Article

International students' perceptions of university lectures in English

Tony Lynch
University of Edinburgh

ABSTRACT

Listening to lectures in a second language is a challenge, even when the listener is generally proficient in the language. Here I report the findings of a survey carried out at the University of Edinburgh to find out what advice international students, as lecture listeners, would give to academic staff who want to enhance the comprehensibility of their lectures. It summarises the responses to the survey and explores the implications, for lecturers and students, of adjusting to the comprehension needs of multicultural academic communities.

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Introduction

Given the cognitive load borne by students listening to university lectures in a second language, it would make good sense to examine the lecturing process from the international student's perspective. Yet there appear to have been only two such studies in English-medium settings, both in the United States: Kim (2006) investigated East Asian postgraduates' perceptions of listening and speaking requirements and compared the results with an earlier study of mainly undergraduate international students (Ferris 1998). One-third of Kim's postgraduate respondents reported problems in listening and note-taking, against 80 per cent of Ferris's respondents. Arguably, undergraduates require sound note-taking skills to do well in class examinations, while postgraduates tend to be assessed through longer assignments. Postgraduates are also likely to have acquired note-taking skills through previous academic experiences, while undergraduates are still developing them.

Listening to lectures in English is no longer limited to Anglo-Saxon settings. In some Swedish universities, for example, undergraduate lectures are given in English, often for the sake of non-Swedish exchange students. This accommodation can have unpredicted consequences: in research at the University of Uppsala, Airey and Linder (2006) found that

when lectures were in English, the Swedish students asked and answered fewer questions than in Swedish lectures, and felt less able to follow and take notes.

Of particular relevance to second language lecturing methodology is the work of Morell and colleagues (e.g. Morell 2009; Morell, Garcia and Sanchez 2008), who have drawn on the concept of *multimodality* (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2001) to enhance lecturers' awareness of the four key modes in lectures based on presentation software such as PowerPoint: speech, writing, projected image and body language. Morell, García and Sanchez (2008) found that lecturers with higher levels of presentation skills used a wider range of modes and tended to foreground their use of visuals more. One might expect that a rich combination of modes would help second language listeners to achieve effective understanding, but that remains to be investigated.

The survey: International Students' Perceptions of Lectures (ISPoL)

The ISPoL survey was intended to elicit the perceptions of lectures and lecturing among international students as listeners with considerable – and growing – expertise in English lecture listening. My intention was to consider international students not as the problem, but as the source of potential solutions. The survey was based on a two-section questionnaire (see the Appendix). The first section listed 12 pieces of advice to lecturers, adapted from Morell (2009), and asked the student to rank the three items they considered most important. The second section invited them to comment on other points that they felt their lecturers should take into account.

The questionnaire was emailed to some 850 international students – approximately 120 undergraduates and 730 postgraduates on taught Master's programmes – who had been asked to take the University of Edinburgh's Test of English at Matriculation at the beginning of the academic year because they were at, or only just above, the minimum overall English proficiency level required for their particular programme. The questionnaire was sent out towards the end of Semester 1, when the students had attended 7-8 weeks of lectures. It was returned by a total of 126 students, or roughly 15% of those canvassed, of whom just under half took up the invitation to provide additional comments and advice in section 2.

Findings

Item-ranking

If we consider first the pieces of advice that respondents ranked in first place (Table 1), the lecturer's rate of delivery clearly emerged as the most important single factor in the students' perceptions of lecture comprehensibility. Control your speed of speaking was chosen by virtually twice as many students as the next most frequently first-placed advice.

Table 1: Advice ranked in first place by international students (n = 126)

Advice	ranked first by ISs	Percentage
Control your speed of speaking	27	21.4%
Create a relaxed atmosphere	15	11.9%
Exploit all four modes of communication	14	11.1%
Adapt your examples for your audience	12	9.5%

The fact that more than one in five of the respondents rated speaking speed as the most important factor chimes with a common finding (e.g. Graham 2006; Lynch 2009) that second language listeners ascribe their lack of understanding to excessive speed on the part of the speaker – in the subjective sense of 'faster than they can comfortably cope with' as listeners.

