

## Academic Listening: What Non-ESL Lecturers Should Know

*Tengku Intan Suzila Tengku Sharif  
Mohd Yusri Mohamad Noor  
Academy of Language Studies  
Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Malaysia  
Email: intansuzila@pahang.uitm.edu.my  
Email: mohdyusri@pahang.uitm.edu.my*

### ABSTRACT

*This paper attempts to assist content-based/non-ESL lecturers (i.e. lecturers who teach Science & Technology subjects, etc. in English) of ESL environment, to make their lectures more exciting and productive for students' comprehension. Differences of first and second language academic listening processes will be put forward as a discussion to lead to an understanding of academic listening comprehension in an ESL environment for the knowledge of non-ESL lecturers. Functional pedagogical implication is set forth as a tool to guide non-ESL lecturers in their daily task.*

**Keywords:** *academic listening, listening comprehension.*

### Introduction

Rivers (1981) noted that in a normal day's course, listening is used nearly twice as much as speaking and four to five times as much as reading and writing. Therefore, lectures in a second language makes it even more dreadful and challenging.

Ahmad Saat (2003) highlighted that the results of three physics courses taken by Diploma in Science students in UiTM Pahang were negatively affected when English lectures were first introduced. Based on the examination results, assumptions were made that the newly introduced medium of instruction was at fault i.e. students lack the language competency to fully comprehend the lessons and the lecturers too need to enhance their competency in the language of instruction.

The listening processes in the first language (L1) and in the second language (L2) are obviously different, where listening in L2 will impose more problems of understanding the targeted language functions, cultural notation differences, etc. The existence of different sound system is also a problem where sounds in L2 cannot be processed by learners if it is non-existent in L1, unless acquired. For example, the two [th] sound in 'thin' and 'though' are non-existent in Bahasa Melayu. It is rather impossible to produce sounds that we do not hear. However, a second language learner faces difficulty not only in sound distribution of L2 but lectures in L2 as a whole. Thus, these differences need to be highlighted in order to pursue a higher level of listening, which is academic listening.

## **Learning to Listen**

Flowerdew (1994:10) stated that "a listening text exist in time, it is ephemeral and must be perceived as it is uttered". Therefore, real-time processing and phonological & lexico-grammatical features (see Rost 1994; Lund 1991; Buck 1991, 1992) must be captured as the speaker speaks. Evidence of facial expression, voice tone, and other physical gestures are among other elements that contribute to listening comprehension.

Learning to listen in second or foreign language is not an easy task. Listeners have to offer full concentration of the mind to decode and process input so that conversation and comprehension may exist. In our local scenario, students sometimes seem to be translating every word in their L2 lectures to their L1 in their mind as the listening process takes place. A poor learner may do this at a slower rate compared to a successful learner. The existence of this electronic translator in their mind (if it is neurologically true) or their act of compensating their inability is somewhat an amazement, but to what extend it is functional and practical is questionable. Nevertheless, failure in preparing students' schemata on the understanding of culture etiquettes, targeted issues of topic discussion or the language pragmatics may end any listening comprehension attempts in disappointment.

## **Listening Process**

Once thought to be a passive process, listening actually requires a lot of complex actions to select and interpret the information (Richards 1983;

Rubin 1995). It is also a demanding process due to factors that characterize the listener, the speaker and the content of the message (Brown & Yule 1983). Thus, a listening process can be concluded as a process that requires receiving followed by converting spoken inputs into meanings of comprehension.

An act of listening can be by intention, i.e. if a listener is curious to know, as in the act of eavesdropping. Listening process can also be put forward by belief, i.e. if a listener hears an information and it is not against his/her beliefs, then the listening process shall resume but stop if otherwise. Thus, choice plays an important element in a listening process. A listener may listen for gist or specific information but he/she can also choose to infer (Helgessen 2000) and some may perceive the sound they hear as mere noises. Table 1 highlights the differences in listening process, which is determined by needs and occurrences.

Table 1: Two types of Listening Process.

Transactional Listening	Interactive Listening
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Listening for comprehension and understanding;</li><li>• No focus on intervening or interacting to clarify the meaning or giving feedback is involved. For example listening to the news, lectures, etc.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Listening for two ways communication.</li><li>• Much more important than transactional listening.</li><li>• Holistic approach involving requesting clarification and giving responses.</li></ul>

While interactive listening process takes place everyday, transactional listening skill needs to be built, as it demands higher level of concentration, willingness and interest to achieve comprehension. Transactional listening skills, which takes place in academic lecture, is essential as it ensures students' success in the whole education process.

