

9 THE EFFECT OF DISCOURSE MARKERS ON SECOND LANGUAGE ACADEMIC LISTENING COMPREHENSION:

An Investigation of Sri Lankan University Students Listening to English-Medium Lectures

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1. Background and Context

The spread of English as the international language and *lingua franca* of the academic world has been followed by large numbers of people studying at university level through the medium of English as a foreign or a second language. This happens whether one is studying in one's own country as well as if one travels to a country where English is spoken as a first language. A major part of university study, is the lecture. Therefore, listening to lectures in English is an experience that almost all students the world over would face, either at undergraduate or post graduate level. Lecturing is a widely accepted practice in Sri Lankan institutions of higher learning, as well as throughout the world. Lectures have traditionally been the main mode of teaching in higher education.

In Sri Lanka, although post-independence nationalism inspired a Sinhala-only Act of Parliament in the late fifties, and Sinhalese and Tamil have been listed as official languages in the Constitution since the early sixties, and have been the only mediums of instruction in schools, English has remained the *de facto* official language of the country, gaining importance in the business and academic sectors of the country. Therefore, English is often used as a medium of instruction at university level, especially in the Faculties of Science and Technology, Engineering, Medicine, and Business studies. Not only do students have to sometimes listen to lectures in the English, a large proportion of the text books and reference material found in university libraries too, are in English, as is information in scholarly journals and on the Internet. Further, at university, there is a sudden awareness among students, that the ability to communicate in English is likely to enhance their employability and assist them in their studies. However, having studied throughout their school years in the mother tongue, and having learnt English only as a subject, often with a tremendous lack of motivation, this sudden transition to English in their academic careers often turns out to be difficult and problematic. The situation in Sri Lanka, is one which has been described by Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998) thus:

...the school system mostly uses the national language to teach all subjects. Thus students have to **make the adjustments from studying all subjects in their national language at school level to studying subjects such as science...in English at tertiary level** (emphasis added).

As Jordan (1997) affirms, there are many students around the world, whose mother tongue is not English, "who do not possess all the study skills needed for effective study through the medium of English". Thus, lectures in further and higher education may pose severe problems for students who have to listen to the lecture in a language, which is not their native language. Although most of their problems derive from linguistic discorsal or cultural sources, at least part of the difficulty is the nature of the lecture format itself. Unlike face to face communication [i.e. conversation] where the rate of

delivery is governed by conversational rules which encourage comprehension, a lecture is unique in that it consists of a steady flow of information delivered at a rate which may be only marginally influenced by a sensitivity to the problems faced by the speaker's audience. Further, within the lecture's formal context, no student feels at liberty to stop the speaker to ask for clarification (Bilbow, 1989:85). This would be especially relevant to the context of a typically Sri Lankan classroom, where lecturers are accorded tremendous "respect" and are not likely to be interrupted while speaking.

Thus, many English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses have been set up at all Sri Lankan universities as a means of addressing this issue.

However, the EAP courses currently conducted in universities in Sri Lanka focus mainly on reading skills and writing skills. Reading skills are of considerable consequence in higher education settings because they are needed for the purposes of understanding important text- books, reference material and electronic information. Writing skills are needed to write academic essays, term papers and dissertations accurately, and in an acceptable 'academic style'. However, little attention has been given to the skills needed for listening to lectures in the English medium and to the necessity to train students to listen in a second language. Perhaps, this neglect of listening skills in an academic context, reflect the practice in general English language teaching situations, where listening is still an underrated skill.

2. Rationale

The growing demand for and existence of EAP/ESP courses has led to the need for research into the processes underlying academic performance in a second language context such as Sri Lanka. Such research could provide input to teacher training as well as to the development of appropriate curriculum and instructional materials. The literature on English for Academic Purposes related to listening comprehension, however, has concentrated on the analysis of the various strategies for listening and for note-taking considered to be needed by the non-native speaker who has to be able to follow lectures or seminars in English (Chaudron, Loschky and Cook, 1994). However, research into lecture discourse can provide information of relevance which can indicate to teachers and course designers what linguistic and discorsal features learners need to be familiar with in order to understand a lecture and what, therefore should be incorporated into ESL courses. Further, no research related to academic listening has been conducted in relation to ESL learners in the Sri Lankan context, or in relation to learners whose first language is Sinhalese.

Although for the majority of students engaged in open and distance learning, such as students at the Open University of Sri Lanka, who are subjects participating in this study, a full series of lectures is unlikely to be part of the teaching, there are certainly some face-to-face sessions in the form of lectures, intended to convey new information, provide support with printed course material and to consolidate difficult aspects of a course.

3. The Study

In communicative interactions with non-native speakers, native speakers or near-native speakers of English often adjust or modify their speech in their attempt to make it more comprehensible to the second-language listener. This is known as speech modification. Likewise, subject lecturers who deliver English-medium lectures to non-native speaker students sometimes modify their lectures in order to facilitate comprehension. There are

two ways to help non-native speakers understand lectures in a second language. One is to improve their knowledge and skills in the target language until the comprehension process is no longer a problem. The other is somehow to modify the form of the lectures to vary the input so as to make them easier to comprehend.

The primary focus of this study is on a form of modified input - discourse markers. It investigates the effect of discourse micro and macro markers on the lecture comprehension of Sri Lankan ESL undergraduates. The comprehension of a six-minute audiotaped lecture, by 70 students at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, OUSL, was tested. The subjects, who were divided into two proficiency levels by a standard university grading test, follow the BMS degree course conducted by the Department of Management Studies.

4. Research questions

1. Which lecture will subjects comprehend better - the version including only micro-markers or the version with both micro and macro markers?
2. What is the relationship between the comprehension of a lecture modified with discourse markers and proficiency level?
3. What is the relationship between the inclusion or exclusion of discourse markers and post-listening task type?

Comprehension was measured with post-listening multiple choice, True/False and summary writing tasks. The ANOVA approach was used to test differences between open and closed tasks as well as the differences between closed and open tasks in relation to version of lecture listened to and to language proficiency level. Independent sample t tests were carried out to compare the performance between the two versions of the lecture in relation to language proficiency.

5. Findings & Conclusions

The study's main findings indicate that the performance of subjects (at both levels of proficiency) listening to the lecture which combined micro and macro markers, is significantly better than that of subjects who listened to the lecture with only micro markers. However, students with a lower level of proficiency appear to benefit more from the inclusion of both micro and macro markers than the subjects with a higher proficiency in English. Further, students from both proficiency groups, who listened to the lecture with both types of discourse markers, performed significantly better on the task of summarising the lecture information

Also important was the finding that *students with a lower language proficiency demonstrated greater understanding of the lecture information than students with a higher language proficiency, because of the presence of both types of discourse markers in the lecture*. Improving students' language proficiency alone, therefore, will not suffice to overcome difficulties with L2 lecture comprehension. More attention may have to be paid by lecturers, to discourse organisation of oral texts and the devices that signal that organisation. While it is acknowledged that limitations related to sample size and task characteristics may have had an effect on such an outcome, this finding remains an interesting and provocative one, worthy of further research.