Lectures in a Second Language: Notes Towards a Cultural Grammar

John Flowerdew and Lindsay Miller

Abstract — This paper reports some of the findings of an ethnographic research project into second language lectures conducted at a university in Hong Kong. Six socio-cultural features of lectures where there is a discrepancy in student and lecturer perceptions are presented and discussed, as follows: (1) purposes of lectures; (2) roles of lecturers; (3) styles of lecturing; (4) simplification; (5) listener behaviour; (6) humour. A greater understanding on the part of lecturers and students of each others' perceptions on these issues, it is claimed, is likely to be of value in the preparation of these two groups for participation in second language lectures.

Introduction

The use of English as a world language continues to grow at a rapid pace. As part of this growth, English is increasingly being used as the medium of instruction at university level in countries where the first language is not English. Probably the most important learning medium at university level is the lecture. Waggoner [1984: 7, cited in Benson (1989: 426)] claims the lecture to have what he calls “paradigmatic status”. But while there is considerable literature on academic reading and writing (see e.g., Pugh & Ulijn 1984; Swales 1990, for review), relatively little research has been done on academic listening (see Flowerdew 1994, for overview). And within the research that has been done on academic listening, hardly any has been conducted in contexts where English is a second language (Arden-Close 1993; Flowerdew & Miller 1992; Jackson & Bilton 1994), most having been carried out in the US, or the UK, where non-native speakers of English study alongside their native-English-speaking peers in English as a first language context. This paper, which studies a second language lecture situation where native-speakers of English lecture to non-native, ethnic Chinese students, is a contribution to this somewhat neglected research area. In particular, this paper addresses some of the cultural questions attaching to lectures in a second language context, questions which have to date been hardly touched upon in the literature [although see Benson (1989) for ethnographic work focusing on overseas students in English as a first language context].

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Ethnographic Approach

One of the key principles of ethnographic research is the need to go beyond description to analysis, interpretation and explanation (Watson-Gegeo 1988). This paper presents an analysis, interpretation and explanation of certain aspects of the findings of an on-going ethnographic research into second language lectures which has been conducted at a university in Hong Kong.

Benson (1994), in an overview of the potential role of ethnography in lecture listening research, makes the point that for ESL students in lectures “...not only the language forms (vocabulary, syntax, etc.) but also the underlying cultural grammar and interpretive strategies may be initially unknown”. (emphasis added). When learning is thought of as a culture, Benson argues, it becomes clear that it has, amongst other things, “its own structures, contexts, rituals, universals, significant symbols, roles, status markers, patterns of behaviour, beliefs, values, assumptions, and attitudes... just like the larger entities we call cultures” (p. 181). Ethnographic research can play an important role in revealing this cultural dimension of lectures, a dimension which presents a challenge to all lecturers and students, but which is likely to be particularly problematic when lecturers and their audiences are from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

In line with these observations, this paper focuses on the underlying cultural grammar and interpretive strategies of the second language lecture experience, a dimension which until now has been relatively neglected, both in terms of research and pedagogy, but a dimension which is essential for both lecturers and students (and those concerned with the training of these two groups) to grapple with, if lectures in a second language are to achieve their goals.

The paper is organized under the following headings, each of which is derived from our analysis, interpretation and explanation of the data:

- purposes of lectures
- roles of lecturers
- styles of lecturing
- simplification
- listener behaviour
- humour

As the ethnographic data were collected and organized, these are the six most salient socio-cultural issues which emerged. These features of lectures in a second language — all of which have particular cross-cultural dimensions — need, it is argued, to be taken into account in the preparation of lecturers and students for participation in lectures in a second language.

Background of Lecturers and Students

Ten native-English-speaking lecturers (American, Australian, British, and Canadian), none of whom had more than a basic knowledge of Cantonese and none of whom had experience of learning in a second language, were involved in the research. Lecturers were selected to provide a representative cross-section of
TABLE 1
Background Information about the Lecturers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Group size</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Lecturing experience (yr)</th>
<th>Lecture experience to Chinese sts (yr)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LA</td>
<td>Building &amp; Construction</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>SL</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LB</td>
<td>Economics &amp; Finance</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LC</td>
<td>Business Management</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>1½</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Computer Science</td>
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<td>1½</td>
<td>1½</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LF</td>
<td>Electrical Engineering</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3½</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LG</td>
<td>Information Systems</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>SL</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LH</td>
<td>Marketing</td>
<td>240</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>1½</td>
<td>½</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LI</td>
<td>Public &amp; Social Administration</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LJ</td>
<td>Accountancy</td>
<td>163</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>3½</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Key: R = Reader, SL = Senior Lecturer, L = Lecturer.

native-English-speaking lecturers in the university, in terms of rank, experience (both overall and with Chinese students), gender, subject area and size of student group lectured to. Table 1 shows this background information about the lecturers.

