LEARNING FROM AN ACADEMIC LECTURE IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE: A LESSON FOR THE LECTURER

UCZENIE SIĘ Z WYKŁADU AKADEMICKIEGO W JĘZYKU OBCYM: WNIOSKI DLA WYKŁADOWCY

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Summary
Introduction. The article explores the role of an academic lecture in gaining disciplinary knowledge and developing domain-specific language in a foreign language context. The current study aimed to investigate how students' knowledge on a selected topic changed after they had participated in a lecture.
Materials and methods. A small-scale qualitative-quantitative study was conducted in a natural context of a lecture delivered to the students of English philology. The students' statements depicting their knowledge on Communicative Language Teaching provided before and after the lecture were compared in order to examine the information they gained from the lecture content.
Results and conclusions. Having listened to the lecture, reviewed their notes and reflected on its contents, the students formulated longer and more precise statements, more frequently commented on the relevant concepts and assumptions, and verbalized them better. The procedure used activated the students' processing of the content of the lecture and showed the lecturer what kind of information the students focused on.

Keywords: receptive skills, academic discourse, lecture delivery, disciplinary knowledge, Communicative Language Teaching, domain-specific terminology

Streszczenie
Wstęp. Artykuł omawia rolę wykładu akademickiego w przyswajaniu wiedzy oraz terminologii w zakresie danej dziedziny w języku obcym. Celem badania była ocena zmiany, jaka zaszła w wiedzy posiadanej przez studentów na wybrany temat po wysłuchaniu wykładu.
Materiał i metody. Przeprowadzono badanie jakościowo-ilościowe na małej próbie studentów filologii angielskiej w naturalnym kontekście wygłoszonego dla nich wykładu. Porównano wypowiedzi studentów odzwierciedlające ich wiedzę na temat podejścia komunikacyjnego w nauczaniu języków obcych sformułowane przez nich przed i po wykładzie, co umożliwiło analizę informacji przyswojonych prze studentów na podstawie treści wykładu.
Wyniki badań oraz wnioski. Po wysłuchaniu wykładu, przejrzeniu notatek i refleksji nad jego treścią studenci konstruowali dłuższe i bardziej precyzyjne wypowiedzi, częściej komentowali na temat ważnych konceptów i założeń, jak również lepiej je wyrażali pod względem językowym. Dzięki zastosowanej procedurze studenci aktywnie przetwarzali zawartość wykładu, a wykładowca uzyskał informacje o tym, jakie treści skupiły ich uwagę.

Słowa kluczowe. sprawności receptywne, dyskurs akademicki, prezentacja wykładu, wiedza dyscyplinarna, podejście komunikacyjne, terminologia danej dziedziny wiedzy

Introduction

Undeniably, a lecture is still one of the dominant forms of instruction in academic contexts in higher level education institutions. With reference to foreign language settings, this particular genre is typically associated with the issue of academic listening, and it is labeled as transactional, that is one-way listening (Rost 2002). In many educational systems worldwide, a typical academic lecture lasts between 45-90 minutes and its form can vary depending on a particular domain of knowledge it deals with. Yet, apart from traditional lectures given in auditoria with students just listening to the lecturer and taking down notes, PowerPoint presentations, with the visual component added to oral speech, have become a highly approved form of lecturing nowadays. This is a significant

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development for academic education, which undoubtedly requires an enhancement of students' skills in discourse comprehension, as emphasized by many specialists in the area of English for Special Purposes, English for Academic Purposes, and in other forms of content-based instruction.

In an attempt to better explain the functioning of listening skills, numerous researchers have drawn attention to their strong bond with reading so as to point at the similarities existing between the two receptive skills, which play a paramount role in providing content input in all instructional contexts in educated native and non-native speakers. It is important to bear in mind that receptive language skills are to be perceived as an issue of human verbal communication in which listeners and readers are expected to be active, and which have been empirically confirmed to be interactive in their nature. Processing of spoken and written discourse requires reconstructing the communicative value of information which is arrived at by creating some mental model of the text by the speaker/reader using bottom-up and top-down processing involving the structure of the discourse and one's general world knowledge (Dakowska 2015, Field 2008, Flowerdew and Miller 2005, Johnson 2001, Vandergrift and Goh 2012). Both listening and reading activate deep information processing that is based on semanticizing, interpretation and evaluation of the discourse being processed (Dakowska 2005).

Despite an overlap between the functioning of listening and reading which needs to be given fair coverage as an instance of general language comprehension ability, some experts have worked on delineating and explaining the unique features of the listening process. The specificity of listening has often been described by considering primarily a number of linguistic attributes of the spoken mode as different from those of written language hence the most important phenomena concerning phonological modification, accent, prosodic features, speech rate, or hesitations have been addressed (e.g. Buck 2001). Taking a broader view at a listening experience as an instance of discourse processing requires that both the listener's and the speaker's part should be given due consideration. Lynch (2011) claims that a comprehensive picture of listening can be obtained by investigating internal and external factors impacting the ultimate listening outcome, with the former attributed to the listener himself/herself and the latter connected with the speaker and with the context. While it is common for listeners to experience temporary distractions or even develop a negative reaction to speakers, the gravity of speakers' role, who are in control of the text they produce, is unquestionable. Speakers determine the rate of speech, the kind of language they use to introduce the particular content, which may be unfamiliar to the listeners to a large extent, as well as employ different types of cultural references. What is problematic about assessing the effectiveness of listening, as remarked by Lynch (2011), is the relative inaccessibility of listening: it is difficult to get a response from the listener or some observable product that would provide further information about the process.