### **Understanding the Scenario of Local L2 Classes**

This mini research was conducted via observation of video recordings of five 45-minute sessions of teachers, in their practical training, handling their primary school children at a selected primary school in Seri Kembangan, Selangor. The subjects are 3 Malay teachers teaching moral values through storybook reading; and a Malay and a Chinese teacher assisting students with product description practices, in a class of approximately 25 young students. The video recordings were transcribed

and a list of behavioural conducts was noted down. Findings related to this issue are as follows:

Table 2: Findings of General Observation of L2 Classes

Subjects/ Teachers	Good lecturing qualities	Lecturing qualities that can be improved	Overall impression
Malay 1	1. Encourages the students to listen to what she is saying throughout the session.	1. Lectures/ instructions were given in a mumbling manner. 2. No actual comprehension can be achieved.	1. Fails to elicit real interest among the students to listen to her. 2. Pure monologue.
Malay 2	1. Good voice projection. 2. Uses discourse markers to indicate topical segmentation.	1. Talk to the board mostly. 2. Task sheets given simultaneously as the instructions. 3. Gives too many instructions with too many pauses to the students.	1. Unmanaged pauses in lectures may create unrest and uncertainty in students' attention span and listening process.
Malay 3	1. Schemata preparation is well carried out. 2. Clear instructions were given with clear pronunciation. 3. Manage to ensure every student maintain listening through her loud voice projection.	1. Response management needs to be improved. 2. Uses bombastic words	1. Appropriate voice projection is vital in attention getting which leads to listening process. 2. Choice of words in instructions should depend on students' level of proficiency
Malay 4	1. Clear instructions were given. 2. Instruction reinforcement was often made. 3. Offers re-explanation of jargons.	1. Good voice projection but sometimes has to scream to gain attention. 2. Tend to walk around while speaking which disturbs the sound projection to reach students who are behind her when she walks forward.	1. Listening process takes place continuously as the students maintain class attention. 2. Progressive instruction and explanation is vital in L2.
Chinese 5	1. Clear instructions were given.	1. Mispronounced few words, which created minor confusion. 2. Gets students' attention through small threats.	1. Good class instruction and management and clear pronunciation are important.

The overall impressions of these subjects were made possible through discussion with the supervising lecturer of this project. Each teacher offers a different set of lecturing style and, thus, gaining different response from their students. A relation between lecturing styles and students' comprehension, however, need to be scientifically proven before any conclusion is made. In this observation, some generalization can be made that, clear correct pronunciation and appropriate voice projection play an important role in attention getting and maintaining. Listening process too can be encouraged by well-managed pauses indicated by discourse markers. Although lecturers may feel that their voice projection is at an appropriate volume, poor monologue lectures without good management of voice projection, pauses and proper multi-tone lecture delivery, will still result in lost of interest and lead to low comprehension level by the students.

## **Academic Listening**

Different subject matter of lecturing requires different set of lecturing approach. Olsen and Huckin (1990) found that engineering lectures have to be "point-driven" which means the lectures have to be well-framed and organized with coherent information in order to induce comprehension among L2 students. Whilst in Plant Biology lectures, such requirement differs and a theoretical framework of various taxonomists' works, which classify and describe various plant genetic materials, is essential (Dudley-Evans 1994).

A chemistry lecture was found to be difficult for high proficiency level students as opposed to a history lecture; however both were reported difficult for low proficiency level students where T-LAP test was conducted (Hansen and Jensen (1994) in Flowerdew 1994). Ahmad Saat (2003) also attributed low proficiency level as the reason why Diploma in Science students fared worse in their Physics (PHY204) paper compared to their previous courses. Thus, an assumption can be made that either a lecture is a technical or of non-technical matters, proficiency level among the students plays a great impact in understanding academic lectures.

Schematic patterning of lectures (Young (1994) in Flowerdew 1994) in either technical or non-technical lecture, is thus deemed important. These researches (Olsen and Huckin 1990; Young 1994; Dudley-Evans 1994; Hansen and Jensen 1994) have highlighted that different subject

matters require different sets of lecture approaches in order to enable students to gain success in listening comprehension. Lecturers are not to fix themselves to one method of lecture, which they may assume beneficial but to test a style or approach deemed appropriate abreast with local needs and flavour.

