Student Perceptions, Problems and Strategies in Second Language Lecture Comprehension

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Abstract

This paper adopts an ethnographic approach to the study of second language lecture comprehension. It studies a group of 30 1st year Hong Kong Chinese students listening to lectures in a B.A. TESL methods course.

Data was collected regarding the lecture comprehension experience of these students by means of questionnaires, diary studies, classroom observation, and in-depth interviews. The analysis of this data focuses on students’ perceptions of the lecture experience (attitude, self-rating of comprehension level, what students look for in a lecture, etc.), their problems (speed of delivery, terminology and concepts, concentration, etc.) and the strategies they use to try to overcome these problems (pre and post-lecture reading, peer or lecturer help, attempts to concentrate harder, note-taking, etc.).

As well as providing important information for the program in question, the results of this study, it is claimed, have wider implications for both lecturers to non-natives and ESL specialists preparing students to study through the medium of English.

The number of tertiary level students studying through the medium of English as a second language continues to increase worldwide. These students may be studying overseas, in English-speaking countries, or at home, in countries where English is a second language and is used as the medium of instruction. The lecture medium remains a major part of most university study (Benson, 1989). The ability to comprehend academic lectures is therefore an important part of the necessary proficiency of tertiary level students for whom English is a second language.

This paper reports on the findings of a study into the way university level students attending their first English medium lecture course generally perceived the experience, the problems they had and the strategies they employed for overcoming these problems. The research is based on the premise that the knowledge derived from this investigation will provide insights to support learning and teaching, as well as curriculum planning.
Approaches to Research on Second Language Lecture Comprehension

Various approaches have been adopted in investigating second language lecture comprehension, with a view to informing learning, teaching and curriculum planning.

One approach is a discourse analysis one. The aim here is to describe the structure of lecture discourse so as to provide ESL professionals with models on which to base ESL instructional materials. A number of studies of this type have attempted to adapt the Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) model of classroom discourse to lectures (Cooke, 1975; Montgomery, 1977; Murphy and Candlin, 1979; Coulthard and Montgomery, 1981). Another study, that of DeCarrico and Nattinger (1988), has stressed how lectures are structured around what are referred to as “lexical phrases” (prefabricated patterns with a discourse marking function) and that instructional materials should focus on these discourse structuring devices. A further discourse based study is that of Olsen and Huckin (1990), who have emphasized the “point-driven” nature of Engineering lectures (how these lectures are structured around a series of main points or ideas) and have argued that instruction should take this phenomenon into account.

Another approach is a psycholinguistic one, the aim here being to test out hypotheses concerning language processing in relation to second language lecture comprehension. One well known study of this type was conducted by Chaudron and Richards (1986) into the effect of discourse markers on the comprehension of lectures. Another study of this type is that of Griffiths (1990) into the effect of lecture delivery rate on comprehension.

A third approach to second language lecture comprehension research is what might be called a learner strategies approach. Here, data on the listening processes of effective and less effective listeners is elicited from experimental subjects by means of “think-aloud” or written “on-line” protocols. The results of learner strategy research can be used to train less effective listeners to use the strategies employed by the more effective listeners. Malley, Chamot and Kupper (1989) employed a think-aloud procedure to determine types of processing strategy and differences between strategies used by good and weak listeners in listening to academic language tasks. Rost (undated) used listener summaries of lectures to identify processes in effective and less effective listeners.

A final approach is an ethnographic one. Benson (1989) investigated the listening activities of one overseas student at a U.S. university over one course, examining his notebooks, together with interviews and recordings of the lectures. This procedure led to insights concerning the processes the subject was involved in relation to the subject matter and the teacher. For example, the subject was more concerned with integrating new information with knowledge he already had and relating to the teacher’s viewpoint than he was with acquiring new facts. The results of this research were used to refute the view of listening as an autonomous process in isolation from other knowledge and skills and to support an argument for preparatory listening programmes based on content subjects.
The Approach and Procedures Employed in this Study

As already mentioned, this study investigates the perceptions, problems and strategies of a group of listeners to lectures in a second language. As such, it has similar aims as the learner strategies approach described above, in that it investigates the processes used by effective listeners, with a view to encouraging the use of these strategies by the weaker listeners also.

