2 Effective lecturing

Introduction

Lecturers report that the changes they need to make for EAL students are not major, and in fact improve things for all students (Radloff 1998; Zamel and Spack, 1998). Changes which are not difficult to implement include:

- speaking at a reasonable pace
- explaining abstract concepts with clear examples
- ensuring that subject-specific terms get used several times in contexts that help define the meaning
- providing written support for oral delivery
- choosing examples from a broad worldview

One lecturer said:

> *I started by trying to make my classes clearer because of the speakers with English as an additional language in the class, but I realised that these strategies were making things better for all the students.*

We start by reporting the purpose and styles of lecturing, then note the special difficulties of EAL students in listening to lectures and what lecturers can do about them.

About lectures

Understanding the purpose of lectures

Here is an example of an explanation about lectures to students.

The purpose of lectures in this department is to:

- interest you in the topic
- make difficult ideas clear
- make connections with the textbook
- prepare you for further reading
- show you a different view from that of the textbook

The purpose of lectures is not to:

- say everything there is to say on a topic
- speak slowly enough for students to write down every word
- give a list of facts

What is the purpose of lectures in your discipline? Are the goals listed above similar to those of your department? How do you aim to make new knowledge clear to students? Do you make the goals of a lecture explicit to the students?

Lecturing styles

A lecture, like a journal article, an essay or a science report, has a format of its own. Although there are differences from one speaker to another, the general pattern is as follows:

- an introduction defines the topic and outlines the session
- the body of the lecture provides important information or procedures (see below)
- a conclusion may summarise, or pose a question, or preview next week's topic

Lecturers spend considerable time putting their lectures together in way that seems logical to them. What counts for students, though, is not what this looks like on paper but how it sounds as it is being delivered. Two lectures on the same subject can be totally different from each other. Dudley-Evans and Johns (1981, in Nattinger and de Carrico, 1992) found three typical ways of delivering a lecture.

Reading style

The lecturer reads aloud, only occasionally stopping to look at the audience and say something "off the cuff."

Conversational style

The conversational style suits the lecturer who knows the topic well and is a confident and interesting speaker. The lecturer gives the lecture as if having a one-sided conversation with the class. These lectures are usually prepared as a series of notes with support materials such as overhead transparencies or Powerpoint presentations. Students may be invited to answer and even ask questions from time to time (see Chapter 5). Conversational lecturers tend to use less formal language with many features of spoken English, including phrasal verbs (e.g., *put up with, put up against, put down, put aside, put forward, put back, put on, put off*), as in the following examples:

> *We'll put back this assignment one week.*
>
> *I'll put off discussing this topic for the moment.*

These expressions are particularly difficult for EAL students. First, the meaning cannot be guessed from their composite parts, although it can usually be inferred from the context, and second, there is a growing number of these. One dictionary search of the phrasal verbs formed with "get" revealed 52 different meanings.

Another feature of this conversational style is colloquial usage such as:

Next up is the main artery…

Lecturers can make listening easier for students if they limit these expressions or add an explanation in simple language.

Rhetorical style

The rhetorical style of lecturing includes rhetorical questions, i.e., questions to which the lecturer does not expect a response. Rhetorical questions may be used as a type of heading, and are immediately answered by the lecturer. Rhetorical questions may put a question into the listeners' minds to set them thinking, or may come in the middle of the lecture to hold the listeners' attention.

Who could have envisioned that one day…?

The three lecturing styles may have different effects on EAL students, depending on how they have learnt English. Here are two typical examples.

1. Student A has learned mainly written English in her own country. She finds the formal, reading style of lecturer A easiest because it is most familiar. Too much use of idiomatic spoken language is hard for her.
2. Student B's experience of English is mainly the spoken, idiomatic language of his fellow students. He is quite at home with the conversational style of lecturer B, and recognises the colloquialisms that he has heard around him. On the other hand, he is less familiar with the more formal reading or rhetorical styles.

Your lecturing style

If your approach is more informal, then try to listen to your language the next time you lecture. Do you include many idiomatic expressions and colourful language? Whichever lecturing style you use, try to identify potentially challenging language and provide a quick paraphrase or check your students' understanding. It may help to highlight some difficult words in your text so that you remember to explain them during the lecture. You will probably be doing this already with the technical terms in your subject.

Try recording your next lecture. When you listen to it later, consider the points that were raised above. This could be an interesting professional development task to do with a colleague.

