The use of modifiers in English-medium lectures by native speakers of Mandarin Chinese: A study of student perceptions

Ken Lau [a, *], Jacob Cousineau [b], Chia-Yen Lin [b]

[a] The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong
[b] Yuan Ze University, Taiwan

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ABSTRACT

The focus of this study is pragmatic force modifiers (PFMs), linguistic units that are known to realise interpersonal and textual language functions in discourse domains such as academic prose, casual conversations and intercultural encounters. Despite attracting substantial interest, most studies of PFMs have been undertaken from a researcher's perspective; little has been written about users' perceptions of their own PFM usage. Even less is known about non-native English speakers' perceptions of the use of PFMs in academic settings. This study, situated within an EFL context, explored Taiwanese students' perceptions of PFMs in English-medium university lectures and the correlation between their understanding of the linguistic features and their self-reported comprehension of the lecture content. The results show that the frequency of PFMs in a lecture had little to no influence on students' awareness of the modifiers. All of the students seemed to be aware of some PFMs but unaware of others, regardless of the differences in their lecturers' use of these PFMs. This study also highlights the differences between high- and low-comprehension students' perceptions of PFMs.

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1. Introduction

The global spread of English has led to its penetration into the highest levels of education around the world. English as an academic *lingua franca* has thus become a burgeoning field of research. University-level education programmes are increasingly conducted in English, even in countries where English is a second or foreign language. Regardless of the language used, the primary goal of formal education is to efficiently transfer knowledge from an educational source (e.g., lecturers) to learners (students). The majority of this knowledge transfer takes place in the classroom, which makes academic lectures a particularly important genre to study to increase our understanding of knowledge transfer and the flow of information (Lynch, 2011).

Containing stereotypical speaking and writing, academic lectures are a distinct genre in their own right, primarily due to their overlapping interface between the oral and literate continuum (Csomay, 2007). On the one hand, academic lectures reflect written academic discourse, being 'jam-packed' with information and intellectual content. They are likely to be 'monologic and relatively planned with respect to the content' (Eslami & Eslami-Rasekh, 2007, p. 25). On the other hand, lectures include a range of features commonly found in spoken discourse, including interaction between the lecturers and

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* Corresponding author. Centre for Applied English Studies, The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong.
E-mail address: lauken@hku.hk (K. Lau).

content-receivers, typically students, the use of discourse markers, pauses, self-repairs and colloquial expressions. Understanding such a complex and multi-faceted genre can be challenging for students (Thompson, 2003). Gaining insight into how students comprehend lectures will therefore lead to important pedagogical benefits.

Over the years, many English for academic purposes research studies have examined English-medium lectures by second language speakers. Researchers have investigated a wide array of generic features of academic lectures, including pronoun references (Fortanet, 2004), modal verbs (Crawford Camiciottoli, 2004) and formulaic expressions (Simpson, 2004). In addition, many previous studies on academic lectures have focused on the relationship between discourse structure and lecture comprehension (see, for example, Chaudron & Richards, 1986; Khuwaileh, 1999; Olsen & Huckin, 1990; Rido, 2010; Sadeghi & Heidaryan, 2012). As English usage has spread, a growing number of studies have examined the role of non-native speakers (NNSs) in this field, for example by looking at how the discourse structure of lectures given by native speaker (NS) lecturers is received by NNS students (Crawford Camiciottoli, 2004; Sadeghi & Heidaryan, 2012). Other researchers have investigated the effects of NNS lecturers who teach NS students (Liao, 2009; Shahbaz, Sheikh, & Ali, 2013).

Among other linguistic elements, the presence of pragmatic force modifiers (PFMs) has been proven to be important in shaping a coherent and comprehensible lecture (Lin, 2010, 2012). PFMs are linguistic devices that not only regulate the strength of the propositions expressed, but also realise 'manifold social pragmatic purposes' (Lin, 2010, p. 1173). As Wei (2011) described, PFMs connect the speaker with the receiver at the interpersonal level and, more importantly, provide contextual clues to the attitude of the speaker. At the textual level, these linguistic resources organise the discourse and 'aid the addressee in comprehending [the] interrelatedness' (p. 3456) of various components.

Being more linguistically prominent in textual and interpersonal than ideational functions (Liu, 2013), PFMs have been investigated in a range of contexts such as academic speaking (Biber, 2006), informal conversation (Jucker, Smith, & Ludge, 2003) and academic writing (Hyland, 2005). A common finding across these studies is that the functions of PFMs are highly context-dependent rather than arbitrary. In addition to research into domain-specific uses, comparative analyses of the use of PFMs by native and non-native English speakers have also been undertaken (e.g., Fung & Carter, 2007; Liao, 2009). Generally speaking, these two groups of speakers differ in terms of the range and the pragmatic purposes of their use of PFMs.

Despite broad-ranging studies concerning academic lectures and PFMs, studies focussing on NNS students' perceptions of particular linguistic features of academic lectures appear to be lacking. In addition, in a majority of the previous studies of PFMs, analyses were based on the researcher's perceptions of language usage; the addressees' understanding of the uses of PFMs has been underexplored. The current study extends previous research by investigating Taiwanese students' perceptions of the use of PFMs in English-medium lectures delivered by NSs of Mandarin Chinese, and discussing the correlation between students' awareness of the linguistic devices and their self-reported comprehension of lecture content.

2. Research niche

The recent international presence of English in tertiary education and its status as an academic *lingua franca* have created many new phenomena that have not yet been fully explored. In particular, NNS students' perceptions of the use of PFMs in English-medium academic lectures have been unexamined. Currently, insufficient knowledge is available about NNS students' awareness of PFMs and what functions, if any, they think these modifiers perform.

With this knowledge gap in mind, this study seeks to answer the following overarching research question: what are NNS students' perceptions of their lecturers' use of PFMs? To operationalise this question, three sub-questions are addressed:

1. Are NNS students aware of PFMs in English-medium university lectures?
2. Do NNS students feel that PFMs influence the meaning of an utterance?
3. What functions, if any, do NNS students feel these PFMs serve?

3. Research methods and data generation

The data for this study were generated from student responses to one of four questionnaires that were based on four recorded lectures. The development of these research instruments can be divided into two stages.

3.1. Stage 1: Analysis of PFMs in lectures

Four lecturers, all of whom were Taiwanese and NSs of Mandarin Chinese, were approached and gave their consent to have their lectures recorded for the study. All four participating lecturers had studied abroad in English-speaking countries, but none was an NS of English. The selected lectures lasted for two or three hours, and were given in undergraduate-level courses at a research-oriented university that is the first bilingual university in Taiwan. This university has a strong mission to internationalise the campus. Promoting English as a medium of instruction is believed to be one way to achieve internationalisation and enhance the university's global competitiveness (Lau & Lin, 2014).

Two of the lectures were delivered in the foreign languages department and two were in the management department. These departments were chosen because these specific courses were certain to be taught in English. Classes in other