Ethnography of L2 lectures has also significantly contributed to students' academic listening comprehension (see Benson 1994; Mason 1994; King 1994). This sets forth the concept of "culture of learning" (Benson 1994) or "events" (Mason 1994) that demand focus on "structures, context, ritual, universals, significant symbols, roles, ... (Benson 1994:181)," which is also known as understanding "English through content" (Benson 1994). This ideology encourages lecturers to assist academic listening by allowing students to experience lectures in miniature and with cultural values.

Academic listening as opposed to conversational listening has its own set of distinctive features (Richards 1993). As transactional listening takes place in lectures, L2 students are set in an ESL environment where comprehension and understanding of lectures are vital for examination purposes and indirectly knowledge seeking.

Table 3: Comparison of L1 and L2 Academic Listening.

L1 Academic Listening	L2 Academic Listening
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Requires concentration in understanding subject matter.</li><li>• Jargons can be understood contextually</li><li>• Filtered important notes are only jotted down</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Requires concentration to understand language and subject matter.</li><li>• Unfamiliarity with jargons in the L2</li><li>• Notes translated to L1, coined with L1 or simply retained the L2 words (Koren 1997)</li></ul>

## **Assisting Students in Understanding Content- Based Lectures**

### **Lecturing Styles**

In encouraging attention spending and securing listening process among students, individual lecturing styles have to be acknowledged. Lecturing styles have been identified through numerous studies by several

researchers (Morisson (1974) in Jordan (1989); Goffman (1981); Frederick (1986) in Benson (1989); Dudley-Evans (1994). A comparison of lecturing styles can be analyzed in the table below.

Table 4: Lecturing Styles

Morisson (1974, cited in Jordan 1989)	Goffman (1981)	Frederick (1986, cited in Benson 1989)	Dudley- Evans (1994)
Science lectures are divided into <b>formal:</b> close to prose, <b>informal:</b> high informational content, but not necessarily in highly formal register	<b>Memorization</b> <b>Aloud</b> <b>reading</b> <b>Fresh talk</b>	Participatory lecture: A lecture that is closer to discussion, with greater encouragement for students' participation.	<b>Reading style:</b> reads or speaks as if reading from notes <b>Conventional style:</b> speakers informally with/ out notes. <b>Rhetorical style:</b> presents him/ herself as a performer with wide intonational range, digressions, shift of keys & tempo.

Each researcher highlights an almost similar concept of lecturing styles, which are reading-like, conversational-like, and discussion-like. Thus, whichever style of lecture one may uphold, each style requires experimentation to offer evidence that may suggest maximum comprehension is induced from the students. Having said that, lecturers have to be aware that discourse structure can vary across subject area (Dudley-Evans 1994) which means a lecture in English should not be delivered like a public speaking in English but rather offers different styles of lecture depending on subject matter and needs.

### Teaching Strategies

There are several teaching strategies that can be exercised. However, the practicality of each teaching strategy is for the lecturers and students to experience as it relies solely on subject area and needs. This section shall put forward methods suggested through countless reading and self-evaluation effort from researches carried out by all cited work in the references.

*Teaching for Understanding*

Before listening to a lecture: Preparing your students' schemata

Brown & Yule (1983) mentioned that as listening is a demanding process, not only because of the complexity of the process itself, but also due to factors of listeners, the speaker, the content of the message, any visual support that accompanies the message. Thus in pre-listening, students are to activate their schemata through the encouragement to think about the subject matter that they are about to hear and discuss of what is already known about it. The rationale of "content schemata" (Helgessen 2000) preparation is, when background information is established, understanding is enhanced. Students are much more focused and tuned-in to the lecture.

As listening process can be established by intention, students need to be made aware of their sense of purpose of attending and adhering to the lecture. This self-awareness can be established by highlighting the importance of the subject matter to them and their daily life without imposing the issue in a nagging manner or diminishing their pride. Building curiosity and eagerness to learn can be created through recapturing previous lectures through jigsaw reading or jigsaw vocabulary. This method has offered great opportunity for second language learners to excel in literature studies, history and many other subjects.

Beginning a lecture by highlighting a related local case study will further boost students' sense of confidence and lower their effective filter as they are brought into and encouraged to discuss. Ask non-threatening questions and open-ended ones, which shall create a more motivated environment. To avoid frustration, students may need to be given reading material beforehand and recap their understanding of the reading material.

Showing colorful pictures, related performance graphs, encourage discussion on given table of findings or even allow them to watch movie snips or documentary regarding the subject matter would definitely help. A scene from Phua Chu Kang has certainly encouraged adult learners to learn grammar as well rather than just learning speaking as a strategy to boost their communication skills. The main issue is to give room for students to compensate their minimal ability in comprehending ideas through various methods.



