

Listening to Academic Lectures: Investigating Students' Strategies and Comprehension

Anissa Khaldi
Tlemcen University (Algeria)
language13@gmail.com

Abstract

Listening is a very important vehicle for language learning. At university, this skill is attached more importance as it is also used to accumulate content information from lectures. The present case study focuses on academic lecture comprehension. It attempts to investigate whether EFL first-year students at Tlemcen University (Algeria) have the necessary strategies which help them comprehend their lectures. For this purpose, a questionnaire is administered to uncover the strategies of the participants, in addition to a test to measure their comprehension of lectures. The results show that the subjects do not employ the necessary strategies, and their performance on the test is poor. Therefore, it is suggested, at the end of the article, that university students should be instructed into lecture comprehension strategies so as to assist them to effectively understand their academic lectures.

Key words: Academic, Listening, Lectures, Strategies, EFL, Learners

Introduction

Over the last few decades, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of listening comprehension in language learning. This may be reflected in the increased publication of articles and books which revolve around different aspects of listening, such as listening processes (e.g., Richards, 1983; Weir, 1993), listening strategies (e.g., Vandergrift, 1996; Goh, 1997, 2000, 2002), the effect of speech rates (e.g., Griffiths, 1990; Tauroza & Allison, 1990). As most university instruction takes place through the medium of lectures, the ability to comprehend academic lectures has also received some attention. In this context, one major issue which has been addressed is the use of strategies.

Academic Lecture Comprehension Strategies

Listening comprehension varies according to whether listeners are involved in listening as a component of social action (conversational listening) with the purpose being understanding a speaker's personal interests and developing social relationships; or listening for pleasure (for example: listening to movies, radio); or listening in order to learn which includes listening to academic lectures (Richards, 1983).

For each type of listening comprehension different processes are required. With respect to lecture comprehension, Richards (1983) suggested a number of processes, including: the ability to understand the purpose of the lecture; the ability to identify the topic of the lecture and follow topic development; the ability to recognize major relationships between units of the lecture (major ideas, supporting ideas, examples); the ability to identify cues that signal the structure of lectures; the ability to recognize key lexical items related to the subject/ topic; the ability to deduce meanings from words based on the context; the ability to infer relationships, for example, cause, effect, etc; the ability to follow information from lecturer's speech (spoken language) and information derived from other media, like visually displayed materials presented by the overhead projector.

In order to facilitate the processing of academic lectures, students can employ a range of strategies. Strategies are "the special thoughts or behaviors that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn, or retain new information" (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990:1). Flowerdew and Miller (2005) proposed a list of lecture comprehension strategies which are outlined in table 1. Three kinds of strategies are identified: metacognitive, cognitive, and socio-affective. The first category involves thinking about the listening process, planning for listening, monitoring listening whilst taking place, and self-evaluation after the task has been completed. Cognitive strategies entail manipulating the listening material or applying specific techniques to a listening task. Socio-affective strategies describe the techniques that the listener uses for: interacting with others (teachers and peers) to verify comprehension, lowering anxiety, and self-encouragement.

Strategy	Description
<i>Metacognitive</i>	
Advance organization	Clarifying the objectives of the lecture listening and /or proposing strategies for handling it
Directed attention	attending to the main points of the lecture ignoring irrelevant distractions; maintaining attention while listening
Selective attention	paying attention to details
Comprehension monitoring	Checking one's understanding
Problem identification	Deciding what problems hinder comprehension;
Evaluation	Judging overall execution of the task and of one's strategy use
<i>Cognitive</i>	
Inferencing	Using information within the spoken message to guess the meaning of unfamiliar language items, predict outcomes or fill in information
Elaboration	Using content and formal schemata already stored in memory to predict outcomes or fill in missing information
Note taking	Writing notes during the lecture listening
Summarization	Making a summary
Resourcing	Using available reference resources of information, like books, articles
<i>Socioaffective</i>	
Questioning for clarification	Asking for explanation, verification, rephrasing
Cooperation	Learners working together
Lowering anxiety	Trying to relax
Self-encouragement	Positive self-talk(I can do it)

Table 1. Lecture Comprehension Strategies
(adapted from Flowerdew and Miller, 2005)

Research Questions

The present case study tries to answer two general research questions:

1. Do students possess the strategies which help them understand their academic lectures? Three other sub-questions are generated:
 - Do students employ cognitive strategies to process their academic lectures?
 - Do students use metacognitive strategies to understand their academic lectures?
 - Do students employ socio-affective strategies to comprehend their academic lectures?
2. To what extent do students succeed in comprehending their academic lectures?

Methodology

The subjects participating in this case study were first-year EFL students studying English at the English Section, in Tlemcen University (Algeria). Their learning experience of English ranged from seven to eight years. At university, they are supposed to study three years to have a BA, which will enable them to work as teachers. Most of the modules studied are based on lectures.

A questionnaire was developed based on Flowerdew and Miller's taxonomy of lecture comprehension strategies (2005). It was given to the participants so as to uncover their strategies. The items of the questionnaire were in the form of frequency rating scales. Each item asked about how often the participant would employ a particular strategy. The points in the scale ranged from never to always. In order to measure their ability to comprehend lectures, the participants were to sit on a test.

