Academic Listening Tasks for ESL Students: Difficulties and Implications

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Abstract:

The spread of English as a world language has been accompanied by ever-growing numbers of people studying at university level through the medium of English as a second language, whether in their own country or in English-speaking countries as overseas students. A major part of university study remains the lecture (Johns, 1981). Academic listening skills are thus an essential component of communicative competence in a university setting. And yet, although "academic listening" has its own distinctive features, there has been relatively little research in this specific area. The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of ESL students' difficulties with listening tasks, and suggests pedagogical implications to deal with those difficulties.

Keywords: academic listening tasks, lecturing styles, lecture structure, note-taking, difficulties and implications.

Introduction

Listening has been regarded as the most frequently used language skill in the classroom. It plays an even more important role in academic success than reading skill or academic aptitude (Conaway, 1982). Listening purposes vary according to whether learners or not are involved in listening as a component of social interaction. Brown and Yule (1983) classified listening functions or purposes as interactional and transactional. Interactional listening is to engage in social interaction. In contrast, the purpose of transactional is primarily to communicate information. Accurate and coherent communication of the massage is required. It is important for the listener to get the direct massage in transactional listening. For example, news broadcast, lectures, descriptions, and instructions are all transactional use of language.

Transactional listening is common in academic listening. Academic listening involves listening and speaking tasks in university classes. According to Flowerdew (1994), it has its own characteristics and places special demands upon listeners. To be a successful academic listener, a student needs relevant background knowledge, the ability to distinguish between important and unimportant information, and appropriate skills like note-taking. This paper, therefore aims to overview ESL students' difficulties with listening tasks, and suggests pedagogical implications to deal with those difficulties.

Academic Listening Tasks

When students go to a lecture, they may already have some background knowledge of the subject and be able to predict a little of the content of the lecture, not least from its title. However, it is at this point that problems may develop. Jordan (2002) summarizes the main problems, within three broad areas:

1. decoding, i.e. recognizing what has been said;

2. comprehending, i.e. understanding the main and subsidiary points;

3. taking notes, i.e. writing down quickly, briefly and clearly the important points for future use.

Flowerdew (1994: 37), adds that the act of decoding involves not only recognizing unit boundaries phonologically, but also the *"recognition of irregular pausing, false starts, hesitations, stress and intonation patterns".* The problem will be intensified for NNS who lack familiarity with spoken discourse structure, various styles of delivery, and the accent and speed of speaking of the lecturer. Comprehension difficulties may be compounded by insufficient knowledge of the subject matter.

The lecture itself brings its own particular and potential areas of difficulty. Especially problematic is *"the requirements to be able to concentrate on and understand long stretches of talk without the opportunity of engaging in the facilitating functions of interactive discourse, such as asking for a repetition and negotiating meaning"* (Flowerdew, 1994: 182). In addition, students may be expected to combine the spoken input with input from other sources, e.g., handouts, black/white-board displays, slides, overhead projector transparencies or video.

Jordan (2002) states that note-taking can also cause problems. As a skill, it involves several processes, among which are:

- the ability to distinguish between important and less important information;

- deciding when to record the points (so that other important points are not missed while writing);

- the ability to write concisely and clearly in a kind of personal shorthand which will probably make use of various devices, e.g., abbreviation symbols, etc.;

- the ability to decipher one's own notes at a later date and to recall the essence of the lecture.

Richards (1983) summarizes the range of topics associated with research into lectures by constructing a taxonomy of micro-skills needed for academic listening (listed below). Features of the language itself may cause difficulties for students as well as the way in which the lecture is delivered.

Micro-skills: Academic Listening (Listening to Lectures)

1. Ability to identify purpose and scope of lecture

2. Ability to identify topic of lecture and follow topic development.

3. Ability to identify relationships among units within discourse (e.g., major ideas, generalizations, hypotheses, supporting ideas, examples)

4. Ability to identify role of discourse markers in signaling structure of a lecture (e.g., conjunctions, adverbs, gambits, routines).