The stages of a lecture

As well as style variations, lecturers make use of different language for introducing and changing topics, for summarising and for giving examples. Nattinger and De Carrico (1992) examined the language used in these transitions. The expressions you use will act as signposts for students for their understanding of the direction of your lecture as well as for their notes. Some of these markers are the same as in written English: *moreover, on the other hand, consequently…*

Whether you announce the topic (*Today I'm going to talk about ...*) or signal a change of topic (*Let's move on to*), EAL students are very dependent on the verbal cues that indicate the direction of the lecture. In the conversational or rhetorical styles, these markers may be more colloquial and less 'transparent: *So much for ...* (indicates finishing this topic).

As well as the words, some topic changes are indicated by a change of intonation, which EAL speakers may not recognise. Provide a written outline on the board or as a paper copy and indicate the stage of the lecture by pointing to the list (see discussion on p. 17). Summaries also help understanding at various points in the lecture and EAL speakers will benefit from a second chance to listen to an important point. It may help to think of the large number of students in a lecture theatre as a gathering of small groups. Many pair and small group activities can still work effectively in a large lecture theatre where, for example, students can talk in pairs to clarify something to the person next to them. To help students to understand, it is often said that a lecturer should not talk for longer than 15 minutes. Paired talk on the topic can help to break the monotony of listening for long periods as well as giving students a chance to use the language of the subject. As a way of mixing up students' speaking partners and adding variety, the front row of students can be asked to talk to the row behind, and so on.

Conversational and academic listening are different

As we saw earlier, lectures come in different styles, but even the so-called conversational lecture differs in many ways from a regular conversation, as Table 2.1 shows.

Table 2.1 Comparing conversational and academic listening.

Language skill	Conversations	Lectures
Background knowledge	General	Specific to a specialist area
Distinguishing relevant from irrelevant content	Not crucial to identifying general meaning	Crucial to understanding key issues
Turn-taking	Dialogue established by mutual turn-taking	Monologue continues and lecture style may not require students to answer questions
Making meaning clear	Meaning often implicit, dependent on time and place	Meaning usually made explicit by clarifying terms and including detail
Interaction with speaker	Listener has opportunities to contribute and to question	Listener often cannot interrupt to clarify misunderstandings. Long stretches of listening and note-taking.

Adapted from Flowerdew's (1994) summary of a number of studies

Common difficulties for EAL students

Research by Mulligan and Kirkpatrick (2000) shows that EAL students are 25 percent less able to understand key terms and concepts in a lecture and that they have more difficulty with academic listening skills overall. Below we look at some commonly reported difficulties.

Working out the theme of a lecture

Students sometimes say they cannot work out the overall message of a particular lecture even when they understand individual points; in other words they have trouble seeing the wood for the trees. As Sakuma (2000: 374) points out, it is easier "listening to difficult lectures involving complicated language ... [for] listeners who know something about the content of the lecture beforehand." To assist them, lecturers can:

- announce lecture topics a week ahead
- explain technical terms as they arise
- draw on prior knowledge from some students in the class
- link with the topic previously covered in class
- draw students' attention to the relevant textbook chapter
- provide and refer to lecture outlines, give out handouts, etc. (see Chapter 3).

Understanding intonation patterns

Another thing that makes listening to lectures difficult is that in spoken English the same word or phrase can have many different meanings depending on the speaker's intonation. In lectures, for example, the verbal signal "OK" can mean any one of the following:

- Do you understand?
- Now I'm moving on.
- I'm looking for my place on the page.

Understanding pronunciation

Try saying aloud: "Grey skills" and "Grace kills." Even in listening to our own language we sometimes hear three words as one, or one word as three. It is also easy to hear a different word break from the intended one. Hearing one word as another is a further problem. Such difficulties in distinguishing between words can also occur as a result of dialectal differences. For example, one PhD student who was educated in the United States reported that she kept hearing the lecturer referring to "the mutton." As she was in New Zealand at that time she assumed that a sheep-related term was used as a metaphor. Only later did she realise that it was "the mountain"; elision had made it indistinguishable. Examples like this one indicate the importance of written back-up for academic listening.

Students who change countries may believe that their comprehension problem is due to the fact that they studied English in one country and their present lecturer speaks with a different accent.