Analysis

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After collecting data, the researcher analysed the results through calculating the central tendency. The total score for research each research instrument was decided to be twenty. As far as the questionnaire is concerned, the mean of the group was found to be low: 6.78 out of twenty. For the overwhelming majority (85.71%), the mean scores of strategy use ranged from one to eight out of twenty. The percentage of students who reported mean scores of strategy use around 11 was 9.52%. Finally, 4.77% had a mean of 10. Other elements of the central tendency of the group are reported in following table.

Mode	Median	SD
4.67	6.67	2.53

Table 2. The Participants' Mode, Median, and SD of Strategy Use

The mean scores of the different types of lecture comprehension strategies, namely metacognitive strategies; cognitive strategies; and socio-affective strategies were 2.84; 2.29; 1.65, respectively. The findings also showed that the subjects appeared to use less the strategies that require interaction with their peers and the lecturer. This finding is similar to Jeon' results (2007) in his investigation of lecture comprehension strategies. The reason that this researcher stated was the students' concern of losing face.

The strategy that was reported less by the group was inferencing. The highest mean values were related to the strategies: directed attention, selective attention, and note-taking. The low mean value of inferencing may be due to the subjects' lack of background knowledge. If listeners have no knowledge relevant to the particular event taking place, then it will be more difficult for them to make inferences (Buck, 2001). In this study, the mean of this type of knowledge was also low. Hence, the participants seemed to have poor background knowledge that could have assisted them to make inferences. A possible explanation for the quantitative high mean values of the other strategies is that note-taking requires, partly, concentration and selective attention of important details (Piolat et al., 2005).

Regarding the test of lecture comprehension, the findings are displayed in the following table.

Mean	Mode	Median	SD
5	4.25	4.5	2.35

Table 3. Central Tendency of the Test

As it can be concluded from the above table, the group had a very poor performance. The mean was very low. The most frequently occurring score was 4.25. The sample demonstrated heterogeneity. In this context, the best score was 10 and the lowest was 1. Therefore, it is clear that the overwhelming majority of students could not comprehend their lectures.

Analysis of the test also showed that some subjects succeeded, to some extent, in defining some concepts but they could not understand the relations between such concepts. This failure may be due to two factors. First, some participants' proficiency could probably help them to recall information as presented in the lectures, however their lack of content knowledge hindered them from integrating the information from the different parts of the lectures. In this line of thought, Jeon (2007) argued that learner's proficiency may help the student achieve only a superficial understanding of the lectures which is sufficient for retention tasks but not for tasks of reconstructing information to infer relationships. This second type of tasks requires the use of content knowledge. Another reason for subjects' inability to grasp the relationships between the concepts of lectures may be the fact that lecturers did not include detailed explanations.

Summary of the Results

To sum up, the findings of the questionnaire clearly imply that the group had some lecture comprehension strategies. This supports the common view in the literature that EFL learners usually have some language learning strategies. They often employ them in their mother tongue, and transfer some of them to foreign language learning (Mendelsohn, 1994). However, the results of the statistical measures also indicated that the subjects possessed a few number of lecture comprehension strategies. This may be due to the fact that L1 listening comprehension strategies might have been impartially or imperfectly

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transferred to EFL learning (Rost, 2005). Finally, as the participants did not have all the necessary strategies, they failed to successfully comprehend their academic lectures. This was clearly evident in results of the test of lecture comprehension.

Pedagogical Implications

Based on the aforementioned findings, it is suggested that university students should be assisted to process their academic lectures effectively. This can be done through instructing them into lecture comprehension strategies. Although various models of strategy instruction have been proposed, many researchers pointed out to the value of explicit strategy training (Graham, 1997). The main purpose is to make students aware of what, when, and how to use specific strategies. Therefore, listeners will ultimately learn to take charge of the comprehension process and become more autonomous.

Explicit strategy training comprises the following stages:

1. Preparation and assessment: this stage concerns identifying the strategies that students already use, in order to decide which strategies to instruct and which ones should be given more attention;
2. Presentation/modelling: the instructor describes and demonstrates the use of the strategy in question;
3. Practice: learners are given various opportunities to practice the strategy;
4. Evaluation: learners are encouraged to assess the efficacy of the strategy.

In order to further help students develop autonomy in consciously focusing on the strategies, teachers can develop a checklist (Vandergrift, 1999), which should comprise the different lecture comprehension strategies that students need to employ. Before lecture listening, students may have recourse to the checklist to guide them in preparing themselves. After the task of lecture comprehension, students should check whether they considered using the necessary strategies.

Conclusion

The main conclusion which can be drawn from the data of this case study is that students did not have the necessary lecture comprehension strategies which could assist them to process their lectures effectively. Therefore, it is crucial for teachers to instruct

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their students into how to listen to their lectures. This could be done through explicit strategy training of lecture comprehension strategies, which will develop students' responsibility to take charge of learning and achieve a better understanding of lectures.

Finally, it may be worth mentioning that one limitation of this study is that it did not examine differences between skilled listeners and less skilled ones. Hence, future research may explore the qualitative differences of strategy use between both types of listeners after conducting explicit strategy training in lecture comprehension.

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