5. Ability to infer relationships (e.g., cause, effect, conclusion).

6. Ability to recognize key lexical items related to subject/topic.

7. Ability to deduce meanings of words from context.

8. Ability to recognize markers of cohesion.

9. Ability to recognize function of intonation to signal information structure (e.g., pitch, volume, pace, key).

10. Ability to detect attitude of speaker toward subject matter.

11. Ability to follow different modes of lecturing: spoken, audio, audio-visual.

12. Ability to follow lecture despite differences in accent and speed.

13. Familiarity with different styles of lecturing: formal, conversational, read, unplanned.

14. Familiarity with different registers: written versus colloquial.

15. Ability to recognize irrelevant matter: jokes, digressions, meanderings.

16. Ability to recognize function of non-verbal cues as markers of emphasis and attitude.

17. Knowledge of classroom conventions (e.g., turn taking, clarification requests).

18. Ability to recognize instructional / learner tasks (e.g., warnings, suggestions, recommendations, advice, instructions).

Lecturing Styles and Lecture Structure

Morrison (1974) analyses lectures and divides them into two kinds: *formal* (formal register, and close to spoken prose) and *informal* (high informational content but not necessarily in highly formal register). He notes that students have greater difficulty understanding informal lectures than formal ones. This may be regarded as a basic division for most lectures.

Dudley-Evans and Johns (1981) analyze lectures, and identify three styles of lecturing:

1. *Reading style:* the lecturer reads from notes (or sounds as if he is so doing); characterized by short tone-groups, and narrowness of intonational range; a falling tone predominates.

2. *Conversational Style:* the lecturer speaks informally, with or without notes; characterized by longer tone-groups and key-sequences from high to low.

3. *Rhetorical Style:* the lecturer as performer; characterized by wide intonational range; often exploiting high key; frequent asides and digressions.

Another aspect of lectures to consider, in analyzing features to assist students, is the type of lecture and its purpose, Olsen and Huckin (1990) analyze the written responses of students to a task set for a mechanical engineering lecture. They conclude that many

students are not aware of the distinction between: (1) lectures giving information, and (2) those developing an argument, point by point, with a discussion of ideas and in a problem-solving framework. In the former, an *information-driven* listening strategy is needed, whereby facts can be absorbed. In the latter, a *point-driven* listening strategy is needed with which listeners can take a broader view of the larger situation of which the discourse is part. In effect, this involves the discourse as having a single overriding main point and a number of subordinate points supporting it. Students will also need to infer the speaker's intentions and goals.

Further research by Tauroza and Allison (1994) among first year ESL undergraduate in Hong Kong, complement Olsen's and Huckin's findings in several respects, especially in showing that L2 listeners have difficulties following argumentation that is developed in more complex discourse structures than they are used to. However, Tauroza and Allison find that their students have few difficulties understanding the lecturer's main points, except when one such point is introduced in a manner which they do not expect. Later, Allison and Tauroza (1995) replicate their experience among L1 students. They find that both groups of students have similar problems in understanding lectures when complex discourse patterns beyond the most basic problem-solution pattern are used.

Many universities organize some kind of staff training sessions but these rarely prepare lecturers for the specific difficulties of NNS. In this context, Lynch (1994) discusses ways in which lecturers could be more effectively trained. He summarizes a set of recommendations widely cited in the literature relating to lecture methodology:

1. Speak loudly and clearly…don't go too fast.
2. plan, prepare, structure every lecture.
3. Make it understandable – explain, emphasize, recap, repeat and summarize main points and relate to current examples and applications.

4. Watch out for reaction and feedback, invite questions and ask questions, encourage participation, involve your audience.

5. Be adequate, do not try to cover everything.

6. Know your subject.

7. Keep time.

8. Look at the audience.

9. Assemble materials to which the students won't have easy access.

10. Don't read from your notes.

11. Be interesting and humorous but not too much.

12. Prepare handouts.

Hence, students' tasks in understanding lectures would be considerably eased if lecturers clearly structured and delivered their talks.

Lectures and Note-taking

The study of L2 lecture comprehension involves a number of important research questions. A considerable number of recent L2 studies have dealt with the analysis of lecture structure and its effect on L2 language learners' comprehension, analyzing native speaker lecture style as well as non-native speakers' oral skills and comprehensibility (e.g., Chaudron and Richards 1986; Tyler, Jeffries, and Davies 1988; Williams 1989; Chaudry and Astika 1991). A much larger area of methodological prescription involves the training of L2 learners, in which an emphasis is put on such strategies as listening for main ideas and supporting details, paying attention to key phrases and words that signal discourse relevance, and in note-taking, the use of abbreviations, and outlining or highlighting techniques (e.g., Brown 1978; Dunkel and Pialorsi 1982; Mason 1983; Ruetten 1986).

