EFL Students' Perceptions of Effective Lecturers

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Abstract

The present research paper explores EFL learners' perceptions of effective lecturers. The case study was conducted using a questionnaire with a sample of third year students, at Tlemcen University, Algeria. The main findings indicated that the overwhelming majority of students viewed all the characteristics in the questionnaire as either very important or important. The research paper ends with some suggestions to lecturers.

Key words: lecturers, students, effective.

Introduction

Learning a foreign language requires various types of knowledge including: a phonological system, an abstract system of new grammar rules, a lexical system that is linked to the semantic system of the mother tongue, and a comparative pragmatic system. All of these types of knowledge may be available to the learner through the aural input (Rost, 2005). At university, listening is important as it is present in the most widely used genre: lectures. This academic genre varies according to its style, length, formality, degree of interactivity, multimodality, complexity, language, content, audience profile and size (Chazal, 2013).

In lecture comprehension, students encounter a number of challenges: listening and note-taking, integrating information from different resources (visual and auditory), listening to dense and complex language for a long period, specialist vocabulary, the speed of delivery, the lecturer's pronunciation (Chazal, 2013; Flowerdew 1994). Therefore, lecturers are faced with dilemma of how to present information in a way that assists learners meet the challenge of comprehension. In a review of studies, Barned and lock (2010) classify attributes of effective lecturers into four categories: rapport (patience, having a sense of humour), delivery of the content of the lecture (giving clear explanations, using good examples, encouraging group work and participation, preparing students for examinations), fairness (treating all students impartially, producing examinations which closely relate to work covered in class, providing clear grading guidelines), knowledge and credibility (having sound content knowledge of their discipline, being proficient in English, being able to answer complex

questions). Flowerdew and Miller (1992) found that their ESL Chinese subjects consider the following lecturer strategies to be beneficial: clarity of presentation, summaries, responding to questions, initiating interaction in the classroom, and repetition. Finally, Miller (2009) studied features that facilitate students' processing of lectures. The subjects identified linguistic features like simplification and pronunciation, in addition to pedagogic features such as: the use of examples and visuals, light atmosphere (humour), advanced preparation of learners, staging of lectures.

Methodology

The present research is a case study that attempts to answer the following research question: what are the characteristics of effective lecturers? In order to address this topic, the researcher administered a questionnaire to twenty university students, studying English as a foreign language at Tlemcen university, Algeria. The questionnaire comprises seventeen closed items in the form of rating scales. Students have to judge whether a specific characteristic is very important, somewhat important, or not important. There are fourteen pedagogical characteristics and three personal (use of humour, being patient and fair). There are also two additional open items which ask the subjects to add any other attributes which they regard as effective or ineffective.

Results

The following table reports the main findings. It indicates that most characteristics were viewed by the overwhelming majority of students as either very important or somewhat important. A small number of the subjects considered some characteristics as not important. The characteristic which received the highest percentage of being not important is 'using visuals'. Twenty percent of the students believed that it is not important that the lecturer uses visuals. Probably because they are not visual learners. This implies that the lecturer should conduct needs analysis at the beginning of the course to measure his learners' learning styles.

Lecturer characteristics	Very important	Somewhat important	Not important
Dividing the lecture into clear main parts	90%	5%	0%
Providing a summary at the end of each main part	65%	30%	5%
preparing students in advance	25%	70%	5%
clear pronunciation	85%	10%	5%
clear explanations	85%	10%	5%
clear examples	85%	15%	0%
group work	20%	75%	5%
visuals	25%	55%	20%
repetitions	65%	35%	0%
Interacting with students	65%	35%	0%
Helping learners prepare for exams	65%	25%	10%
Preparing exams which deal with the topics already seen in class	70%	25%	5%
clear exam scoring guidelines	55%	40%	0%
proficiency in the subject matter	65%	35%	0%
humour	25%	60%	5%
patience	90%	5%	5%
fairness	90%	0%	10%

Table 1. Effective lecturer characteristics (n:20)

Some learners were not in favour of lecturer's use of humour for fear of losing face and being hurt. Therefore, the lecturer should be very careful when trying to have a sense of humour.