While/during listening to lectures: Maintaining your students' concentration.

Lecturers should try to minimize distractions as much as possible. The act of some lecturers who constantly need to refer to lecture notes is a distraction among other habits, such as using a lot of difficult words. Some may lecture in a reading manner (refer to earlier discussion), which may create a monotonous echo of sounds and perceived as mere noises by many students.

Lecturers should also make connections between one topic to another. Hansen (1994) has shown that most science-based lectures need to have structural basis which means it has to be presented to the students in a proper topic hierarchy and continuity to promote listening comprehension. The usage of topic shift marker that acts as discourse markers, which will signal a change in topic, is also vital. Among the common topic shift markers are “*now let's see, but...*,” etc. Her research findings were essential as it was compared to students' notes taken during the lectures and it was found lecturers with proper structural framework boost students' understanding in science-based lectures.

Though most lecturers know and understand the importance of visual support, many tend to take it for granted. Assuming that the students will listen in an important lecture, lecturers still need to prepare visual support. Even the act of pointing to the board and say “*this...*” will help to maintain students' attention, thus, promote listening and understanding (Hansen 1994).

In achieving maximum effectiveness in a delivery, the speed of a lecture delivery must be controlled and it shall promote understanding. It was found that non-native listeners scored higher in comprehension test on modified text in terms of articulation rate and pause frequency and duration (Griffiths 1990). High-speed lecture delivery hinders understanding (Flowerdew 1994) as it is difficult enough for the ESL students to digest the jargons, which exist in content-based lectures, and now they have to process the inputs in their L2 at high speed.

Students should also be encouraged in note taking. Although semantic ambiguity, syntactical difficulty and lexical void (see Koren 1997) may exist, note taking emphasizes future references and secure attention giving.

### **After Listening to Lectures: Ensuring Your Students' Comprehension.**

Students summarize lecture in many ways, which evidently portray their listening process to academic listening. Rost (1994) reported his subjects summarize lectures in either a reporting, framing, embedding, or non-embedding style, and few tend to self-monitor their understanding by making comments. Under reporting style, students were selectively listening to lectures as only important notes were written down. In framing style, signs of inference were obvious and can be detected through the usage of sequence markers. Embedding style was found when students present facts or ideas in a hierarchical order through inference and reorganization of important points. Selective listening also took place here to ensure comprehension. Evidence of students' failure to subordinate ideas was clear in non-embedding style. In addition, some students do note that they were not concentrating to lectures, could not understand explanations given, just did not get what was said in the lecture in their effort to self-monitor their listening effort to academic listening. Therefore, it is important for lecturers to summarize the content at the end of every lecture.

### **Conclusion and Recommendation**

In building lecture discourse structure, there are potential drawbacks (Flowerdew 1994), which highly depends on discipline variation. Engineering and biology non-native students may still fail to comprehend lectures due to failure to employ knowledge of the overall discourse structure and background knowledge (Olsen & Huckin 1990) as opposed to humanities & social sciences lectures (Strodt-Lopez 1991). However, this can be overcome if lecturers of science & technology do not develop topics from many angles and evoke numerous interpretive frames but adhere to a conventional lecture structure, that is by maintaining topicality and evoke students only at partially pre-existing knowledge frame (Strodt-Lopez 1991). Dudley-Evans (1994) also suggested problem-solution lectures for engineering students. He added by reporting that science and technology lectures are dependent on topics of lectures, thus one lecturing style cannot be adhered to at all time. Therefore, lecturers are encouraged to test the suitability of a lecturing style to topic content to ensure optimum comprehension.

### **The Solution: Will Interactive Lecturing Help Students to Comprehend L2 Lectures?**

Moving from monologue lectures to interactive lectures might also solve other discrepancies. If traditional lines, cultural nature, role and status of university lecturers and the deference that is set on their shoulders or the subjects themselves are very content-based, then the adaptation of interactive lectures would not be possible (Flowerdew 1994). In our local scenario, most lecturers may be seen as not functionally playing their role if free photocopied handout/notes are not given prior to lectures. Students should be allowed to photocopy the lecturers' transparency notes or they will be deemed lack of empathy or compassion towards the students. Manuals are expected and taking the students to the library are seemed as not performing our lecturing duties. Until this mindset can be changed, monologue lectures are here to stay.