The students of the lecturers involved in the study were Hong Kong L1 Cantonese speakers. They were at various stages of their university career, from first year undergraduate to taught Master's degree level. They would have gone through the Hong Kong secondary educational system where a mixed medium of instruction (English and Cantonese) is used, with the emphasis on English for reading and writing and Cantonese for teacher explication and student response (Johnson & Lee 1987). They would have been taught in a traditional way, with considerable emphasis on rote learning. Given this approach to teaching and learning of the Hong Kong secondary system, students would have had little experience of listening and interacting in English. As Pennington et al. (1992) have noted, in a study conducted at our research site, students have little or no exposure to English at home. The median English proficiency level of students on entering the university is between 450 and 530 equivalent on the TOEFL [grade E–C on the Hong Kong Certificate of Education English exam (Hogan & Chan 1993)]. These scores are somewhat below that required of foreign students by most U.S. universities, for which NAFSA (National Association of Foreign Student Affairs) recommends a minimum entry level of 550.

Data Collection

Our data were collected over a period of three years, in the following ways:

— questionnaires and at least two in-depth, reflexive interviews (Hammersley & Atkinson 1983) administered to the 10 lecturers involved in the study, at the beginning and the end of a lecture course.
frequent discussion, often on a daily basis, with three of the 10 lecturers over the full three-year period

questionnaires (several hundred), in-depth interviews (18), and focus groups (3) conducted with students of the selected lecturers

participant observation of 11 lectures by both researchers

reflective diaries kept by lecturers and students during their lecture courses

field notes arising from less formal discussion with and observation of lecturers and students (the 10 lecturers and their students referred to above, but also others)

recordings and transcriptions of 34 lectures

other artefacts of the lecture situation, such as textbooks, handouts, and student notes.

**Purposes of Lectures**

One area where we found there to be a strong contrast in the assumptions of Western lecturers and the Hong Kong ethnic Chinese students was in their basic attitudes to the purpose of lectures. When asked how important they felt the lecture medium to be in relation to other forms of instruction, such as tutorials, reading assignments, and laboratory practicals, lecturers and students were almost unanimous in regarding lectures as being the most important medium. As lecturer C put it, lectures are “the substance of the course”. And as lecturer A stated: “[lectures are] very important for focusing the material and directing the study”. When asked about the specific purpose of the lectures, however, lecturers and students were less unified in their opinions. While some lecturers stated that they just try to get over the basic facts, the majority talked about developing the students’ own judgment or thinking skills, or developing the students’ creativity in other ways. In contrast, the main feeling among students was that the function of lectures is to provide them with what is to be learned; students were less aware of any more sophisticated role for lectures. The following are typical student comments:

To give us the information, this is the main purpose [of lectures].

It is the lecturer’s duty to give a general idea of what is to be learned.

To provide information, give you some core material that you have to learn, basic and fundamental.

The discrepancy between the views of lecturers and students on the function of lectures may be related to a contrast in academic culture. As Jin and Cortazzi (1993) have stated, based on data collected from Chinese students and their British supervisors in the UK, British academic culture stresses independence and individuality on the part of students and values independent thinking and self-expression. Students are expected to critically evaluate arguments and it is not expected that there will always be one “right answer”. Students may disagree with their teachers and offer their own ideas.
The Chinese interpretation of academic culture, as investigated by Jin and Cortazzi (1993) and by us, however, is very different (see also Matalene 1985). For Chinese students, following the teachings of Confucius, the teacher is omniscient, a fount for whatever knowledge the student could possibly need (Bond 1986, 1991, 1996). Teacher and student are in what Scollon and Scollon (1991: 119) refer to as a "culturally established hierarchical relationship", or "jin" (literally translated into English as "benevolence" or "authoritative person"). The teacher, as a figure of authority, is not to be challenged, and it is not for the student to ask questions, or indeed answer questions — for, in answering, the student could be seen to be suggesting he/she has greater knowledge than the teacher. One reason why students value lectures more than a textbook, say, is that information from the lectures comes from the students' own lecturer, for whom they are likely to have great respect. The role of the Chinese student, therefore, is to memorize the knowledge which the lecturer presents.