However, there are two major limitations inherent in the learner strategies approach which the present study seeks to overcome. Both of these limitations relate to the in vitro procedure adopted in this approach. The first limitation is that the in vitro procedure cannot replicate an authentic lecture situation. This means that information can be obtained on only limited aspects of the lecture listening process, namely the cognitive processing of incoming linguistic data. More global information on listener behaviour in lectures, such as the way listeners relate to the lecturer, the way they relate to their peers, the way they use support materials, when and how they record information, etc. is outside the scope of this approach. The second limitation created by the in vitro procedure of the learner strategy approach is that lecture listening is treated as an autonomous activity, in isolation from background reading, note-taking, use of support materials such as hand-outs, etc. If listening is not autonomous (as Benson, 1989, argues convincingly), then there is a danger that data derived in vitro from autonomous listening tasks will not be a true reflection of the lecture listening process.

Given these limitations of the learner strategies approach, the present study is more ethnographic in nature, employing observation, questionnaires, diaries and interviews, based on an actual lecture course. Where the only ethnographic study on lectures reported above (Benson, 1989) focussed on one single subject, however, the present study takes a larger sample of subjects.

Subjects and Research Instruments

The subjects participating in the study were 30 Hong-Kong, Cantonese-speaking students (selected at random out of a class of 60) on a BA (TESL) course. The research focussed on a ten-week lecture course in the first term of the first year of the course on ESL teaching methods. The aim was to target subjects attending their first course of lectures in English.

Before the first lecture, subjects were asked to complete a questionnaire to provide background information on the amount and type of exposure they had previously had to English, their score on the Hong Kong Certificate in Education English listening paper, and their own evaluation of their overall listening ability in English. After the first lecture and again later in the course subjects rated their ability to comprehend lectures on a 9 point scale. (see Appendix) After each lecture, subjects rated themselves on a percentage scale for level of comprehension of that lecture. After each lecture subjects
also wrote a diary describing their perceptions of the lecture and their problems and strategies in comprehending it. On two occasions, once after 3 weeks and again after 8 weeks of the course, 8 of the 30 students, selected as representative of various levels of listening proficiency, were interviewed in depth about their experience in the lectures.

Results

Background of Subjects

Exposure to English

Hong Kong is a predominantly Cantonese speaking society, where English is little used in social intercourse. Subjects involved in the study would have had little exposure to English at home (Pennington, Balla, Detaramani Poon, and Tam, 1992). The 30 native Cantonese speaker students completing the initial questionnaire had gone through the Hong Kong secondary system where instruction is usually carried out by means of a mixed mode of English and Cantonese, English being the language of the texts and examinations, but Cantonese being frequently used in oral presentation and discussion of the material (Guthrie, 1984; Johnson, 1984; Lin, 1990). As one student remarked in his interview:

At school, classes were all in Cantonese. The name of the school is “Anglo”, but I can tell you nearly ninety percent of the teaching is conducted in Chinese.

Although most instruction in Hong Kong secondary schools is mixed mode, the majority of subjects reported having had exposure to a non-Cantonese speaking teacher (who therefore used English all the time) at some point in their school career. In addition, all subjects had completed at least seven years of ESL classes, which form a part of the Hong Kong curriculum. In spite of their exposure to English, subjects had not had experience of the formal monologue lecture mode of listening, prior to the study.

Listening proficiency

Scores on the listening component of the Hong Kong Certificate of Education (HKCEE) for the majority of students in the study was in the C (“satisfactory”) and D (“pass”) categories, although a few subjects scored A (“excellent”) or B (“good”). An average grade C on the HKCEE has been correlated with a score of 530-540 on the TOEFL test and an average grade D with a score of 498-503; a grade B has been correlated with a score of 550-560 (Hong Kong Department of Education, undated). Given that most U.S. universities require a TOEFL score of 550 as a demonstration of an applicant’s proficiency in English for university studies, most of the students in the present study, it would appear, were a little below the level normally required of the average overseas student in the U.S.
In addition to collecting this objective measure of subjects’ listening proficiency, subjects were also asked to self-rate their listening ability on a five point scale, glossed from “very weak”, through “weak”, “good”, “very good” to “excellent”. About three-quarters of the students rated themselves as “good” in listening, with the rest (with one exception, who rated himself as “very good”) categorizing themselves as “weak”.

