



Genre awareness and academic lecture comprehension: The impact of teaching importance markers



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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the impact of teaching importance marking expressions on EFL learners' comprehension of main points in English academic lectures. The participants of the study were 100 EFL learners (53 males and 47 females) studying medicine at a major university in Iran. Half of the participants were assigned to the experimental group and the other half were put in the control group. The learners in the experimental group received explicit instruction in importance markers within 15 one-hour sessions, whereas the students in the control group participated only in the classes of their regular major-related courses, one of which was a course on English for the students of medicine. A test of the comprehension of important points in English academic lectures was developed and used as a post-test to measure the students' comprehension of important points. The results of *t*-test showed that knowledge of how importance marking is done in English academic lectures improves the EFL learners' comprehension of the main points of lectures. This was taken to mean that genre awareness or an understanding of the discourse structure of academic lectures improves the students' comprehension of the main points of lectures.

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1. Introduction

Academic lecturing has become the primary approach to teaching at the university (e.g., Ellington, 2000; Saviniitty, 2010). Widespread use of the academic lecture by university instructors has even made some scholars believe that “for most university students, understanding lectures is critical to academic success” (Olsen & Huckin, 1990, p. 33).

It must be borne in mind, however, that lecturing is more than just presenting information. “It is misleading to assume that the lecturer ‘packs’ the lecture with information and the listener ‘unpacks’ it in a complementary fashion. The processes by which the lecture is converted to memorable intake are largely inferential, and cannot be modelled solely by reference to the speaker” (Rost, 1994, pp. 93–94, cited in Lynch, 2011).

Despite the importance of the academic lecture, comprehending lectures poses a considerable challenge to students (e.g., Flowerdew & Miller, 1992; Flowerdew, 1994; Olsen & Huckin, 1990; Thompson, 1994). This difficulty concerns advanced level EFL/ESL learners as well (e.g., Allison & Tauroza, 1995; Flowerdew & Miller, 1997). “A problem common to many students in advanced listening comprehension and note-taking classes is that, in spite of apparent fluency, they still have difficulties understanding the points made in lectures”, as Lebauer (1984, p. 41) points out. Speech rate, lack of control over the lecturer,

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insufficient lexical and structural knowledge of English, and a lack of the relevant cultural and background knowledge have made comprehending lectures challenging (e.g., Chaudron & Richards, 1986; Deroey, 2015; Duszak, 1997; Flowerdew, 1994; Goh, 2000; Lynch, 2011; Nesi, 2001). Olsen and Huckin (1990), however, attribute this difficulty to the learners' failure to use the knowledge of the overall organization of the lecture.

The overall organization or structure of discourse is indicated by certain expressions called 'discourse structuring' (Crawford Camiciottoli, 2004). By organizing the discourse, these expressions help the learner develop a mental representation of macrostructure of the contents of lecture (e.g., 'Today we are going to talk about stigmergy'. 'The point to bear in mind is'). These expressions have also been called 'macro-markers' (Chaudron & Richards, 1986), 'organization markers' (Jung, 2003a), 'discourse signaling cues' (Jung, 2003b), and 'contextualization markers' (Jung, 2006).

One crucial aspect of discourse structure is to distinguish between important points and irrelevant information of the lecture (e.g., 'You need to remember that', 'The point is'). The expressions which "overtly mark the importance, relevance, or significance of points that are presented verbally or visually" (Deroey, 2015, p. 2) are referred to as 'importance or relevance markers' (Crawford Camiciottoli, 2007, 2004; Deroey, 2015; Hunston, 1994). Discourse organizational statements convey importance by evaluation of relevance (Hunston, 2004). According to Hunston (1994), relevance markers evaluate the discourse, have an important discourse organizational role, and are metadiscursive in nature.

