

REVIEW OF *ESSENTIAL ACADEMIC SKILLS IN ENGLISH: LISTENING TO LECTURES*

Title	<i>Essential Academic Skills in English: Listening to Lectures CD-ROM</i> (Volume I)
Publisher	CELTE University of Warwick Conventry CV4 7AL, United Kingdom Phone: (0044) (0)-24 7652 8440 Fax: (0044) (0)-24 7652-4318 Email: easeteam@warwick.ac.uk
ISBN	0902683-46-4
Platform	PC only; Windows 95, 98, 2000, or NT.
System requirements	486 processor or better with 8 MB of RAM (16 MB preferred); SVGA display (800 x 600, 16 bit color or better); sound card; computer speakers; mouse
Support	http://www.ease.ac.uk
Target language	English (British)
Target audience	Not stated, but it appears to be designed for advanced intermediate or advanced adult students.
Price	Single user copy (£30.00), 5 user license (£120.00), 6-20 user license (£220.00), Full-site license (£400.00)

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OVERVIEW

Essential Academic Skills in English: Listening to Lectures is a stand-alone PC software package designed for non-native speakers of English who intend to undertake university study in English. *Listening to Lectures*, the first in the EASE CD-ROM series, contains digital video of academic lectures as well as activities based on these lectures, and thus introduces learners to the kinds of lecture situations and listening activities they will likely encounter in academic settings.

DESCRIPTION

Listening to Lectures contains 85 short video clips (approximately 1-2 minutes) from 40 authentic lectures given in 25 different departments, including the sciences, social sciences, and humanities. These clips are divided among six units: Openings, Structure and Organization, Functions 1, Functions 2, Attitudes and Significance, and Argumentation.

Getting started with *Listening to Lectures* is easy. Users simply click on the unit they wish to study. Users also have the option of going through an introductory tour before beginning. Upon beginning a unit, the instructions inform the user of how to proceed. The tasks are organized around watching video clips from lectures. Learners first complete pre-viewing activities and then watch the video clip. The video clip can be controlled by clicking on the play and pause buttons and by dragging the slider with the cursor. Information about the lecture such as the title and the speaker of the lecture can be obtained by clicking on the "i" button. In addition, the user can access the entire transcript of what the lecturer is saying by clicking on the speech bubble. At any time during the program, the user can also access the dictionary

which contains definitions of words in the lectures and allows learners immediate access to the video-clip in which the word is used, thus providing them with the context for the word.

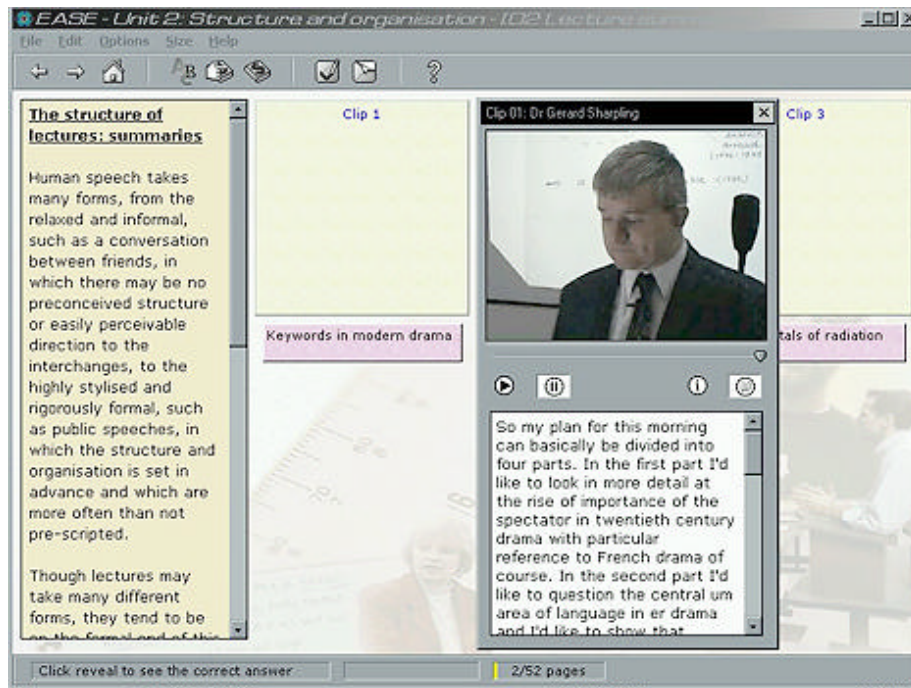


Figure 1. Video clip and transcript

After users watch the video clip, they complete exercises about the lecture. For the most part, these exercises emphasize lecture content and rhetorical features, including discourse-level as well as sentence-level activities. The exercises are varied in terms of type and format, and they include matching questions, multiple choice questions, drag and drop exercises, and cloze-tests. Users also have the option of taking on-screen notes while watching the video (see Figure 2).