Academic listening, being a comparatively demanding skill, can prove difficult to non-native listeners, whose language command most frequently falls below the level of their native language competence. Merely due to the deficiencies in their mastery of linguistic features of the spoken mode in a second language, they can face a variety of problems. Non-native listeners have been found to experience gaps in what they are listening to of different proportions, or even problems in word recognition, which have a negative influence on their comprehension level (Buck 2001). In order to cope with all those problems, however, they can resort to an array of compensatory strategies, such as using visual information, contextual cues, making intelligent guesses, and referring to general background knowledge or a general meaning of the text (Field 1998, Field 2008, Buck 2001). Rost (2002) calls attention to the fact that it is particularly foreign language students that may find it problematic to follow the structure of the whole lecture, which may not be formally polished to the extent that academic writing as a rule is, and be dependent on the ideas presented one after the other by the lecturer with no clearly used discourse markers.

On the other hand, the participants of an academic lecture can expect some support from the lecturer, whose intention is raising students' awareness, informing them or changing their attitudes (Rost 2002). The researcher also argues that approaching listening as "a poor substitute for reading" (p. 162) is not justified. He claims that listening can in fact be found much more beneficial for learning than reading due to such properties as the emotional emphasis provided by speakers expressing their attitudes to the topic discussed. Thus the participants of the listening event can become highly involved in a communication act they are a part of as the audience.

Lecture delivery – enhancing students' processing of lecture content

There are a number of factors that can influence the quality of a lecture delivered to a non-native audience. First of all, lecturers can choose the mode and speed of delivery. They can read the text or use a more informal conversational style of their performance, yet simultaneously taking care of intonation, lexical variety, and proper sentence coordination. Appropriate discourse structuring by means of the use of micro and macro-organizers also plays a facilitative role in lecture reception (DeCarrico and Nattinger 1988, Jordan 2002).

Furthermore, lecturers can also choose between non-participatory and participatory types of lectures. The latter make it possible to incorporate some extra activities that can ensure students' deeper processing, and thus better understanding and retention of lecture content, such as brainstorming, problem solving, or role-playing, which are conducted in smaller groups. The same goal can be achieved by introducing some form of a short written task to accompany the lecture. Asking and answering a few self-generated questions by the students, for example, can also serve as an activity attached to the lecture (King, 1991, 1992, 1994; Chodkiewicz and Kiszczak forthcoming).

Another popular procedure has been integrating lecturing with the other media, in particular with the visual elements represented by the use of illustrations, slides, and videos (Flowerdew and Miller 2005). All of them are assumed to improve the comprehension of lecture discourse by contributing to the general message of the lecture, that is by complementing it, providing some detailed information, or by illustrating the leading concepts (Flowerdew and Miller 2005). The combination of spoken monologue with some kind of visual presentation is not without its problems, though, as it creates some additional burden for listeners who have to implement appropriate strategies to be able to benefit from the use of the two sources (King 1994, Vandergrift 2007).

An academic lecture as a knowledge acquisition experience: building domain and topic knowledge

As already mentioned, academic lectures involve listeners in both comprehension and learning processes which contribute to the achievement of the intended communicative purpose. Listeners perform a range of operations and use mechanisms representing general language processing which are responsible for comprehending information through spoken modality. In order to understand a verbal message, the listener embarks on anticipation processes and selects the relevant data from the input material so as to integrate the incoming information into the macrostructure of discourse representation. Despite some uncertainties that may emerge in the process, the listener has to arrive at the overall structure of discourse so as to receive its message (Gernsbacher 1990, Kintsch 1996). An elaborated model of meaning-building components in listening has been expounded by Field (2008). He maintains that whereas deriving, checking, selecting, and integrating meaning and connecting ideas are the processes which direct listeners in the recognition of the basic argument structure, they operate through contextual cues linked to the listeners' world, topic, and cultural knowledge. The generally accepted view is that academic education settings play a paramount role in building students' domain and subject-specific knowledge.

Since lectures are frequently one of the most common forms of knowledge attainment in non-native environments, it is obvious that teachers are expected to create appropriate conditions to fully utilize their students' learning potential. Yet, instructional goals require that teachers consider more issues that just enhancing comprehension and retention of the input material. In acquiring content knowledge, learners get involved in numerous cognitive processes by which their knowledge gets reconstructed in a coherent way, as well as being elaborated on and individually reformulated. What is more, no positive results in knowledge acquisition can be expected unless efficient connections are made between new knowledge and existing knowledge, and changes are introduced into the learners' whole framework of knowledge (e. g. Mayer 2002; Wittrock, 1990).