> *Students sometimes tell me at the start of a course that they have trouble with my Scottish accent, but after a couple of weeks they follow it quite easily.*

American lecturers should try to be aware of words that are difficult for listeners from outside America (*feudal* sounds the same as *futile* and *knotty* sounds the same as *naughty* to speakers of British, Australian, or New Zealand English). One way around these issues is for the lecturer to write the word on the board, but if the teacher speaks to the board while writing the word, students will find it even harder to understand the pronunciation. Remember to speak facing the audience!

Keeping up with the speed of delivery

EAL students are very dependent on clear, professional delivery and may find information inaccessible if lecturers talk too fast. In surveys of students' difficulties the speed of the lecturer's speech is mentioned as a difficulty by a large number of EAL speakers. Unlike a dialogue, a lecture seldom requires a reply and consequently lecturers may not pause unless they have developed a technique to check their own speed. In addition, when lecturers know their subject matter really well, they may forget just how new and confusing the content can be for students. If they slow down they give their students a chance to think about the material.

Listening and taking notes simultaneously

The students' task in a lecture is to listen and take down what is important. The result can be one of two extremes: students either try to take down everything that is said, or they understand so little that they copy only what is on the board, overhead or screen. The lecturer can help by signalling not to write something down:

> *No need to take this down. It's just a second example.*

Recording lectures

Increasingly, students are asking whether they can record lectures. The good point about this is that they will write less and have more time to listen and participate. Not every lecturer is happy to be recorded, however. Make it clear that students should ask each lecturer individually and don't forget to make your own standpoint on recordings clear from the start.

Some lecturers have successfully experimented with doing their own recordings and making them available on the course website. The technology involved is readily available nowadays, but most lecturers would benefit from some help from an IT assistant, if one is available to them. For an example of how one lecturer uses this technique, go to:

http://cit.duke.edu/ideas/newprofiles/lucic.do

A numbering system helps students follow the direction of your lecture and to announce each point as you come to it.

I'm going to suggest four reasons why …

▪ What can lecturers do?

As well as the suggestions already made, further ideas for overcoming the difficulties facing EAL students are explored below.

Show a lecture outline

Put a brief outline of headings on the board, the overhead or the handout, and refer to it from time to time. Slow note-takers can note all the headings but leave a space for something that has been missed. They can then return to the notes later with a classmate who, hopefully, has not missed the same point. Likewise, the lecture outline can provide a brief list of the new terms used in that lecture.

Put the lecture in context

Make connections between the lecture and other sources. For instance, you could say:

This lecture is based on the content of Chapter 7 in your prescribed text and on Chapter 3 in…

As we saw last week …

Define new terms

In one business lecture, students heard these new terms: production functions, marginal product, diminishing marginal returns, added input.

Because parts of these terms are also used in general English (produce, margin, etc), it is easy to assume that everyone understands them. This may or may not be the case. Defining the terms the first time they appear will help. For example:

Diminishing marginal returns is what happens when…

Be aware that little words can carry a lot of meaning. These words are often the key to understanding and yet may not be stressed. Consider the difference between:

There is no interest in this car.

There is no interest on this car.

The use of the word "or" is particularly difficult for new English speakers because of the two possible meanings. Compare, for example, these two sentences.

You can have either honey <u>or</u> cheese on your bread.

This tree is called "oak" <u>or</u> "quercus."

Explain new concepts clearly

However, definitions are not the whole answer to making meaning clear. In all university subjects there are new concepts that cannot be explained by simple definitions; they require a longer explanation and diagrams on the board may help more than words alone.

What makes a good explanation? Brown and Armstrong (1984) asked biology students about what they thought made a good explanation. This is what they found. The best explanations:

- make students think deeply
- link the parts of the explanation
- outline the various parts of the explanation
- highlight essential features
- give many examples
- use rhetorical questions to get students' attention
- link to existing concepts

Include buzz groups

Buzz groups are breaks in the lecture when students can talk about the content of the lecture to each other. Students need to use language as a "vehicle for improving content mastery" (Snow 1997, p. 301). If they practise using the discipline discourse it will help them acquire the ways of thinking and talking that mark them as academics or professionals (Lea & Street, 1998). Of course it also simply gives them a break from your voice and a chance to reflect on what was said. In terms of learning, it is important to remember that lecturers often focus on lower level learning, neglect students who do not have an auditory learning style and ignore what we know about the attention span of most students (Lueddeke, 2003).