### **Future Research**

An extensive research on the impact of L2 academic listening has on students' academic results would be an area of interest. However, a more informative research would be the next step of this conceptual discussion. Listening to lectures in L2 but taking notes in L1 would be informational in our local scene although it has been experimented abroad. Findings may offer insight of cultural preferences and needs of our local scene.

### **References**

- Ahmad Saat. (2003). Instructional Language and the Performance of UiTM Cawangan Pahang DIS Students in Physics Courses. *Gading Academic Journal*. 8 (1&2): 33-40
- Benson, M.J. (1989). The Academic Listening Task: a Case Study. *TESOL Quarterly* 23 (3): 421-445.
- Benson, M.J. (1994) Lecture Listening in an Ethnographic Perspective. In J. Flowerdew (ed). *Academic Listening: Research Perspectives*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

- Brown, G. & Yule, G. (1983). *Teaching the Spoken Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Buck, G. (1991). The testing of listening comprehension: an introspective study. *Language Testing* 8 (1): 67-91
- Buck, G. (1992). Listening comprehension: construct validity and trait characteristics. *Language Learning* 42 (3): 313-357
- Dudley-Evans, T. (1994). Variation in the Discourse Favored by Different Disciplines and Their Pedagogical Implications. In J. Flowerdew (ed). *Academic Listening: Research Perspectives*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Flowerdew, J. ed. (1994). Research of Relevance to Second Language Lecture Comprehension – an Overview. In J. Flowerdew (ed). *Academic Listening: Research Perspectives*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Frederick, P.J. (1986). The lively lecture - 8 variations. *College Teaching* 34(2): 43-50
- Griffiths, R. (1990). Speech Rate and NNS Comprehension: a Preliminary Study in Time-benefit Analysis. *Language Learning*. 40(3): 311-336
- Goffman, E. (1981). The Lecture in Forms of Talk. In J. Flowerdew (ed). *Academic Listening: Research Perspectives*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Hansen, C. (1994). *Topic Identification in Lecture Discourse*. In J. Flowerdew (ed). *Academic Listening: Research Perspectives*: New York. Cambridge University Press.
- Hansen, J. & Jensen, C. (1994). Evaluating Lecture Comprehension. In J. Flowerdew (ed). *Academic Listening: Research Perspectives*: New York. Cambridge University Press.
- Helgessen, M. (2000). Learning to Listen. [on-line] Available: <http://www.eslmag.com>

- Jordan, R.R. (1989). English For Academic Purposes. *Language Teaching*, 22(3): 151-164.
- King, P. (1994). Visual and Verbal Message in the Engineering Lecture: Note-taking by Postgraduate. In J. Flowerdew (ed). *Academic Listening: Research Perspectives*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Koren, S. (1997). Listening to Lectures in L2: Taking Notes in L1. *TESL-Electronic Journal*. [on-line] Available: <http://www-writing.berkeley.edu/TESL-EJ/>
- Lund, R.J. (1991). A comparison of second language listening and reading comprehension. *Modern Language Journal* 75(2): 196-204.
- Mason, A. (1994). By dint of: Student and Lecturer Perceptions of Lecture Comprehension Strategies in First Term Graduate Study. In J. Flowerdew (ed). *Academic Listening: Research Perspectives*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Morisson, J.W. (1974). An Investigation of Problems in Listening Comprehension Encountered by Overseas Students in the First Year of Postgraduate Studies in Science at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne. Unpublished M.Ed. thesis, University of Newcastle upon Tyne
- Olsen, L.A. & Huckin T.N. (1990). Point-driven Understanding in Engineering Lecture Comprehension. *English for Specific Purposes*. (9): 33-47.
- Richards, J.C. (1983). Listening Comprehension: Approach, Design, and Procedure. *TESOL Quarterly* 17(2): 219-39
- Rivers, W.M. (1981). *Listening Foreign Language Skills (2<sup>nd</sup> edition)*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Rost, M. (1994). On-line Summaries as Representations of Lecture Understanding. In J. Flowerdew (ed). *Academic Listening: Research Perspectives*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

- Rubin, J. (1995). The Contribution of Video to the Development of Competence in Listening. In D. Mendelsohn & J. Rubin (eds) *A Guide for the Teaching of Second Language Listening*. San Diego: Dominic Press. 151-165
- Strodt-Lopez, B. (1991). Tying it all in: Asides in University Lecture. *Applied Linguistics* 12(2): 117-140.
- Young, L. (1994). University Lectures – Macro Structure and Micro-features. In J. Flowerdew (ed). *Academic Listening: Research Perspectives*. New York: Cambridge University Press.