It might be argued that failure on the part of students to see a higher purpose for lectures than the transmission of information is not particularly remarkable and that Western students might well have a similar opinion. Lecturers may have lofty ideals, but students may not aspire to such levels. However, lecturers in our study expressed the view that their Hong Kong students were particularly unresponsive as far as creative thinking was concerned, when compared to the students they had taught in the West. Lecturer D expressed his frustration with his Hong Kong students' attitude to learning, as follows:

LD: They [the students] sit there like goldfish with their mouths open waiting for me to pour information into them... They only experience a system which requires them to learn the 'right' answer and to regurgitate (it) — the concept of evaluation, analysis etc. appears to be totally lacking.

Roles of Lecturers

Although the primary purpose of effective lectures might be that of conveying information and developing thinking skills, and therefore the primary role of the lecturer would be to fulfil this purpose, our research has revealed, either through our interviews and discussions with lecturers and students or through our own direct observation, a variety of other lecturer roles — all of which have a particular cross-cultural dimension — as follows:

Prioritiser of Information

We noted during observation of lectures that a lot of lecturers indicated to their students which parts of the lecture notes or textbook were important and which parts were less important. Given the emphasis students place on the lecturer as an uncontested authority, this is a vital function from the students' point of view, and it was noted by many students as a positive feature of lecturing. However, if overplayed, this role is likely to further undermine the lecturer's desire to encourage creative and challenging thinking.
Mediator to the Local Situation

A particularly important role for lecturers in a cross-cultural setting such as our research site, given that most of the text-books are Western, is in relating their subject matter to the local Hong Kong context. As lecturer H commented:

LH: [referring to lecturing] It's an opportunity to provide local examples to place it in perspective that makes it easier for them to understand the concepts because the text-books are all American.

Although lecturers were, for the most part, aware of the need for local examples, one of the main complaints students had about their expatriate lecturers was their reliance on examples from their own countries, many of which students were unable to relate to.

Regulator of Linguistic and Intellectual Complexity

An important role for lecturers in any context is in adapting the level of the material to match the audience. In a second language context, where both the conceptual and the linguistic level of source material may be beyond the level of the students, this role becomes particularly important. The expatriate lecturers involved in this study attempted to adjust their discourse to match the level of their students in two main ways: by adjusting their language and by simplifying and adapting what was in the set text. Both students and lecturers complained that the language of the published set texts was often too difficult for the students. However, while lecturers attempted to make up for this by simplifying their delivery in lectures, many students still complained that the lectures were difficult for them.

Integrator of Learning Modes

Many of the lectures we observed and recorded involved the students in not only comprehending the spoken text of the lecturer, but at the same time integrating this text with a visual and/or written display on the overhead projector or in a handout. For students with limited language ability, of course, the triple burden of simultaneously listening, reading/deciphering a visual, and taking notes presents a particular problem. While lecturers may see visuals as an aid to comprehension, in requiring students to at the same time read a diagram, listen, and take notes, they may in fact be increasing the processing burden. This is one of the reasons why students commented that they were very keen to receive detailed lecture notes, a point we will discuss further later in this paper.

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1See King (1994) and McKnight (1994) on the difficulty for non-native students in the UK and Australia, respectively, of integrating visual and acoustic information in their lecture notes.
Facilitator of Cooperative Learning

During our observations of lectures and our interviews with students and lecturers we noted and recorded a great deal of peer help, much more than we would have expected in a Western context. As reported in their interviews and questionnaires, help from one’s class-mates was the strategy most used by students when having difficulties in comprehending during a lecture. This dependence on peer help, because of the constant hubbub it creates, was sometimes a cause for concern for lecturers. Most lecturers attributed such a noise level, which is higher than they were used to in the West, to poor student discipline and to the fact that students were not concentrating on the lecture. However, our observations of lectures suggested that students were for the most part concentrating, but that the noise was to a considerable degree due to their explaining things to each other. One lecturer explained how a misconception concerning noise level on the part of lecturers could come about:

LF: When I first started lecturing here I found that there was a lot of talking going on during the lecture. I thought that they were getting bored, but in fact they were confused and trying to get help from each other. As they wouldn’t ask questions I would speed up and that made everything worse.

Lecturers need to be aware, therefore, of the cooperation that goes on in lectures and that facilitating this cooperation can play a positive role in their lecturing.