However, when we widen the focus to consider the cumulative totals of items ranked in first, second or third place, a slightly different picture emerges (Table 2).

Table 2: Advice items ranked 1st, 2nd or 3rd

Advice	Frequency of selection	Percentage
Control your speed of speaking	52	41.3%
Look out for signs of difficulty	46	36.5%
Adapt examples for your audience	39	30.9%
Create a relaxed atmosphere	35	27.8%

While speed of speaking remained the most frequently selected source of concern for over 40 per cent of the respondents, the next was Look out for signs of difficulty. It appears that international students at Edinburgh expect their lecturers to be alert to clues that individual members of their audience are having problems in following them.

Lecturers' selection and/or adaptation of examples emerged as the third most frequently chosen advice in Table 2 and elicited these two comments, among others:

> *I would like to say lecturers may pay more attention on the culture diversity in the classes, especially when they are giving example.*

> *If the lecturers would like to give some examples that might be unfamiliar with Asian students, they had better explain more about it beforehand, because of culture difference.*

Interestingly, the comments made on Create a relaxed atmosphere, the next item in Table 2, included potentially conflicting views on the role of humour:

> *Lecturers should be humorous to create a relaxed atmosphere for the students.*

> *Please do not always… tell jokes that are only be understood by British people or Europeans, because not everyone could understand, or even catch up your… jokes all the time.*

Volunteered suggestions

The comments made by students in the second section of the questionnaire raised several issues not covered in the first, particularly in relation to timing, ancillary materials and lecturers' assumptions.

On the issue of timing a number of respondents advised lecturers to be more realistic about what can be covered in the time available. The following comments encapsulate this well:

> *It hinders understanding when lecturers try to tackle every single aspect of a topic within the 50 minutes of a lecture. It would be more effective to focus on two or three salient aspects which then actually get through to students, instead of just leaving them confused by mentioning whole aspects just in a half-sentence for lack of time.*

Closely connected with the idea that lecturers should not try to cover too much ground were suggestions that they should provide <u>ancillary material</u> that could be accessed before or after the lecture:

> *I would say that WebCT is a very useful tool to guide and prepare students during the course, as well as to have further research based on student's interest. From my courses, one lecturer gives very thorough materials in the WebCT, including handouts containing the reading materials (in hierarchy: must read, read if we have more time, and for specific interest only) and it also contained objectives of each courses.*

The other issue mentioned by several respondents can be summarised as <u>unwarranted assumptions</u>:

> *Do not assume all students have the same background (knowledge) on the subject matter.*

> *Be more clear about what are you expecting, and please let student know*

Discussion

The ISPoL survey suggests a number of lessons for making lectures more accessible. The recommendation that lecturers control their <u>speed of speaking</u> was predominant in the Edinburgh students' responses, which is unsurprising. As I have discussed elsewhere (Lynch 2009), terms commonly used by applied linguists to describe the process of coping with natural speech in another language emphasise transience (*ephemeral* and *temporary*), lack of clarity (*buzz, fog* and *blur*) and a sense of being overwhelmed (*stream, flood, torrent,* and *cascade*). Hincks (2010) has argued that the inevitable consequence of lecturers *really* taking international students' needs into account, such as by speaking more slowly, is that they have to reduce the quantity of what they deliver in lecture form. This is in line with ISPoL respondents' recommendation that more material be made available online, as preparatory or follow-up reading. Shifting material online would also create space in the lecture for questions from students to lecturer.

Many participants in the survey advised lecturers to look out for <u>signs of comprehension difficulty</u> in their audience, but none specified what those clues might be. There has been some research into visual signs of listeners' non-comprehension, but most

studies have focused on the feedback behaviour of pupils in school lessons (e.g. Webb et al. 1997) or of adult learners in second language classes (e.g. De Courcy 1997), rather than a university lecture. As lectures typically involve larger audiences, it is more difficult for lecturers to recognise individuals' facial expressions of non-comprehension, and this problem is increased when the lecture theatre is darkened to make it easier to read a PowerPoint projection.