Most methodological prescriptions on lecture note-taking are premised on at least one of two key assumptions about its value, and these same assumptions are reflected in the major distinction in L1 educational research on this topic. The first assumption, that note-taking aids in organizing lecture content while listening, is viewed as an effect of note-taking on encoding processes; the second, that note-taking is a useful record for later recall and reconstruction of lecture content when studying, is viewed as an effect of notes as an external storage stimulus for recall. Richards and Friedman (1978), characterize this distinction with the following arguments. First, note-taking aids the *encoding* process by increasing:

1. meaningful *chunking* and thereby encoding information,

2. general level of attention,

3. general *effort*, and,

4. *assimilation* of new and old information.

Second, note-taking provides an *external storage* of information:

1. it helps rehearsal, and

2. it provides mnemonics and information for *reconstruction* of memory.

Jordan (2002), states that a distinction is sometimes made between note-*taking* and note-*making*. *Note-taking* is the straightforward writing down of whatever is said or written on a board, etc. It may not require much thought. *Note-making,* on the other hand, is the creation of the learner's *own* notes, which may involve summarizing, paraphrasing, putting question marks against some items (to query, check or comment on at a later stage), and making important elements stand out by visual means. However, the more generally used term *note-taking* will be used for both.

The importance of note-taking in the lecture comprehension process is observed by several researchers in Flowerdew (1994). In particular, the quality of notes and training in note-taking are looked at as an aspect of successful recall of lecture information by students at a later time. Rost (1990) provides a list of types of note-taking (reproduced below). Many of the aspects and items listed are practiced on EAP courses and in listening and note-taking books.

Topic-relation notes:

1. Topicalizing – writing down a word or phrase to represent a section of the text
2. Translating – writing down L1 equivalent of topic
3. Copying – writing down verbatim what the lecturer has written on the blackboard (overhead projector, etc.)
4. Transcribing – writing down verbatim what the lecturer has said
5. Schematizing – inserting graphics (e.g., diagrams) to organize or represent a topic or relationship

Concept-ordering notes:

1. Sequence cuing – listing topics in order, numbering
2. Hierarchy cuing – labeling notes as main point (key finding, conclusion, etc.) or example (quote, anecdote, etc.)
3. Relation ordering – left-to-right indenting, using arrows, dashes, semi-circles, or = signs to indicate relation among topics

Focusing notes:

1. Highlighting – underlining, placing a dot or arrow in front of a topic, circling a topic word
2. De-highlighting – writing in smaller letters or placing topic inside parentheses

Revising notes:

1. Inserting – drawing arrow back to earlier note, inserting with caret
2. Erasing – crossing out old notes

Dunkel and Davy (1989) investigate note-taking in lectures. The main reasons given by students for the importance of note-taking are:

- as a mnemonic device;

- to prepare for exams;

- to reinforce or compare information contained in the textbook and the lecture;

- to increase attention during the lecture.

  Jordan (2002) affirms that note-taking as a skill is not easy in one's own language; in a second language, the difficulties can become very serious. For this reason, considerable help may be needed, which may take several forms. Help may be provided by supplying the overall framework or structure of a talk (with numbered sections, points, etc.) or giving semantic or discourse markers or cues. In the early stages, and at lower language levels, it may be necessary for students to have practice in writing down the words that they hear in the order that they hear them (similar to a dictation). Once they have increased their ability and confidence, they can try to take notes with the use of discourse markers, and later to try to paraphrase as they listen and write (a very demanding task). By using standard and personal abbreviations and symbols , they can save some time in writing. A preliminary activity that is found useful in helping students to transfer information from the spoken word to paper, is the provision of a table or chart which must be completed while listening to a talk.

Students' Difficulties in Academic Listening

Academic listening plays a crucial role in a student's academic success. Research in English for Academic Purposes (ESP) has begun to show that ESL/EFL students have great difficulty in understanding academic lectures. Ferris and Tagg (1996) investigate university professors' views on ESL students' difficulties with listening tasks. Instructors at four different institutions in a variety of academic disciplines respond to questions and provide comments about their ESL students' listening skills. All respondents report that their ESL students have great difficulty with listening comprehension, responding to questions, and class participation.

