meant ...*
- p *I understand, but why did that happen?*
- q *So what I mean is ...*
- r *I'm not sure I agree with you there.*

## Ways to get more practice

- 1 Discuss your answers with another student and see if you both agree. Try to clarify any differences you have, but remember there are sometimes different possible answers.
- 2 Each time you listen to a discussion, see if you can find examples similar to the ones above and make a note of them.