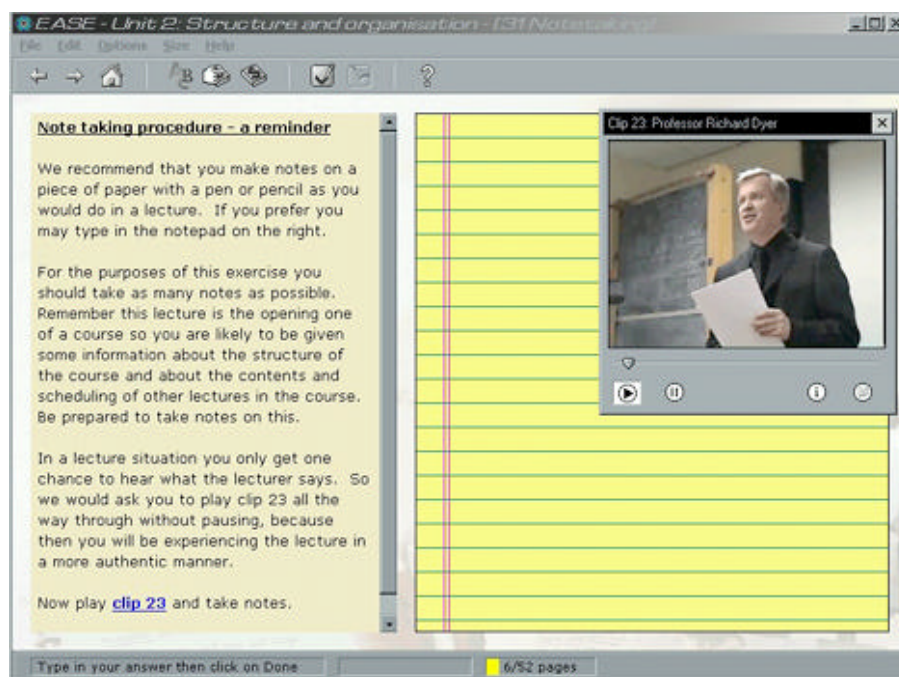


Figure 2. On-screen note-taking

Learners can get feedback on their answers or choose to see the correct answers by using the Done and Reveal buttons, respectively. While the form of feedback varies depending on the type of exercise, in all cases a brief explanation of why the user's answer was incorrect is provided