It is now widely recognized that discourse structuring or organization expressions facilitate the students' comprehension, note-taking and recall of lectures (e.g., DeCarrico & Nattinger, 1988; Flowerdew & Tauroza, 1995; Jung, 2003a, b; 2006; Khuwaleh, 1999; Olsen & Huckin, 1990; Tauroza & Allison, 1994; Thompson, 2003; Williams, 1992). Nevertheless, our understanding of the effects of discourse organization markers, in general, and importance markers, in particular, on the students' comprehension of academic lectures is limited and the findings of previous research are mixed and inconsistent (e.g., Chaudron & Richards, 1986; Dunkel & Davis, 1994, pp. 55–74; Jung, 2003a, b; 2006; Pérez & Macia, 2002). What follows is a review of these studies.

In a study on organization markers (e.g., 'I am going to talk briefly about more complex norms such as rituals', 'Let me give you an example of a norm in different cultures', and 'That's all we'll talk about today'), Jung (2003a) investigated the effect of these discourse structuring expressions on Korean ESL learners' comprehension of important points in lectures. A population of 16 Korean high intermediate- and advanced-level ESL learners (9 females and 7 males) at a major U.S. university took part in the study. The participants were divided into two groups—marker and nonmarker. The marker group was exposed to a 10-minute version of a lecture in social psychology with organization markers included, whereas the nonmarker group listened to an 8-minute version of the same lecture with the organization markers excluded from the lecture. Afterwards, the participants in each group were exposed to a summary task in which they were supposed to summarize important points of the lecture. Results of the study showed that inclusion of organization markers in a lecture leads to the better comprehension of important points in the lecture.

The impact of contextualization markers (e.g., 'There are four stages of this culture shock', 'To sum up so far', and 'Let me repeat it') on the L2 listening comprehension of students has also been studied by Jung. Jung (2003b, 2006) investigated the effect of these markers on the L2 listening comprehension of 80 Korean learners of English through a qualitative analysis. The participants were divided into four treatment groups. Half of the participants were assigned to the marker group and the other half were assigned to the nonmarker group. The participants in the marker group were exposed to a lecture with contextualization markers embedded in it, whereas the participants of the nonmarker group listened to the same lecture with contextualization markers excluded from it. Half of the participants in the marker group were asked to perform summary tasks while the other half were supposed to perform recall tasks. The same was done for participants in the nonmarker group. On the whole, the results of qualitative and statistical analyses pointed to the facilitative role of contextualization markers in L2 listening comprehension.

The effect of metadiscourse on the learners' comprehension of lectures has been studied by Pérez and Macia (2002). 37 engineering university students participated in the study. The subjects were divided into two groups. One group received a scripted lecture containing metadiscourse and the other group was exposed to the same lecture without metadiscourse expressions. The subjects were asked to take notes of the lecture. The participants were also requested to answer a questionnaire which asked them to reflect on their comprehension of the lecture. Analysis of the notes of learners showed that the presence of metadiscourse helps only learners with a low level of English language proficiency. Results of the questionnaire indicated that the learners exposed to the lecture containing metadiscourse perceive themselves to have better comprehended the overall structure of the lecture.

In contrast to Jung (2003a, b; 2006) and Pérez and Macia (2002), Chaudron and Richards (1986) and Dunkel and Davis (1994, pp. 55–74) did not observe facilitative effects for discourse organization markers on L2 listening comprehension. In a study on the role of macro and micro markers in the learners' listening comprehension, Chaudron and Richards found beneficial effects for macro markers. This, however, was not true for micro markers. Pause fillers and expressions that signaled the relationship between different sentences (e.g., 'Well!', 'Okay!') did not have beneficial effects on the students' listening comprehension. This may be related to the difference between macro and micro markers. Contrary to macro markers, micro markers, as the name suggests, do not present the overall organization of the passage.

In another study on the impact of organization markers on the learners' listening comprehension, Dunkel and Davis (1994, pp. 55–74) found them not beneficial to the students' comprehension of lectures. Contrast between the findings of Dunkel and Davis and those of others may be related to the fact that Dunkel and Davis simply counted the ideas that the learners recalled as their assessment procedure.

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