In a survey of overseas students in higher education, Campbell (1973) reports that about 85 per cent of the students interviewed complain of the difficulties faced in their studies, whether it be language or difficulty in taking lecture notes. Practically all students admit that at first there is a problem comprehending lectures because of the lecturers' accents.

One of Campbell's main conclusions is that lectures should be taped and the main points listed on duplicated lists. Both should then be available to students.

In an investigation into note-taking among students (66NS and 63 NNS) at the University of Arizona, the conclusion reached is that: the effective L1 and L2 note-takers are those who compacted large amounts of spoken discourse into propositional-type information units; transcribe content words using abbreviations, symbols and a limited number of structure words. Terseness of note-taking rather than mere quantity seems to be an essential ingredient of effective L1/L2 note-taking (Dunkel, 1988).

Dunkel's conclusion for teaching is that students should be provided with *skeleton notes* containing the major points of information in the lecture. They would then be able to concentrate on understanding the content of the lectures.

Implications for Pedagogy

This paper upholds lecturers to ESL learners to develop realistic strategies for instruction. Many learners, particularly in the foundation year at university, regularly experience confusion in lectures. The task for pedagogy is to help learners stay the course, to find ways to deal with the partial understanding and misunderstanding they experience during lectures.

1- Promotion of a cognitive view of instruction

In order to prepare ESL students to deal with confusion during lectures, instructors can help equip their students with concrete strategies:

   a. Self-monitoring: checking one's own comprehension and sense of satisfaction during the lecture.

   b. Questioning: formulating types of questions that will lead to clarification and greater comprehension.

   c. Forming hierarchies: guided note-taking leading students to list ideas in lectures in order to search for subordination and hierarchical ordering, searching for logical connective relationships rather than amassing details.

   d. Building a lexical base for lecture instruction: generating lists of key terms for students to prepare prior to a lecture. Being familiar with the common meanings of these terms will allow the listeners to comprehend and make inferences during the lecture.

2. Use of self-report protocols to teach listening strategies

In order to assist students in updating and revising their understanding of lecture content, instructors can instigate some type of self-report or summarizing protocol. One of the useful techniques is the comparison of student and expert summaries, in which student might receive several different summaries and evaluate them by:

    a.   Counting the number of ideas presented;

    b.   Underlining the main points and circling supporting points;

    c.   Comparing the summaries in terms of effectiveness.

This use of summaries allows learners a chance to see how effective summary writers – and by analogy, effective listeners – identify a macrostructure in the lecture. Principles for writing effective summaries include:

1. Generalizing: synthesizing high level information from various parts of the text and "reducing" the text to a general principle, fact, or argument. In order to help students achieve this aim, the lecturer may need to pause at key points to indicate that synthesizing is appropriate, and to guide students in doing it effectively.

2. Clarifying arguments: subordinating information and introducing terms or concepts that effectively characterize the speaker's intended meaning. To develop this skill, the lecturer will need to encourage students paraphrasing of sections of the lecture.

3. Identifying the speaker's modality (or intention): supplying "meta-statements" about the speaker's reasoning and decisions for structuring the text in a particular way. To develop this skill, the lecturer may need to pose "meta-questions" (such as, "What do you think about this idea?" "What is your opinion about this?" to take the students "outside the text". These questions may help the students detect speaker attitudes such as hyperbole, sarcasm, and amusement that may assist them in understanding the lecture.

4. Evaluating the text (and speaker) in terms of effectiveness: supplying judgments of the clarity and effectiveness of the lecturer in getting points across to the audience. To develop this skill, the lecturer will need to become interactive, probing the students at certain points in the lecture about the effectiveness of examples and explanations in expressing new ideas (Rost, 1994).

Conclusion

This paper outlines several issues related to academic listening, including lecturing styles, and the importance of note-taking in the lecture comprehension process. Aiming at providing an overview of ESL students' difficulties with listening tasks, and therefore suggests pedagogical implications to deal with those difficulties. Research results confirmed that ESL students have great difficulty with listening comprehension, responding to questions, class participation, taking lecture notes, and comprehending the lecturers' accents.

Meaningful consideration of the basic issues in ESL lecture pedagogy – promotion of a cognitive view of instruction and use of self-report protocols (such as summarizing) to promote macro- structural thinking – is likely to increase the quality of our instruction to ESL learners and lead them to adopt more active comprehension skills and strategies.

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