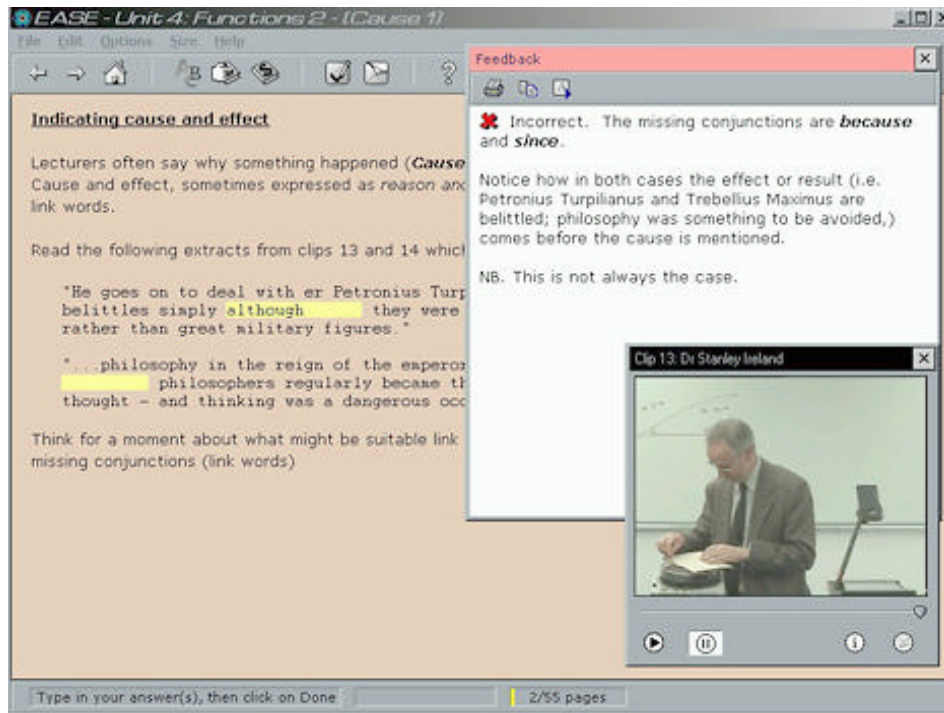


Figure 3. Feedback

The first unit, Openings, focuses on some of the things lecturers commonly do at the outset of their lectures, and thus the six video clips in this unit are all of the beginnings of lectures. In one activity, users view three video clips and are asked to identify (from a list) the ways in which the speakers opened their lectures. Choices include "the speaker tells a joke," "the speaker states what they're going to talk about," and so forth. In this unit, questions on discourse and rhetorical features include, "Did the speaker introduce himself?" "How many parts is the speech divided into?" and "How many broad questions is the lecture organized around?" Other activities require the user to type in the phrases that the lecturer uses to talk about the structure of the lecture.

In the second unit, Structure and Organization, the focus is on the ways in which speakers structure their lectures and the language they use to talk about structure. Topics covered include opening and closing summaries, markers, and transitions. In one activity, users watch video clips and then identify whether they were opening or closing summaries, while in another they identify opening and closing phrases used in a video clip. More form-focused activities in this unit require the user to identify the tense of the verbs being used by the speaker in the clip, or to type the missing words from the speaker's lecture.

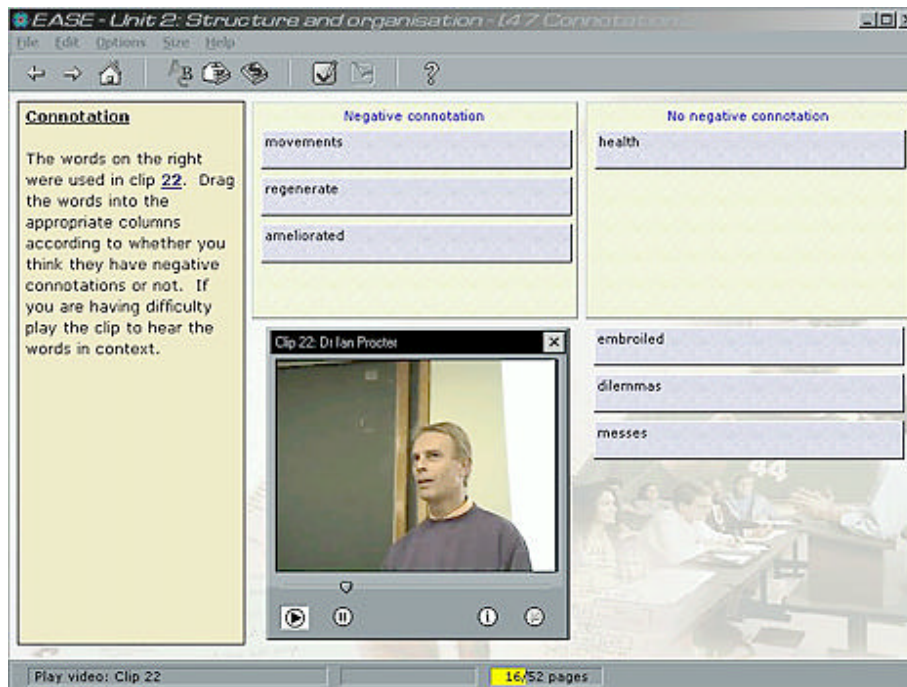


Figure 4. Drag and drop activity.

In the third and fourth units, Functions 1 and Functions 2, the focus is on features of academic discourse. In other words, users are introduced to some of the things speakers usually do in lectures such as defining, classifying, comparing and contrasting, and exemplifying.