Language Teacher

Experience from the immersion movement in Canada and from the content-based language instruction movement in North America in the US indicates that one of the potential benefits of instruction in a second language is that it offers students the opportunity of a rich environment within which their acquisition of the second language can develop (Cummins & Swain 1986). A considerable number of students, when asked about the respective merits of foreign versus local lecturers, stated that foreigners provided them with an opportunity to “practise their English”. In contrast to the students, the expatriate lecturers involved in this study, while aware of and sympathetic to their students’ language problems, did not see themselves as playing any part in developing the English of their students. None of lecturers we interviewed demonstrated any familiarity with language learning theory or of the role that they might play in providing modified input and an opportunity for language development. This situation is unfortunate, because an awareness on the part of lecturers of their potential role in language enhancement would be likely to lead them to consider in what ways they might optimise this potential. It might lead them to consider what might be an appropriate level of modification of their input, for example, or what opportunities there might be for increasing the amount of interaction and hence negotiation of meaning, in their lectures.
The predominant style of lecturing used by participants in this study was for lecturers to extemporize around a set of prepared notes or lecture outline. Although lecturers might periodically invite questions or comments, such invitations were only rarely taken up, with the result that lectures were largely monologue, with little or no participation from students. This monologue style was in spite of the fact that many of the lecturers claimed to have used a more participatory style when they had lectured in L1 contexts and that many of them stated that they would also like to use a more participatory style in Hong Kong:

LA: I think [a participatory and interactive style] is appropriate but I think they [the students] have been brought up on the former. I am trying to change [to the participatory style]. It's a constant battle because it's still something very new to them.

The problem with the participatory style, for lecturers, is that Hong Kong students are felt to be unresponsive:

LJ: In my last job [in an L1 context] the students used to chase me up and down the corridor asking questions. If they didn't understand something they would stand up in the class and ask questions... The students here cannot bring themselves to tell you face to face that there is a problem.

Perceptions such as these concerning the unresponsiveness of Hong Kong students are supported by our own observations as researchers and teachers and by our recordings of lectures. When a lecturer at our institution asks a question of the class as a whole, it is very unlikely that anyone will volunteer an answer. If an individual is nominated by the lecturer to answer a question — a sensible follow up strategy if there is no response to questions directed at the class as a whole — there may be an answer, but often this will be preceded by what, for a Westerner, is a long period of reflection or consultation by the student with his or her peers before the answer is forthcoming. If a lecturer invites the class to ask questions, again a response is very unlikely.

Hong Kong students' approach is determined, lecturers feel, by the students' educational background, where they have been used to a transmission model:

LC: ... They (Hong Kong students) have been conditioned to expecting a [non-participatory] delivery system. In one way it would be very difficult to break that down.

While lecturers ascribe their students' preferred learning style to their educational background, the reasons for such student expectations, we suspect, are even more pervasive, rooted in Confucianist teaching, with its emphasis on filial piety and reverence for one's ancestors, one's elders, and especially one's teachers, as referred to earlier (Bond 1986, 1991, 1996). Lecturer D summed up the situation well, as follows:
L.D. ... as a 'gweilo' [Westerner] that [students' reluctance to ask questions and participate more in lectures] may be their respect for seniority which they don't want to challenge. As a 'gweilo' I know of that, but don't know how to handle it.

When asked about the reasons for their reluctance to be more participatory in lectures, most students were unable, or unwilling, to be very specific. However, there did seem to be a consensus that such non-participatory behaviour is a part of the general make-up of Hong Kong students and due to general up-bringing and background. There did also seem to be a general awareness on the part of students that their lecturers would like them to participate more actively, but that students were unwilling to break the mould. As one student put it, “this is our way” (i.e., [as we as researchers interpret it] “this is how we have been brought up to behave”). Of those students who were more specific on this question of the lack of participation, some said that students who asked and answered questions would be seen as “showing off” and that they would be shunned by their class-mates. Others mentioned the fear of being shown up in front of their peers by their poor English. This fear of standing out from the crowd and public loss of face can again be related to important tenets of Confucianist teaching (Bond 1986, 1991, 1996).

Our interview and observation data show that, as a result of their students’ preferred learning style, the lecturers involved in this study had little choice but to revert, for the most part, to a non-participatory style. In the short-term and from the point of view of the individual lecturer, this would seem to be a sensible strategy. Lecturers with responsibility for one 15- or 30-hour lecture course do not have time to revolutionise study modes which are deeply embedded in the culture of their students. However, at the institutional or departmental level, this question of lecturing style needs to be addressed. As a number of lecturers commented, a reluctance on the part of students to be more participatory may be linked to a reluctance or inability to think creatively:

L.A: ... their inability to analyze and synthesize because they have always been told the answer before.
L.R: ... they ...try to learn what they need to learn to pass the test, very few of them think outside that framework.

Simplification

To say that effective communication depends on appropriate uses of simplification is perhaps a platitude. Not only do people engaged in politics, pedagogy and parenting routinely resort to simplification, most people do so when, as part of ordinary living, they seek the right means to ease the traffic of ideas across borders (Tickoo 1993: v).