**Students Perceptions of the Lecture Experience**

*Contrast with school-based learning experience*

Data on this topic come from the interview question, “How do the lectures differ from the lessons you had in school - English and content subjects?”. Subjects remarked upon the following features of the school lessons which differed from the lectures. Classes were mixed mode Cantonese and English; groups were smaller; teachers were not native-speakers of English; content was based solely on what was in the set texts; there was more interaction between teacher and students.

*Attitudes towards the lectures*

Students were about equally divided as to whether they enjoyed the lecture experience or not. In answer to the interview question, “Do you enjoy attending the lectures”, typical positive comments were:

S9 (interview): yes, I like to learn something which I haven’t learned before.
S10 (interview): very much, I can know some more about teaching.

A neutral comment was:

S4 (interview): when I concentrate on it I enjoy it

Negative comments were:

S19 (interview): honestly speaking, not actually
S22 (interview): frankly speaking I don’t

*Self-rating of comprehension level in lectures*

Students rated themselves quite highly in their ability to understand a lecture. As Table 1 shows, on the self-rating scale (see Appendix) administered after the first lecture, the majority of subjects rated themselves at point six or above, indicating that they had no real problems in understanding lectures; only 2 students rated themselves at point 5, indicating some problems in following a lecture; no students rated themselves below point 5. There was no significant change in self-rating, when the scale was administered again later in the course.
Table 1

Students’ general self-rating of listening to lectures on a 1-9 scale

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>2/1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No. of students</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although no significant improvement was noted on the self-rating scale just referred to, on the percentage self-rating measure of each individual lecture, subjects rated themselves as improving somewhat as the course progressed. The mean and standard deviations for self rating over the nine lectures are shown in Figure 1. As Figure 1 shows, the mean comprehension rating increased from 66% in lecture 1 to 75% in lecture 8, tailing off somewhat to 69% in lecture nine, the last lecture recorded, which was somewhat different in format. The mean ratings for lecture 4 and lecture 6, where there was a considerable increase in self rating, are worthy of comment. Lecture 4 was given by a different lecturer, the usual lecturer being absent. Many students commented in questionnaires and interviews that they found this lecturer more easily comprehensible because of his slower delivery rate. Lecture 6 followed a staff/student liaison meeting in which the lecturer received feedback and recommendations on his lecturing style. In interviews and questionnaires following this lecture students commented on noticing a change in lecturing style.

*Perceived purpose of the lectures*

Students had mixed views as to the purpose of the lectures. Of the students interviewed, in answer to the question, “What do you think the purpose of the lectures is?”, half felt the purpose to be to convey basic information:

- S9 (interview): to make more clear about the difficult contents of the book.
- S22 (interview): to give the important point.
- S4 (interview): to give us the information, this is the main purpose.

Others felt the lectures aimed to convey a broader picture:

- S10 (interview): give us a picture of approaches and theories of teaching.
- S15 (interview): the lectures give an overall framework rather than details of each method.
Fig. 1. Students’ self-rating of lectures 1-9.

One interviewee had no idea of the purpose of the lectures, answering the question with a simple “I don’t know” (S2l). Another answered the question quite literally with, “To teach us” (S3).

When asked the more specific question, later in the interview, “Which is more important for you, understanding the facts or understanding the opinions of the lecturer”, half the students felt the facts to be more important; some felt both facts and opinions to be important; only one student felt opinions to be more important than facts.

There was no appreciable change in students’ view of the purpose of the lectures over the course, as indicated in the post-course interviews. This difficulty in understanding the purpose of the lectures may relate to the fact, as reported by subjects, that the school lessons they were used to were based solely on the contents of the set text.

Relation to previous knowledge

Students fell into three groups in answering the question, “Has your personal experience or knowledge of the subject helped you in understanding the lecture and understanding what is important?”. First, there were those students who had previous formal knowledge of TESOL and who were able to relate the content of the lectures to this:

S19 (interview): Yes, definitely. If I have already learned it before it's easier.

Second there were those who were able to relate lecture content to previous teaching experience:

S10 (interview): I haven’t heard of those theories before, but in fact I find I have used some of them and when I read about them or hear about them in the lecture I can grasp the idea.
Third, there were those respondents who had no knowledge or experience of TESOL and who were not able to relate the content of the lectures to previous knowledge:

S9 (interview): No, I haven’t done the subject before.
S21 (interview): I haven’t any experience in teaching methods.
S4 (interview): I think I have no personal experience in this field.