In Unit 5, Attitudes and Significance, the user practices distinguishing between significant and less significant points made by lecturers and examines the degree to which the lecturer is committed to what he or she is saying. This is done through activities that ask users to identify importance markers, style and manner, speakers' attitude about a topic, and identification of non-literal meaning. For example, in one activity on style and manner, users view video clips of two different speakers. A drag-and-drop activity asks them to match words such as "informal," "formal," "humorous," and "serious" with the appropriate clip.

In the final unit, Argumentation, users identify arguments and study the language and structure of arguments. In addition to thinking about how arguments are constructed, users are asked to consider the purpose of academic discourse and their role within it.

Users begin by learning about the differences between documentary, which is based on truth and is factual, and fiction, which is based on imagination and is invented. They also engage in activities in which they are asked to listen for specific phrases that might indicate a lecturer does not agree with a particular notion. They are asked to identify which ones appear in a speech and which phrases are used to evaluate an argument. In another activity, users are first presented with information explaining a common organizational pattern for arguments. Next, they view a video clip and try to match the points the lecturer makes with the pattern. In addition to exercises centered around video clips, this unit also contains activities based on longer, written passages.

EVALUATION

This program offers a well-designed user interface and the operation of the program is self-explanatory and clear. Further, navigation is straightforward, and page numbers inform users of their progress through units. At any time during the program, learners can click on the Home icon to return to the main

page of the first unit. However, after having moved beyond the first unit, the user cannot return to the main menu without exiting the program and starting again.

Generally speaking, the sound quality is quite good. One important point to note, however, is that all speakers have British accents. While all learners will likely benefit from exposure to a wide range of English pronunciation patterns, learners in other settings, such as those who aim to enter a U.S. college, for example, may find this somewhat distracting initially. On the other hand, learners of British English will likely appreciate this aspect of *Listening to Lectures*.

A strong feature of the program is the sound pedagogy on which it is based. According to current research, effective listening activities should be based on authentic, rather than simplified, input (Dunkel, 1991; Mendelsohn, 1994; Rubin, 1995). In *Listening to Lectures*, learners are presented with naturalistic spoken language, rather than scripted input designed specifically for nonnative speakers. Another important point to note is that the videos provide visual support, as users cannot only listen to speakers but can also see their gestures, facial expressions, and body language which can increase comprehension.

In addition, *Listening to Lectures* provides users with opportunities to employ both top-down and bottom-up processing skills (see Dunkel, 1991; Morley, 1991). Many of the pre-listening activities are designed to provide background information and activate schemata by encouraging the users to think about what they already know about the lecture topic and the skill to be practiced. Students can also practice a range of skills such as inferencing, evaluation and synthesis of material, and extracting implied meaning from what they hear. Such activities are in line with constructivist approaches to language learning which view knowledge acquisition as a dynamic process where learners are the architects, rather than the recipients, of knowledge (McGroarty, 1998).

Another positive aspect of the program is that many activities are designed to help users develop listening strategies, including using non-verbal cues to assist in comprehension, synthesizing and summarizing information, recognizing rhetorical organization, and predicting information, to name a few. Such an approach is consistent with current theory, which views listening as a highly active process of selecting and interpreting information from auditory and visual cues (Richards, 1983; Rubin, 1995).

The availability of feedback makes *Listening to Lectures* suitable for self-instructional purposes, as well as use in courses. Although the form of feedback varies, correct answers and a brief explanation are always provided. Some feedback responses, however, such as "Are you serious? Try again" offer little in the way of encouragement. Nonetheless, the feedback is generally useful and in many sections, when learners get the wrong answer, they have an opportunity to replay the clip and attempt the question again.

SUMMARY

Essential Academic Skills in English: Listening to Lectures is easy to use and could undoubtedly improve listening comprehension and academic listening skills. The overall format and content is most suited to students in, or planning to enter, college or university settings. Because its main focus is on improving listening skills in this type of setting, it is best as a curricular supplement for high intermediate and advanced levels. The reviewer highly recommends this program and believes it will be useful to both non-native and native students who wish to improve their academic listening skills.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Meena Singhal (PhD, The University of Arizona) teaches Academic Reading and ESL at Long Beach City College, CA. Some of her publications have appeared in *Language Teaching and Research*, *CALL-EJ*, and *On-CALL: The Australian Journal of Computers and Language Education*. She is the editor of an online publication, *The Reading Matrix: An International Online Journal*, which deals primarily with

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