As Tickoo suggests, simplification is a fundamental of human communication, one area where it is particularly important being education. Other scholars (e.g., Calderhead 1988; Brumfit 1993), have emphasised how simplification is one of the fundamental principles which underlie any teaching. In any
context, simplification is likely to have both a conceptual and a linguistic
dimension; but, in a second language context, there is likely to be a greater
awareness of the latter. Certainly lecturers in the present study were very much
aware of the linguistic problems of their students and of the need for linguis-
tic simplification in their lectures. However, they were less successful in
overcoming the problems.

One way in which lecturers reported trying to adjust their language was in
slowing down their speech (9 of the 10 lecturers interviewed reported using this
strategy). A second strategy lecturers claimed to adopt in simplifying their use
of language was avoiding complex or unusual words (eight of the 10 lecturers
claimed to modify their vocabulary use). A third way lecturers claimed to
modify their delivery linguistically was by making use of repetition. In answer
to the question “Do you repeat more than with native-speakers?” all lecturers
except one replied in the affirmative.

Modification of their delivery is by no means unproblematic. For one thing,
a modified, slower delivery requires a lot of effort, especially when one is
absorbed in one’s subject:

LE: I think delivery is probably the main problem. I think I have to speak more
slowly, more clearly... it requires quite a lot of effort.

LB: I think my vocabulary is too exotic and when I get a head of steam I forget
myself and use my full "powers" which doesn't help. I sometimes feel like a
racehorse in hobbles.

For another thing, lecturers may feel uncomfortable using simplified language:

LF: I sometimes speak in broken English, not all the time, but I feel that I'm not
grammatically correct. I try to get the idea across so use this choppy style.

Furthermore, simplification can lead to misunderstanding:

LJ: I try to simplify it, but this might also cause problems as they go to the text-
book and it seems quite complex. Because of their difficulty with language they
can't pull out of the book what they want as they get stuck on some little word
...and that will cause so many problems.

Lecturers' attempts to reduce their speech rate and a range of vocabulary
seem to be well-directed, as speed of delivery and vocabulary were the problems
most frequently identified by students as inhibiting their understanding, and
repetition was a strategy students noted as being beneficial for comprehension.²

²Higgins (1994) cites a range of surveys of L2 students conducted in various countries which provide evidence
that speech rate is perceived by non-native listeners as one of the most important factors in hindering their ability
to process listening material. [Of course, it could be that speed of delivery is an effect rather than a cause of diffi-
culty in comprehension i.e., non-native speakers have difficulty in understanding and as a result perceive speech
as fast, while in reality it may not be (Flowerdew 1994)]. Since the time of Lorge and West, at least, vocabulary
control has been an important objective of ESL course designers. Kelly (1991) claims vocabulary to be the main
problem for advanced listeners. See Chaudron (1988) for review of the role of repetition as a feature of modified
input.
Regarding the effectiveness of lecturers' simplification strategies, as stated, students did note the positive value of lecturers' use of repetition. Regarding speech rate, there are, unfortunately, to our knowledge, no published data on average speech rate of lectures to native speakers against which to compare the rate of the lecturers involved in our study. Our own impression, however, is that, in general, lecturers are not speaking noticeably slower than they would to native speakers. As a measure of this, as participant observers we found it difficult at times to keep up with lecturers when we tried taking notes ourselves. Regarding vocabulary, our impression is, again, is that there is little adjustment. When shown transcripts of their lectures, lecturers expressed surprise at the level of vocabulary complexity. As an illustration of the lexical complexity of the lecturers' discourse, Table 2 lists individual words and compound forms from a three-minute, randomly selected, segment of a lecture on housing which might be considered to be problematic to second language students.\footnote{None of the individual words listed here appears in either West's General Service List of the 2000 most frequently used words in English (West 1953) or in Nations' 2400 word list of academic vocabulary (Nation 1990). The high number of compounds listed in this table not only indicates a heavy usage of technical terms, but also suggests a complex level of linguistic processing which would be required in order for listeners to decode them.}

**TABLE 2**
Potentially Problematic Words and Compound Forms from Three Minutes of a Lecture on Public Housing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual words</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>administration</td>
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<td>definitive</td>
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<td>imperatives</td>
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<tr>
<td>intervention</td>
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<tr>
<td>laissez-faire</td>
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<td>non-interventionism</td>
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<tr>
<td>proactive</td>
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<td>profess</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Compound forms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>broader contexts</td>
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<tr>
<td>economic and social constraints</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hidden agenda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>paternalistic political reasons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>political constraints</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>political economy approach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>population dynamics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>public housing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>public-housing sector</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>public and social welfare policies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>social welfare</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>stand-back position</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>urban development policies</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[None of the individual words listed here appears in either West's General Service List of the 2000 most frequently used words in English (West 1953) or in Nations' 2400 word list of academic vocabulary (Nation 1990). The high number of compounds listed in this table not only indicates a heavy usage of technical terms, but also suggests a complex level of linguistic processing which would be required in order for listeners to decode them.\]
We mentioned earlier how learning from lectures involves a lot more than just understanding a spoken text. Because of students' relatively poor ability in listening and note-taking from spoken monologue, they tend to depend on the written dimension of lectures. At least this way they have a record of one dimension of the lecture which they can take away with them. As a result, lecturers find themselves under pressure to provide extensive written support in the form of overhead transparencies or handouts:

LA: Generally I give more handouts, use more overheads and as I am talking I will do more work on the board [than with native speakers].
LJ: With native speakers I would only use about 10 per cent of the overheads I use.

This provision of written material to support the oral medium of lectures can be viewed as a form of simplification. However, as with any simplification, it has its dangers. As one lecturer commented, the provision of too much written support can have a negative effect on study habits, encouraging rote learning:

LJ: ... they take copies of the overheads, or they demand copies of the overheads, and they go away and memorise them.

And it can slow things down:

LJ: At first the only way I found the students could understand what I was saying was to write nearly everything on the transparency, but now I am only giving note form as there is so much to cover in the course.

Similarly, while the majority of students, in their interviews, acknowledged the high value they attached to handouts and transparencies, some nevertheless were aware of the negative role too much written information could have in discouraging them from listening at all. One student reported to one of the researchers that he often "switched-off" during lectures. Because he had extensive notes from the lecturer, he did not need to follow the talk. If he didn't have these notes he said, he would have to concentrate more.

While the various simplification strategies play a useful role in making the content of lectures comprehensible to students, if they are to achieve their declared goal of greater participation, lecturers need to emphasise that a surface understanding of what is presented in the lecture is not always enough. It may be that lecturers, in providing lecture notes and simplifying in other ways, may be encouraging students to do what they do not really want them to do (to memorise, to concentrate on getting a "correct" version of the lecture down in writing), instead of getting them to accept the challenge of really working out the lecturer's approach to the content.

**Listener Behaviour**

The following extract from an economics lecture shows the difficulty experienced by one lecturer in gaining the attention of his class:
Okay / let's get started / remember / er / last time / a long time ago / er / before the new year / I stressed to you / ah / how dramatic the change had been / [long pause as lecturer waits for attention] / how dramatic the change had been in our region / ...[long pause as lecturer waits for attention] / okay thanks / ok / so that's set the stage for us / [lecturer continues, but there is much hubbub] / last time I told you how hard it is to lecture / some people are talking so busily they don't know that I've stopped lecturing and that I'm talking about them / mmmmm [into the microphone] / it's very hard to lecture and it's hard for you to listen if there is a lot of talk so please settle down / ok? / thanks / so have a look ....

The extract is not unrepresentative of the difficulty of the lecturers in our study have in gaining the attention of some of their audiences. In one lecture half an hour went by before the lecturer had his students' full attention and this only when students needed to copy down an overhead transparency which did not appear in their handout. There are many references in lecturers' interviews to problems with inattentiveness on the part of students:

LG: They ask each other, their neighbours, there is more talking in lectures than I am used to. I like to kid myself that it is them asking about the course which is probably true 50% of the time.

However, such comments are in strong contrast to what the literature (in addition to strong anecdotal evidence) would lead us to believe about the motivation, assiduity and respect for the role of the teacher of ethnic Chinese, as mentioned earlier in this paper.

It is perhaps surprising that the lecturers in the present study, in spite of their negative evaluation of their students' behaviour in lectures, should present a positive view of their students when asked to comment on their strengths and abilities. The following are representative of the sorts of comments made on the overall strengths of their students:

LB: Seriousness and desire to learn.
LD: Dedication and ability to work hard.

Our own experience conforms with that of the lecturers in seeing the students we observed and interviewed as essentially keen to learn and hard-working. Such a view is also supported by the undoubted academic success of students, as measured by examinations and course-work assignments (which are fairly rigorously monitored by internationally appointed external examiners).

How are we to account for this apparent contradiction of, on the one hand, the noisy behaviour of students in lectures and, on the other hand, the students' reputation for assiduity and good behaviour? One possible interpretation is that those students who are demonstrating this poor behaviour, because of language difficulties, are benefitting so little from the lectures that they engage in conversation through boredom. An alternative possible interpretation is that students, coming from a much more regimented background at secondary school, are not able to adapt to the more permissive attitude to classroom discipline of the expatriate lecturers. A further alternative possible explanation, and one we have
mentioned earlier in this paper, is that those students who are talking are not being inattentive, but are in fact helping each other in the mother tongue. It is likely that there is some truth in all of these possible reasons. Students, indeed, have expressed all three to us, when asked to account for the noisy behaviour of their peers. This is clearly one area where more research is needed. But it highlights the complexity of evaluating listener behaviour when a second language dimension is involved and the need for some sort of lecturer and student cross-cultural awareness-raising.