Fourthly, one student, although having no previous knowledge or experience of TESOL, was perceptive enough to be able to relate the content of the lectures to his experience as a high school student:

S22 (interview): I will just think of my teachers, their way of teaching us.

Perceptions of lecturers strategies

In their diaries and interviews, students demonstrated an awareness of a number of strategies used by the lecturer which they saw as positive.

One group of strategies students remarked upon as being beneficial concerned the way the lecturer structured his discourse. These strategies were remarked upon under the following headings.

Overall clarity of presentation

S12 (diary): The materials were presented systematically.

Systematic presentation of main points:

S12 (diary): The main points were very systematically presented on the whole.

Summary

S14 (diary): Main points are summarized in the form of a table. It’s easier to understand.

Responding to specific questions:

S19 (diary): the lecturer is quite good to clarify some classmates’ problems.
S18 (diary): Becoming more understanding . . . having a question and answer session.
**Initiating interaction with the class:**

S9 (diary): The lecturer gives some questions for us to discuss. I think it is good for us because we can have a chance to think, not just absorb from lectures.

S12 (diary): A few minutes of discussion on practices were allowed. This not only enabled us to absorb the materials presented previously more effectively, but also enabled us to listen to the following lecture more attentively.

S18 (diary): ... becoming more understanding of two previous chapters as having a question and answer session.

**Repetition**

S15 (diary): He repeats everything he says.

S10 (diary): ... he repeated some important points, then I could follow quite well.

Other discourse strategies remarked upon by subjects as being beneficial were the provision of examples and the indication of what was important to remember.

A set of strategies perceived by students as even more beneficial than discourse structuring concerned the use of visual support of various types:

S2 (diary): the lecture was presented with more visual aids, such as tables and a video was shown so as the lecture could be followed more easily.

S6 (diary): diagram is clear. A clear picture can teach us more than a mess of words.

S10 (diary): he put down some key words on the board and used transparencies to illustrate ideas.

Particularly well received by students was the use of demonstrations by their peers:

S4 (diary): The demonstration of silent way makes us easy to understand the concept.

S13 (diary): With the demonstration of our classmates, I have a deep impression of the silent way now.

S21 (diary): Lecturer invited some students to demonstrate “the silent way”. The demonstration was funny and did a great help in illustrating the concept.

Many students noted the value of a break in the lecture when it was introduced in week six:
S4 (diary): Today it is marvellous because there is a break.
S14 (diary): The ten minute break is of great importance so as to retain attention in the second part of the lecture.
S13 (diary): We were delighted to have a break as it could lessen our tension, give us time to reorganize the content and question the points we were not sure.

The following diary entry illustrates the combined value of a break and student participation in improving the atmosphere of the class:

S21 (diary): The class atmosphere was highly improved in this lesson. Students were given a break. This was good for unlearning mood. Besides, many activities involved students’ participation. We got chance to take part in this lesson. It became more interesting than before.

Problems Encountered by Students

Three main problems were identified by students in the lectures: speed of delivery, new terminology and concepts, difficulties in concentrating, and problems related to physical environment.

Speed of Delivery

Many diary entries refer to the speed of delivery of the lectures as a problem and in seven of the eight interviews, the response to the question “Do you think the lecturer speaks too fast?”, was “yes”. In addition, many students cited speed of delivery, in answer to the question, “What are the main problems you have in listening?”. Reasons given for this difficulty with speed of delivery included unfamiliarity with listening to native speakers:

S21 (diary): In my secondary school, all the English teachers are Chinese, there was no chance for me to talk with foreigners.

the need to translate into Chinese:

S21 (interview): I have to translate his English into Chinese so it takes many time to catch his meaning.

and the need for time to process the information:

S10 (interview): If the lecturer explains something too fast - especially theories which are rather abstract - then I need to have some time to think about it.
New Vocabulary and Concepts

Another major problem for student comprehension was vocabulary:

S21 (interview): I am weak in listening because if there is a vocabulary I don’t understand then I miss many main points.
S9 (interview): (in answer to the question, “What are the main problems you have in listening?”) ... some difficult words and vocabulary, some terms...
S22 (diary): some vocabulary may not be understood.

