Academic Lectures:

Discourse and Comprehension Processes

KhaldiAnissa

Faculty of Letters and Languages

Deparment of Foreign Languages

University of Tlemcen

Abstract

Lectures are widely used at university. Their comprehension determines, in most cases, success or failure of students. Furthermore, lecture listening is different from other types of listening in terms of organization and the processes required in comprehension. This implies that both lecturers and students should be familiarized with this topic. Therefore, the present article highlights important features of academic lectures with respect to discourse and the different processes underlying comprehension.

Key words: academic, lecture, discourse, comprehension, processes.

1. Introduction

EFL university students often encounter various challenges, including: learning English and, at the same time, accumulating content knowledge related to particular modular courses *through lecture listening*. Faced with these challenges students may not be equipped with the necessary tools to help them process their lectures effectively, nor may lecturers be aware about how to present their lectures, so as to further facilitate learners' comprehension. The different sections of this article discuss the way lecturers can manage to structure their lectures, and the various processes that students can rely on in lecture comprehension.

2. Discourse Organization

Lectures' discourse has been approached from different angles by different researchers. This section is confined to three aspects: structuring patterns, discourse organizers, and lecturing styles.

2.1. Phases of Lectures

Compared to other genres like research articles, very little research has been carried out on the structuring patterns of lectures. In this context, Young[1] made an attempt in which she offered a description which entails phases. Based on a corpus of seven two-hour lectures from third- and fourth-year courses in addition to using systemic functional linguistics as a theoretical framework, the researcherproposed a model describing the structure of university lectures. She identified a number of phases, also called strands. Three of them are found in all university lectures, which are:

- Interaction: the degree of interaction between the lecturer and his students;
- Theory: also called content, during which the lecturer transmits theories, models, and definitions;
- Examples: in which theoretical concepts are illustrated through concrete examples.

2.2. Discourse Organizers

Discourse organizers, also called macro-organizers, have the function of organizing the content information of the lecture[2]. According to their function in a lecture, they can be of different types. They are summarised in the following table.

Global macro-organizers	Local macro-organizers
⚓ *Topic markers*: what I really wanted to talk about/tell you about was X; let me start with X; the first thing is…….; first of all.	⚓ *Exemplifiers*: to give (you) an example; for example.
⚓ *Topic shifters*: OK, now (falling intonation+pause); and finally we have X; let me go from X to Y; this brings us to; the next point is.	⚓ *Relators*: nonetheless; however; as a result of; and also.
⚓ *Summarizers*: in a nutshell; to tie this up; in short/summary.	⚓ *Evaluators*: I think/ don't think that X; as far as I know; there is no doubt that.

Discourse Organizers

Discourse organizers can be global macro-organizers that signal the introduction of a topic in the beginning, shift to a new topic, and the summary of the topic. Local macro-organizers are those which also mark sequencing or importance of high-level information, but they do so at particular points within the overall framework set by the global macro-organizers.

2.3. LecturingStyles

Lectures were also studied in terms of styles. In this context, Dudley-Evans[3] identified three lecturing styles: reading, conversational, rhetorical. In the first style, the lecturer reads the lecture or delivers it as if he is reading. As for the second style, the lecturer presents the lecture from notes along with a certain amount of interaction. Finally, the rhetorical style involves giving a performance with jokes.

3. Comprehension Processes

Listening purposes differ from one situation to another. For instance, it can be listening for pleasure, listening as a component of social action, or for learning (i.e., lecture listening). In these different purposes comprehension is considered to be the first-order goal, the highest priority of the listener[4]. However, processes may differ as the listening purpose varies. As far as lecture listening is concerned, Powers (as cited in Flowerdew)[5] specified some processes, based on a survey that the researcher administered to 144 faculty members in the United States of America. The survey yielded the following processes: identifying the topic of a lecture; identifying major themes or ideas; identifying supporting ideas and examples; identifying relationships between ideas; following the spoken mode of lectures; comprehending key vocabulary.

Kuo[6] rather focussed on lecture comprehension strategies, which are:

- Getting familiar with the context, situation, and the content of the lecture;
- Segmenting speech into meaningful word boundaries;
- Listening to key words and distinguishing between content words and function words;
- Recognizing the organizational patterns of the whole structure of lectures;
- Recognizing main and supporting ideas;
- Reading handouts in advance.

Finally, Flowerdew[7] maintained that lecture comprehension has a number of distinguishing features and processes. First, it requires a different type of background knowledge, which should be knowledge of the specialist subject matter. Second, it includes note-taking, that is a crucial skill. Third, lecture listening involves students' integration of the incoming verbal information with other media, like handouts.

4. Pedagogical Implications

Offering a description of the lectures' discourse helps EFL teachers acquaint their students with how lectures are generally organized. This will make comprehension easier[8], as learners will be in a better position to cope with the transmitted information. At the same time, it is crucial to instruct learners into the necessary lecture comprehension processes so as to further facilitate lecture listening.

As regards lecturers, they are expected to deliver their lectures effectively, through clarity of presentation, showing an expert knowledge of the subject[9]. Therefore, lecturers need to develop a number of skills. According to Brown and Atkins[10], such skills encompass: explaining, presenting information, lecture preparation, generating interests.

5. Conclusion

Lectures have different characterizing features. They can be delivered differently by different lecturers. For example, a lecture may be read or presented in a conversational mode. Usually lectures are structured through a number of stages, in which information is organized using different organizing markers. In addition to these discourse features, lectures require quite different processes. These latter help students understand information as given by the lecturer.

As most EFL students come to university with almost no basic knowledge of the lectures' discourse or no basic skills of lecture comprehension, it is the task of teachers to bridge this gap, by instructing learners into lecture listening. Finally, comprehension is not dependent on learners only. Lecturers need to structure their lectures in a way that further facilitates the processing of information in a lecture. Hence, lecturers are bound to develop a number of skills, like lecture preparation and generating interests.

Footnote

1) Young L. University lectures– macro-structure and micro-features. In J. Flowerdew (ed.) Academic listening: research perspectives, 159-176.Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Pp.167-168.

2) Nattinger,J.R. AndDeCarrico, J.S. Lexical phrases and language teaching. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1992. pp95-96.

3) Dudley-Evans, L. Variations in the discourse Pttaerns Favoured by by different disciplines and their Pedagogical Implications. In J. Flowerdew (ed.) Academic listening: research perspectives. 1994. 146-158.Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 148.

4) Rost, M. Teaching and researching listening, New York: Pearson. 2002. p.59.

5) Flowerdew, J. Academic Listening: Research Perspectives. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1994. p.13.

6) Kuo, C. Teaching Lecture Comprehension to non-native Science Students. IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication. Vol 36, 70-74. 1993. p.76.

7) Flowerdew, J. Academic Listening: Research Perspectives. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1994. p.11-12.

8) Young L. University lectures– macro-structure and micro-features. In J. Flowerdew (ed.) Academic listening: research perspectives, 159-176.Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 174.

9) Nicholls, G. Developing Teaching and Learning in Higher Education. New York: Routledge. 2002. P.79.

10) Brown, G. and Atkins, M. Effective Teaching in Higher Education. New York: Routledge. 2000. pp.19-49.

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