Humour

In our interviews with lecturers, there were many references to their inability to use humour as they would with native speaker audiences:

LA: Jokes I have dispensed with a long time ago because they don't work unless they are absolutely obvious.
LI: At first, I would try to lighten up lectures but I realised there are significant difficulties in doing so, jokes aren't understood.

Although lecturers claimed to reduce their use of humour with their non-native audiences, in the lectures we observed there were many instances of attempts at humour, but these were often unsuccessful or only partially successful. The following are some examples:

LI: (lecturing on housing management in Hong Kong, where buildings are mostly made of concrete) Managing the bricks and mortar — or concrete, bricks and mortar don't make sense here.

The lecturer laughed at this but none of the audience did.

LB: (at the beginning of the lecture the lecturer explained a small change to the lecture notes) You'll probably say he keeps changing the notes so we'd better go to the lecture.

Again the lecturer smiled, but none of his audience laughed.

When asked in their interviews, students did not report any problems with humour. This is quite understandable, of course, because a joke is only a joke if someone finds it funny. If the students are not laughing then they do not perceive that a joke is being made and so they cannot have a problem with humour.4

But does the fact that students are not picking up on humour matter that much in the context of lecture understanding? The purpose of lectures, as lecturers and students interviewed in this study are agreed, is to convey information and sometimes to develop thinking skills, not to entertain. In addition, it may be that the students' educational background, with its emphasis on the dignity

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4The situation is different where non-native students are mixed in with natives, as they are in the US, UK, Australia, etc. John Swales (personal communication) quoted a graduate student of his in the US who said to him, "I understand everything in class except when everybody laughs — then I am an alien again".
surrounding teachers, means that students do not expect their lecturers to be light-hearted and humorous. Even if students recognized humour, it may be that they would not feel it to be appropriate. Furthermore, the insertion of jokes and humorous asides may be a distraction from the main message of the lecture which acts as an impediment to understanding of key information.

On the other hand, there are reasons why the impairment of lecturers’ ability to make use of humour may be prejudicial to their overall effectiveness. First, not being able to use humour imposes a restricted form of communication and prevents the expression of a lecturer’s personality. The ability to lighten up an lengthy monologue (necessarily a monologue, because, as we have seen, a more interactive style is problematic with Hong Kong students) with a few light-hearted comments seems to be impaired in the second language lecture situation we observed. Absence of humour, therefore, may result in lecturers being perceived as remote and unapproachable, and may lead to students feeling uncomfortable with their lecturers and unwilling to ask questions or interrupt. Second, the result of humour — laughter — functions as a release of tension. An absence of laughter in the lecture theatre, then, may result in a heightening of tension, and such tension is likely to exacerbate the difficulties many students reported experiencing in concentrating.

Implications of the Study

This paper has analysed a number of features which characterise the behaviour of one group of lecturers and students and some of the problems they have in the particular cultural setting that is the second language lecture. The context of our research is Hong Kong, but comparable cultural settings exist everywhere that lectures are presented in English to students whose first language is not English, and we predict that similar problems (always allowing for cross-cultural variation) are encountered in these other settings also. We therefore believe that our findings may be of value to others concerned with lectures presented by native English-speakers in countries whose first language is not English. Our findings are likely to be of value also to those involved with second language lectures in first language contexts, where overseas students study with native-speakers of English. In such contexts the cross-cultural problems may be less evident, because the non-native students are interspersed with the natives, and more complex, because students from many different cultures may be involved.

In the introduction to this paper we suggested that our research was based on the premise that the knowledge derived from our investigation would provide insights to support learning and teaching. The findings of our study, we would claim, have implications for both lecturer training and student preparation for lecture listening. Watson-Gegeo (1988: 586) makes the following point about ethnography in ESL research:

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Ethnographic research can document and analyze what it takes to establish good relationships between teachers and students in the context of particular cultural or school settings, so that this information is available for teacher training.
In the following paragraphs we make some concrete recommendations regarding the training of lecturers and students, based on the results of our study.

**Purposes of Lectures**

In order to overcome the problem of a clash between the Western lecturers' and the ethnic Chinese conception of the purpose of lectures, both lecturers and students may receive cross-cultural training in this area. Lecturers may be trained to provide explicit statements of what they hope to achieve in their lecturing — assimilation of key facts and concepts, thinking skills, creativity, etc., and how they will go about achieving these goals. Students, on the other hand, may be made aware of different conceptions of the nature of acquiring knowledge and what their lecturers' expectations are.