In addition to new vocabulary, students also expressed difficulty with new terminology and concepts. The nature of the subject matter of the course necessitated the introduction of a heavy load of new concepts e.g. “suggestopedia”, “total physical response”, “community language learning”, “communicative approach”. Table 2, for example, shows the new concepts and potentially problematic vocabulary which occurred during a ten minute randomly selected segment of the lecture on suggestopedia.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>General lexical items and expressions</th>
<th>Content words and expressions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>eliciting</td>
<td>* Approach design</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>corpus</td>
<td>* Counselling learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>capacity</td>
<td>* Interactional theory</td>
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<tr>
<td>sift through</td>
<td>* Interactional view of language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>water it down</td>
<td>* Suggestopedia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>whole person</td>
<td>* Psychology of suggestion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>notion</td>
<td>* accelerated learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>counsellor</td>
<td>* ritual placebo system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chunks</td>
<td>* The Lozanov method</td>
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<tr>
<td>negotiation</td>
<td>* Infantilization</td>
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<tr>
<td>hypnosis</td>
<td>* Double-planedness</td>
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<td></td>
<td>* Intonation, rhythm and concert</td>
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<td></td>
<td>* pseudo-passiveness</td>
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<td></td>
<td>* Structural-situational language teaching</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>* Communicative language teaching</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The following diary extracts are typical of the sort of comments made in relation to the problem presented by new concepts.
S4 (diary): The concepts are difficult to understand.
S12 (diary): I am still unable to comprehend the whole lecture. This is because some terms he talked about are quite technical, abstract and new to me.

Failure to comprehend certain concepts could have the cumulative effect of a total breakdown in comprehension from that point on:

S2 (diary): The ideas are very difficult and I cannot concentrate because as I got lost in the first part of the lecture I could not follow the last part of the lecture.

In other cases the problems posed by new ideas could demotivate the student from even wanting to listen:

S3 (diary): The ideas are very difficult and I have no interest to listen to it at all!

Reasons attributed to the problem with new terms and concepts were the complexity of the subject:

S19 (interview): (in answer to the question “Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your experience of these lectures?”) The lecturer may have some difficulty in expressing a very long history of methods in language teaching, maybe he should work out what is necessary for language teachers, it’s too complicated and quite abstract.

and the fact that the subject was a new one for students and that they had limited background knowledge of the subject:

S3 (diary): It is a new subject to me so I find it very difficult to cope with.
S15 (interview): (in answer to the question “Would you say you have more background knowledge which can help you?”) What makes it difficult to learn is our weak foundation and we are not psychologically prepared for those abstract concepts.

Difficulties in Concentrating

A third area of difficulty for students was concentration:
S4 (diary): Because I did not concentrate too much I missed some points.
S19 (diary): I sometimes aware of myself in day-dreaming and I failed to catch up with the new teaching points.
Reasons given for difficulties in concentration were as follows:

**Difficulty in maintaining concentration over a long period**

S4 (diary): The first part is too long with no break, it makes me very difficult to concentrate in the two hour lesson.

**Lack of alternative stimulus to monologue:**

S19 (diary): It is hard to concentrate in the lesson with only one mode of stimulus i.e. lecturing.

**Distraction**

S4 (diary): Some classmates are always talking/chatting during the lecture. I am deeply disturbed by them so I cannot catch up with the lecturer sometimes.

**Reasons related to physical well-being**

S2 (diary): I understood the lecture not very well because I was sick and it was difficult to concentrate.
S2 (diary): I did not sleep well the night before so I cannot pay much attention in this lecture.

*Strategies Adopted by Students*

The diaries and interviews revealed a number of strategies that students used in overcoming their problems in comprehending the lectures.

**Reading**

In answer to the question, “How do you solve these (listening) problems?”, a number of students identified pre- and/or post-reading of the prescribed text as helpful. Pre- and post-reading was also referred to by many students in their diaries:

S2 (diary): I understood the lecture quite well because I did the reading before lecture.
S8 (diary): After I have read the chapter after the lecture I totally understand the lecture now.

In addition, observation by the researchers of students in the lectures revealed a widespread practice of referring to the textbook during the lecture.
Peer help

Responses to various interview questions referred to peer help. To the question “How do you solve these (listening) problems?”, for example, a number of students responded with answers such as, (S22) “Ask my neighbour”, (S21) “I will ask my classmates”. One diary entry indicated peer assistance was a systematic study strategy of that student:

S4 (diary): I will ask my classmates. It is my habit.