Choose a range of examples

The wider the range of examples chosen to explain topics in lectures, the more likely it is that students will understand. Sakuma (2000), whose advice we quoted above, mentions the important of activating students' existing knowledge. Look back at your recent lecture notes and check where your examples have come from. Some of them might include:

- a personal reminiscence
- the professional experience of a recent graduate
- your own research
- examples from a range of countries

The use of a metaphor, parallel or analogy may be just as useful. In this case you are reminding students of concepts that are related but not the same. For instance, universal design is the idea in

architecture that a particular innovation might have benefits beyond those it is designed for: a ramp helps the wheelchair-bound student, but it will also help the mother with a pushchair.

If we apply universal design to teaching, then using simple, clear language will help EAL students, but it will also help many students who are struggling, for example students who are hard of hearing and students who are unfamiliar with academic discourse. (This was an idea presented recently by Kimberly Johnson, at a pre-conference workshop for the 4th International Conference on Language Lecturer Education in Minneapolis.)

Others techniques include audiovisual examples such as photos, videos, audio fragments, websites, software, current examples such as news items and examples from many cultures, historical examples, as well as demonstrations, experiments, and models. Be careful not to make assumptions that everyone in the class will have the same background knowledge; examples may need further explanation. For many students an oral reference to "The Last Supper" may not conjure up either its religious significance or da Vinci's masterpiece. If you cannot think of any examples yourself, ask colleagues or the students themselves. In today's tertiary institutions, students are likely to come from many parts of the world and may have background knowledge that the lecturer is not aware of. Remember, students are your greatest resource for creating a culturally inclusive environment (Radloff, 1998).

Local references may not be understood by everyone and this is an opportunity to ask local students to explain the meaning to newcomers. Likewise, students from other cultures can explain case studies or examples from their culture, as they arise. This way you, as lecturer, are demonstrating to the students how the diversity within the class can be mutually beneficial

Repeat key terms

Knowing a word also involves recognising the words that are commonly used with it. Use new terms many times rather than simply referring to "the last point" or "this expression." Students will also benefit from the chance to use these terms to make their own meaning. When using overheads or Powerpoint, occasionally point to the key term that is being used.

Check audibility

Speaking clearly and speaking slowly are not necessarily the same thing. Speaking slowly could mean not racing from point to point, but also signalling what the purpose of the following material is (to give an example, to say the same thing in another way). Speak at a measured pace and use pauses. Pauses give the EAL listener time for mental processing. This is not the same as speaking in an artificially slow voice.

Check that you are using the sound system effectively. In large lecture theatres there are usually microphones, which some lecturers choose not to use, or stand too close to. Doing a check from time to time can help audibility ("How's the sound up there in the back row?").

Summarise from time to time

We think of a summary as coming at the end of a lecture but it can be helpful to present the same information at the start as an overview. Also, part way through the lecture, the lecturer can say:

> *If I were to summarise this point I would say...*

or point out to the students that talking about the topic helps them clarify their ideas:

> *Turn to your neighbour, and summarise that last point.*

Thesis card

In one example from the literature (Snow 1997), a professor asks every student to hand in a "thesis card" at the end of each lecture. On this card the students summarise the main point of the lecture in one or two sentences. The professor continues to ask for these cards until the majority of the class can correctly identify the thesis.

Provide clear written support

Whether using overheads or PowerPoint™, check that you do not cram the slide full of text that then becomes illegible or that you do not photocopy text on to an overhead without any enlargement. This makes your information difficult for any student to read. Here is a checklist to use as you plan a lecture. How many of these do you do?

- Define new terms.
- Show a lecture outline.
- Make connections between the lecture and the text book.
- Choose examples from a range of cultures.
- Give clear explanations.
- Use clear expressions that signal the direction of the lecture.
- Repeat key terms. Explain the same thing in more than one way.
- Keep your voice at normal volume but use the microphone.
- When something is not clear, ask students who do understand to explain to others, via their first language if they choose. You could say: "take a minute and explain this to your neighbour."
- Avoid asking "Do you understand?" Instead, try to elicit the information that students can give you to demonstrate what they have understood, e.g., if you were explaining about two political systems, you could ask "What are the differences between... ?"
- Summarise the main points of what you are saying either orally, or with visuals.
- Be aware of body language. Pointing is offensive to many groups, maintaining eye contact may be interpreted differently by different cultures, and specific cultures may have particular rules; for example, sitting on a desk is offensive in Mäori culture in New Zealand. It's impossible to learn all the rules, but some awareness may help your students to feel more included.

References and further reading

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