Students stressed the need for lecturer to choose <u>accessible examples</u>, avoiding those that demand cultural 'insider information' and may exclude international students from the circle of understanding. From a technological point of view, it is now much easier for lecturers to find illustrations, in the literal sense, to demonstrate points that might have been difficult to explain verbally to earlier generations. So awareness of the role of visual support for second language listeners, including PowerPoint and the interactive whiteboard, could be a key part of the lecturer's repertoire.

Some lecturers might be sceptical about the respondents' advocacy of <u>a relaxed atmosphere,</u> especially as individual interpretations of 'relaxed atmosphere' will vary. However, in many cases it was clear that ISPoL respondents had something very specific in mind: the extent to which a lecturer seems genuinely to encourage audience questions. Question-asking is culturally complex, of course, and the relatively difficult syntax of English interrogatives can also inhibit participation. For example, asked about the widely cited reluctance of Chinese students to ask questions in class, Chinese postgraduates studying in the UK offered a number of reasons: a wish to avoid wasting the teacher's and other students' time with a hesitantly delivered question; reluctance to risk losing face by making grammatical errors, and uncertainty about the content value of their question (Wang 2010). Given such tensions, lecturers should explore practical ways of increasing the chances that students will ask questions when they realise they need to. One approach I have advocated is the use of *question pauses* – breaks of 2-3 minutes, when the lecturer encourages students to raise queries about what has been said up to that point (Lynch 1994). Clearly marking a space for question-asking in this way can provide an opportunity for students to raise doubts and queries.

Conclusion

The responses to the ISPoL survey suggest a need for universities to work on two fronts – English for Academic Purposes courses for international students, and professional development for lecturers – to help make lectures more accessible. The students will benefit from pre-sessional or in-session instruction in listening and note-taking which realistically reflects the <u>input</u> they will encounter in actual lectures, in different combinations of speech, writing, image and body language. Listening materials ought therefore to be based on video-recorded or, if possible, live lectures, rather than audio. In addition, students need to practise the <u>output</u> in lectures which the ISPoL survey points up: asking questions to get clarification when the lecturer's speaking speed, terminology or choice of example has made understanding difficult.

From the institutional perspective, more must be done to ensure that lecturers appreciate the practical pedagogic consequences of internationalisation, and English language teaching centres have a key role to play here. All universities should consider following the example of those, such as the University of Edinburgh, which offer their staff professional development sessions, led by English language specialists, highlighting the core requirements of teaching international classes, such as clear enunciation, appropriate illustration, judicious combination of image and speech, a willingness to encourage and answer questions, and (not least) to adjust their lecture content to allow space for those questions.

Working on these two fronts, with international students and with lecturing staff, should have the benefit of making university lectures more effective learning opportunities – and, of course, not only for international students.

CONTACT THE AUTHOR

A.J.Lynch@ed.ac.uk

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Appendix: **The ISPoL questionnaire**

Section 1

Below are 12 pieces of advice often given to university lecturers teaching international students. Read through them and decide <u>which three</u> you think are the most important in making lectures easier to understand. Number them 1, 2 or 3 to show your order of priority

- *Tell students when you prefer them to ask questions*
- *Control your speed of speaking*
- *Use visuals such as PowerPoint*
- *Exploit four modes of communication: speech, writing, image and body language*
- *Guide students' note-taking*
- *Check students' comprehension by asking questions*
- *Create a relaxed atmosphere*
- *Look out for signs that students are having difficulty following you*
- *Introduce variety into the lecture*
- *Encourage students to ask questions*
- *Adapt examples to students' background knowledge*
- *Use clear 'signposting'*

Section 2

Apart from those 12 points, is there <u>any other advice</u> you would like to give your lecturers? If so, say what it is and how you think it would make lectures more comprehensible: