ELSEVIER

Adjusting a business lecture for an international audience: a case study

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Abstract

It is widely known that L2 audiences continue to experience comprehension difficulties when listening to content lectures in English, regardless of proficiency level. For this reason, NS lecturers should be aware of potential obstacles to comprehension and the need to make appropriate adjustments. In order to understand how such adjustments may be made, using a case study approach, this paper focuses on a business lecture given by a native speaker on two different occasions: As an L1 classroom lecture in the UK and as an L2 guest lecture in Italy. Speech rate, redundancies, interpersonal and disciplinary features and references to local culture were compared using both quantitative and qualitative methods. The results showed that more adjustment had been made for the L2 audience in terms of speech rate, redundancies, interpersonal features, and references to local culture, while less had been made in the use of discipline-related lexis and metaphorical expressions. These insights into the characteristics of intercultural lecture discourse can find useful applications in the context of both lecturer training and EAP/ESP lecture comprehension instruction.
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1. Introduction

In today's globalized academic world, more and more international students are faced with the task of understanding content lectures in English. The number of L2 students attending universities in English-speaking countries or studying in English-medium universities abroad is constantly increasing. In their home countries, L2 students have opportunities to hear guest lectures in English given by visiting

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academics, representing another type of intercultural lecture that is on the rise (Henry & Rosenberry, 2001). However, the literature on L2 lecture comprehension suggests that listeners continue to experience difficulties, even at advanced proficiency levels (Mulligan & Kirkpatrick, 2000; Thompson, 1994). But what are the causes of these difficulties? Flowerdew (1994) discusses a number of variables involved in lecturing to international audiences that have an impact on successful comprehension, ranging from delivery speed to some particular lexico-grammatical, interpersonal, disciplinary and culture-related features of lecture discourse.

Speech rate has been investigated as a key factor in L2 lecture comprehension. Griffiths (1990), (cited in Flowerdew, 1994) and Derwing and Munro (2001) found that L2 listeners do indeed have difficulties with relatively fast speech rates, but do not benefit from either relatively slow or artificially reduced speech rates. On the other hand, Zhao (1997) found that when L2 listeners were given control to reduce lecture speech rate by means of computer technology, their understanding improved. Thus, the role of speech rate in lecture comprehension is still unclear. Another question linked to the potential usefulness of reducing relatively fast speech rates is whether or not NS lecturers would be willing and able to do so. Griffiths and Beretta (1991) (cited in Flowerdew, 1994) and Crawford Camiciottoli (2004) found that NS lecturers apparently did not make such adjustments for L2 audiences. However, since a limited number of speakers were involved in both studies, further research of this type would be warranted.

Successful lecture comprehension also hinges on students' ability to understand the lexis used by content lecturers. According to Flowerdew (1994, p. 19), during the listening process, the "linguistic decoding phase", which triggers the activation of background knowledge, takes on particular importance with L2 learners whose vocabularies are typically limited. In fact, unknown lexis has been shown to be a significant factor in miscomprehension. Rost (1994) found that L2 students were unfamiliar with discipline-related key words, as demonstrated by their errors in written summaries of a recorded lecture. Kelly (1991) determined empirically that lexical ignorance was the cause of the majority of errors in the listening comprehension tests of advanced level L2 learners. Some studies have focused on how lecturers can help L2 students cope with unfamiliar vocabulary by incorporating forms of redundancy into lecture discourse. Chiang and Dunkel (1992) showed that reformulations using simplified lexis and glosses to elaborate meanings improved comprehension. Bamford (2002) analyzed the repetitions and reformulations of lexical items as a prominent feature of a corpus of recorded economics lectures, apparently used to facilitate understanding for international audiences.

The conventional discourse features of some disciplines can also create problems for L2 listeners. In economics, for example, metaphors are central to the expression of basic concepts. Henderson (1982) refers to two over-arching metaphors that permeate the discourse of the discipline: *The economy is a machine* or *moving vehicle* (e.g. that 'starts up', 'slows down' or 'accelerates'), and *the economy is a living organism* (e.g. that 'grows', 'suffers' or 'flourishes'). Thus, such metaphors should play a key role in the vocabulary acquisition of L2 business and economics students, as