Another student noted using peer help to make up for lapses in concentration:

S7 (diary): I didn’t concentrate too much, I missed some points. But after asking my classmates, it’s then o.k.

Lecturer/tutor help

Only one of the students interviewed admitted to asking questions during the lectures. A reluctance to ask questions during the lectures was related by one student to the Chinese sensibility:

S15 (diary): It’s the Chinese style not to ask questions in public because they might be shy especially to speak in English in front of so many people.

Although students were reluctant to ask questions during a lecture, many students noted seeking help from their lecturer after the lecture, or from their tutor during the tutorials.

Lecturer/tutor help was given a lower priority than peer help, however:

S9 (diary): I will ask my classmate, if I still have problems I will ask the tutor in the tutorial.

Attempts to concentrate harder

Concentration and the value of concentration were something the students were very much aware of. Although concentration was a problem for many students, they nevertheless tried to remedy this problem by concentrating harder, as the following quotations indicate:

S12 (diary): I think the main strategy for listening to lectures in English is to be attentive.
S10 (diary): Sometimes I might get lost if I did not concentrate so much.
S22 (diary): try to listen harder ... because we ourselves have a problem
so we must try harder to listen.

S19 (interview): When the lecture is too fast for me I try to concentrate harder. I am aware of such kind of mental process, wandering or day-dreaming in the lesson. I try to catch it up.

Ironically, concentration was noted as being easier when understanding was taking place:

S4 (diary): I understand more so I concentrate more.

A high level of concentration was seen by one student as being fulfilling in itself:

S4 (diary): When I concentrate on it I enjoy it.

Marking the book and note-taking

Observation of the students during the lectures revealed little note-taking. What students did instead was to use highlighting pens to mark up the relevant sections in the textbook and to make jottings in the margin. These strategies were referred to in the diaries.

S22 (diary): I make some notes between the lines of the book and mark down this is the important area and we have to be aware of it.
S18 (diary): I underline in the book, especially when I cannot catch up in the lecture, so I can study it after.
S10 (diary): I write in the text book, I know where he is up to.

On the whole, while some students were aware of the potential value of note taking:

S1 (diary): I took down notes as usual because I guessed that if I read them afterwards I would understand.

for most, note-taking was difficult:

S21 (interview): (in answer to the question, “How would you solve these (listening) problems?”) Make notes and mark the main points in the chapter, but it’s very time-consuming.

if not impossible:

S21 (interview): (In answer to the question, “Do you take notes?”) No, because he’s speaking too fast. I can’t mark down anything.
For some students, note-taking was felt to be a distraction:

S15 (interview): (In answer to the question, “Do you take notes?”) I think active listening is more important than copying down things.

Summary of Results

Background of Subjects

1. In spite of considerable previous exposure to English while at school, subjects involved in this study had not had experience of the formal English lecture monologue.
2. Subjects’ average level of general listening proficiency is estimated to be a little below what would be required at University level in the U.S..
3. Most students, however, self-rated their general listening proficiency level as “good”.

Student Perceptions of the Lecture Experience

1. Subjects noted a number of contrasts between the lecture experience and the sort of exposure to English they were used to at school.
2. Attitudes towards the lecture experience were mixed, with some students enthusiastic about it and others more negative.
3. Subjects’ self-rating of lecture comprehension ability was relatively high, whilst their self-rating of level of comprehension of the individual lectures improved somewhat as the course progressed.
4. There was some evidence that differences in lecturing style affected students’ ability to understand.
5. Many of the subjects were confused as to the purpose of the lectures: to present basic facts, to put over the lecturer’s point of view, or a combination of both.
6. Some of the students were able to bring background knowledge to the lecture situation, whilst others were not.
7. Subjects were aware of a variety of strategies adopted by the lecturer which enhanced understanding.

Problems Encountered by Students

1. Speed of delivery.
2. New terminology and concepts.
3. Difficulties in concentrating.

Strategies Adopted by Students

1. Pre- and post-reading.
2. Peer help.
3. Lecturer/tutor help.
4. Efforts to concentrate harder.

Conclusion

An ethnographic approach such as the one adopted in this study yields results which are useful in terms of needs analysis for the specific course under study. As such this paper represents a case study of how this sort of on-going needs analysis can be carried out. The findings of this study, however, also have wider implications within the context of lecturing in English to speakers of other languages.