Item number 18 is an open one which asks the participants to mention other important characteristics which are not cited in the questionnaire. The respondents' answers are:

- Being punctual and available;
- Giving homework;
- Accepting mistakes;
- Planning lectures;
- Maintaining students' attention;
- Giving activities to students to check whether they understood;
- Answering questions of students;

- Asking learners to summarize books which deal with the topics of the lectures;
- Giving revision activities at the end of each set of lectures dealing with the same topic;
- Discussing with students their problems of comprehension.

The last item of the questionnaire investigates other characteristics which are not important. The findings entail:

- Spoon-feeding students;
- Assigning students to answer questions;
- Using difficult words;
- Punishment and yelling;
- Giving students too many activities as home work.

Pedagogical Implications

One of the lecturers' task is to organize their lectures effectively in a way that helps students process information. Young (1994) points out to the following stages of lectures: the content, examples, evaluation, conclusion, and the discourse structuring phase. This latter indicates the direction that the lecturer will take to assist students to identify the topics that are about to be covered, for example: now at this point we are going to make another assumption. Structuring discourse in such a way will ultimately 'ease the burden of comprehension of new information' (Young, 1994, p. 168). Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992) cite a number of lexical phrases which function as organizers of the lecture's discourse. Some of them signal the introduction of a topic in the beginning, the shift to a new topic, and the summary of the topic. Others are called exemplifiers, evaluators, fillers, and they respectively signal the use of examples, evaluation of a specific concept or theory, and pauses to give learners time to process information. It is also helpful to provide breaks between the main parts of the lecture so as to give learners more time to take notes and process information (Flowerdew and Miller, 1992).

Repeated listening is also found to increase vocabulary learning and affect lecture comprehension strategy use. On the one hand, repeated vocabulary in the input is more likely to increase students' learning of such vocabulary (Chapelle, 2003). Bligh (2000) explains this point saying that if there is some learning in the first listening, repetition can have some consolidating effects and, hence, learning of the first occasion provides a conceptual framework and a pathway to give meaning to the second. On the other hand, each time a

lecture is repeated students actively assess and, if necessary, shift their lecture comprehension strategy (Kiewra and Mayer, 1991). Repetition ranges from simple paraphrasing to the use of lecture podcasts. podcasts can serve different functions, which are: reviewing the lecture content, exemplifying difficult lecture concepts through elaboration, and preparing for the following class (O'Bryan and Hegelehimer, 2007). In the first case, the podcast duplicates the lecture content, whilst in the second the podcast adds relevant information to what was covered in the lecture and, therefore, provides more details. In the third case, the podcast builds on the second case, with the difference that the podcast also serves as a preparation for the subsequent lecture.

Since this is an EFL context, this section further proposes that teachers' talk should be adjusted and modified according the students' level through the use of linguistic simplifications (Walsh, 2011; Nizegorodcew, 2007), which can take place at different levels like lexis, grammar, and pronunciation. First, vocabulary may be simplified by employing simplified lexis and avoiding idiomatic expressions. Second, grammar can be modified through shorter and simpler utterances, fewer clauses. Third, pronunciation can be made understood by the use of slower, clearer articulated speech. These linguistic modifications should be delivered with slower rate of speech. It is also necessary to engage in interactions with students so as to check their comprehension of the lecture.

Finally, tests are part of every class students take, including lecture-based classes. Tests should be biased for the best. This entails "the degree of strategic involvement on the part of the teacher and students in preparing for, setting up, and following up on the test itself" (Brown, 2001,p.34). According to Swain (1984, cited in Brown, 2001), a test can be said to be biased for the best if the teacher offers appropriate review and preparation for learners, and suggests strategies which are beneficial. Another principle in testing is reliability. It can be established through some procedures which include: familiarising students with the testing techniques, providing clear instructions, and avoiding ambiguous items (Hughes 1989).

Conclusion

Listening is a very important vehicle to accumulate content information from lectures in different modular courses, at university. Therefore, it is of crucial importance that lecturers become familiar with what helps their EFL students to effectively process information. The

purpose of this article was to help lecturers become aware of students' needs. However, the sample was not large enough and, thus, future research may tackle this topic with a larger number of respondents.

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7

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