**Roles of Lecturers**

The emphasis here should be on lecturer rather than student training. Lecturers need to be made aware of the potential roles they may have to play in lecturing and how these roles may differ from lecturing in the first language context. In particular, lecturers should be made aware of some of the linguistic problems their students may encounter and how they can adjust their delivery to help them.

**Lecturing Styles**

Again, cross-cultural training is important, lecturers need to be prepared for students' reluctance to participate and possible ways of breaking this reluctance down need to be suggested [nominating individual students, instead of trying to elicit from the group as a whole is one way of doing this; having students discuss in groups and then report back to the class is another (less threatening) way]; students, on the other hand, may be made aware of the different lecturing styles and of the various roles that students may play in lectures.

**Simplification**

Lecturers can be given training in analysing their speech rate and in how to slow it down if necessary; analysis of transcripts of their lectures and listing of potentially problematic lexis may make lecturers aware of the need to be more careful in their choice of vocabulary. They can be alerted to the value students attach to repetition. With respect to the use of handouts, while lecturers can be appraised of the value students attach to these notes, they can also be warned of the danger for the students in developing too great a dependency on the written mode. If lecturers want to reduce the number of handouts, it can be suggested to them that they explain to students their reasons for taking such action. If students are to become less dependent on handouts and to develop
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their comprehension and note-taking skills, then training in note-taking should be given.

Listener Behaviour

Lecturers need to be told that background noise may not necessarily be an indication of lack of attention, but due to legitimate peer assistance, language problems, or cross-cultural variation in tolerance of noise level (bearing in mind the need to alert students to the importance of complying with certain norms set by the lecturer). Students' concentration can be held for longer by the introduction of short breaks, group and pair activities, short quizzes, and the use of plenty of audio-visual materials. In pre-sessional courses students may develop questioning skills that will allow them to seek clarification from the lecturer.

Humour

It needs to be accepted by lecturers and students that there is likely to be cross-cultural misunderstanding as far as humour is concerned and that, as a result, lecturers, on the one hand, may be perceived by their students as lacking in human warmth, and students, on the other hand, may be perceived by their lecturers as unresponsive. Students, who may not be accustomed to their teachers being humorous, need to be made aware that lecturers are likely to use humour as an integral part of their lecturing style and that a lot of it may be above their heads. It is doubtful that much more than such general consciousness-raising will be of benefit as far as humour is concerned. Training in the understanding of specific instances of humour is not likely to be productive, given the complex linguistic and cultural issues involved. As far as lecturers are concerned, they need to consider whether their use of humour may not be a distraction and hindrance from the main purpose of their lecturing, which is to convey important information and encourage thinking skills. At the same time, they need to bear in mind the negative effect that effacement of their individual personality may have in creating rapport, if they refrain from using humour.

All of the above recommendations could be carried out in training workshops for lecturers and in pre-sessional courses for students. Ideally, we would recommend that this training be conducted within a content-based language teaching framework. Content-based programmes offer an authentic context within which to develop the cross-cultural skills we are advocating. In traditional courses, lecturers and students are only likely to learn about the cross-cultural dimension of lectures in a second language. Only by experiencing (in miniature) second language lectures will lecturers and students be able to fully develop the necessary skills for successful participation later in the real thing.

We realise that it is rare enough for university lecturers to be trained in lecturing of any sort, let alone in the second language context, so we realise that our call for remedial action directed towards lecturers is ambitious. However, even where a full scale training programme might not be possible,
the recommendations we make might easily be fitted into a few workshop sessions; we feel the effort would be worthwhile. Concerning the students, we would point out that the socio-cultural dimension we have focused on in this paper is sadly missing from most EAP course books. This is a situation which could easily be remedied to good effect.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we would like to reiterate the one general claim that we feel this study allows us to make. This is that an ethnographic approach to lectures in a second language such as the one adopted here reveals that preparation for lectures in a second language should not be concerned simply with training in the decoding of an acoustic signal, but as preparation for entering into, in the words of Benson, cited in our introduction, a whole new “culture of learning”. Goffman (1981) noted the ambiguity of the term lecture: sometimes the term refers to a spoken text, sometimes it refers to the social event within which its delivery occurs. The point we want to make is that research and pedagogy directed towards second language lecture comprehension should conceive of lectures as social events, not just spoken texts. The data we have provided in this paper is a start in providing ways of interpreting such events from the cross-cultural perspective, or as we prefer it in our title, the study provides a preliminary set of notes towards the creation of a cultural grammar.

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