The study has revealed a broad, rich picture of the perceptions, problems and strategies of students struggling to get to grips with a new situation, that of listening to lectures in a second language. The key finding is that listening to a lecture monologue is an extremely difficult task, for which second language students may well be inadequately prepared.

The results of the study provide a number of lessons for those involved with students having to cope with lectures in a second language. For content lecturers some of these lessons might be as follows:

— modify the language of presentation and keep new terms amid concepts to a reasonable load for each lecture
— provide a glossary of the new terms and concepts for each lecture
— modify the speed of the lecture
— provide an outline or notes of the main points of the lecture
— reduce the lecture time or chunk the lecture into several sections and provide a break between each chunk
— provide more variety in presenting the lecture material,
— use those discourse strategies, visual aids, etc. which students referred to as positive in this study
— give overt explanations about the purpose of the lecture, indicate when the set text is being referred to and when the lecture is going outside the text, when basic facts are being presented and when personal opinions
— provide plenty of background knowledge and indicate to students how lecture content relates to their background knowledge
— encourage student participation
— get feedback from students on lecturing effectiveness

Although the lecturer is the main person responsible for presenting the information to the students, s/he can be assisted if there is some guidance in the course document about not only what should be in the course, but also how it should be taught. This study has lessons for course planners, therefore. When planning courses, study skills can be included along with content objectives. For example, the course document might include objectives such as:
by the end of this course of lectures the students should be able to do the following:

- take notes from a five minute piece of monologue
- highlight the main propositions from their notes
- write a summary from notes
- ask and respond to questions

In this way, content lecturers would have to consider how best they could assist the students in achieving these goals and in the process examine their own lecturing style more closely.

For ESL professionals the clear lesson of this study is that they have an important potential role in helping students attending lectures in English for the first time. This help can be in the form of pre-sessional training or as an adjunct to an on-going lecture course. If pre-sessional, then a strong case can be made for a content-based model, in which students will be able to develop their lecture listening skills in an authentic context. As noted in the introduction to this paper, and borne out by the results of the study, listening is not an autonomous activity, but is related to all sorts of other skills such as note-taking, interacting with the lecturer and with peers, relating information to background knowledge, etc.. A content-based language course, which replicated a real lecture course, would provide an appropriate situation in which to develop these integrated skills.

If an adjunct model was preferred to a pre-sessional one, then language teachers would be well qualified to provide an environment in which they could apply the sorts of lessons listed above for content lecturers, as well as being able to advise the content lecturers on how to apply these same lessons.

Finally, this study has lessons for learners. The investigation demonstrated that some students were using appropriate strategies in trying to comprehend the lectures. Learners should be encouraged to apply and develop these strategies further by means of some sort of learner strategy training (O’Malley, and Chamot, 1990).

In conclusion, we would like to suggest that there should be closer integration between the content of courses and language/study skills. In this way, students similar to those in this study would be able to cope with the academic system of education faster and better, and lecturers would benefit by examining their teaching style and integrating their content with their methodology to become more effective lecturers.

Note

1. We should like to acknowledge the cooperation of the anonymous lecturer and the students involved in this study.
References


Hong Kong Department of Education (undated) Comparability Study between TOEFL and CE English Language (Syll.B).


**Appendix**

*Self-Rating Listening Scale*

Name:...........................................
Student No:....................................

Using the scale below rate your ability to comprehend lectures in English. *Circle* one number only.

9 I understand everything. I am able to follow the lecture from beginning to end with no listening problems at all.

8 I understand almost everything. A few items of vocabulary confuse me, but I can usually guess their meaning.

7 I have no real problems in listening to lectures in English. Understand all the main points and most of the supporting details. There are usually only a few items of vocabulary or expressions I do not understand.

6 Although I understand most of the main points of a lecture in English, I occasionally get confused. I usually do not understand all the supporting details.

5 I am able to understand at least half of the main points and some of the supporting details of a lecture in English. There are usually many new words and expressions I do not understand. I also find it difficult to follow the lecturer’s speed and pronunciation.

4 I often get confused with a lecture in English. I am unable to identify most of the main points and supporting details. I usually only understand about 30% of the lecture.

3 I understand very little of a lecture in English. I cannot identify the main points or supporting details. The parts I do understand are usually not related to the lecture, e.g. greetings, reference to page numbers etc.

2/1 I do not understand a lecture given in English.

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