Recent years have witnessed the development of considerable interest in drawing distinctions between different kinds of knowledge, the fundamental one being that between informal knowledge and academic knowledge (Buel 2011). Studies in discourse processing have brought further attention to learning within particular disciplinary fields, connected with school or academic subjects of study, such as history, social sciences, science or mathematics in foreign language contexts, with English often used as a medium of instruction. Knowledge started to be also labelled as content knowledge, domain knowledge, and disciplinary knowledge, particularly by some reading specialists (e.g. Alexander and Jetton 2000, Buehl 2011, Shanahan 2009). As for domain knowledge, it has been defined as a field of study concerning content knowledge which has its roots in some formal tradition, covers a selection of topics, and is represented by means of discourse structure characterized by special rhetorical and linguistic features (Shanahan 2009). According to Bernhardt (1991), domain-specific knowledge gets developed through education and is in the possession of professionals at the level of expertise.

A categorization of knowledge advocated by some educational psychologists also concerns the differentiation between topic and domain knowledge (e.g. Alexander and Jetton 2000, Buehl 2011). Whereas the former is treated as a representation of the learner's background knowledge and experience concerning a particular idea or a concept, the latter stands for "a discourse of a discipline", which comprises aspects of language dimension, including the use of vocabulary, concepts and thinking processes characteristic of a particular academic discipline (Buehl 2011, p.83). Field (2008, p. 215) notes that "topic knowledge is part of world knowledge but can provide a more specific framework for what the listener hears". In fact, empirical findings concerning foreign language learning contexts have demonstrated that listeners with background

knowledge on a particular subject or background knowledge concerning relevant concepts will gain better comprehension results. From the psycholinguistic point of view, it is schemata that are assumed to play a role in organizing the conceptual knowledge listeners bring to the comprehension process (Rost 2002). Thus in educational contexts which stimulate knowledge expansion, the listener's background knowledge in the form of schemata becomes an important contributory factor in learning from a particular text. The study reported below looks at the issue of students' topic knowledge expansion as a result of an exposure to the contents of an academic lecture delivered in English as a foreign language.

The study

The main goal of this study was to investigate the learning gain from a 90-minute lecture on Communicative Language Teaching, a commonly adopted approach in foreign language education in Polish settings, by a group of English philology students. In other words, the study aimed to find out how the students processed the lecture content in order to acquire new information from it, that is how the students' conceptualization of CLT changed after the lecture. It was a small-scale classroom-based qualitative-quantitative study in which the students were first asked to report on their prior knowledge of the target topic and then, having listened to the lecture, report on what they thought they had learned from it. There were two research questions guiding the study:

What was the students' prior knowledge of CLT as self-reported by them in the form of five statements before they listened to the lecture?

What was the knowledge about CLT gained by the students from the lecture as self-reported by them in the form of five statements after the lecture?

Method

Participants

A group of twenty-one graduate students from the English Department at Maria Curie-Sklodowska University, Lublin were involved in the study. They were all in their early twenties, and they were in the first year of their two-year Master's programme. They had been learning English for more than 15 years, out of which they had been the students of English philology for 3 years. They had had experience in participating in different forms of academic activities, including lectures in English. They had already studied such subjects as practical English, linguistics, British and American literature, culture, as well as English Language Didactics (in preparation for their EFL teaching qualifications).

Materials

The lecture delivered to the students concerned the topic of Communicative Language Teaching. It was entitled "Communicative Language Teaching: Growth and Criticism" and was a component of a compulsory course in English Language Didactics. While it was presented in the spoken form for about 75 minutes, a PowerPoint presentation consisting of 22 slides was used to accompany it. The lecture was divided by the lecturer-researcher into five major parts which covered different portions of the material. They were entitled:
1. Three phases in CLT development.
2. Traditional vs. communicative approaches.
3. Basic principles of communicative methodology.
4. The concept of communicative competence.
5. Problems with CLT.

Procedure and data collection

Before the lecture, the students participating in the study were instructed to reflect for 5 minutes on what they had previously learnt about Communicative Language Teaching and construct 5 statements that would describe, in their view, the most important principles, assumptions, and ideas associated with this approach, commonly followed in teaching English as a foreign language. When the students' ideas, provided on the sheets of paper, had been collected, the students were asked to listen to the lecture attentively as they would be expected to perform one more task after the lecture was finished. While the lecture was delivered live in the spoken form, its main ideas were simultaneously provided in a bulleted form by means of a PowerPoint presentation. The final task the students performed was writing down 5 statements containing the most important items of new content they thought they had learnt from the lecture. In order to formulate their statements, the students reflected on the relevant material by reviewing the notes they had taken during the lecture.

Thus the data collected for the study were the two sets of statements concerning the major assumptions/principles of CLT compiled by the students, which were taken to represent their topic knowledge before and after they had been exposed to the lecture. Both sets of statements were analyzed in a qualitative-quantitative way in order to evaluate and compare the main items representing the students' prior knowledge of CLT and their knowledge obtained from the lecture. Thanks to performing an analysis of critical content information that appeared in both sets of the students' statements, looking at the number of cases of the use of particular core concepts and items of information that reappeared in each of the sets of statements, it was possible to discern some general picture of the students' prior knowledge on CLT

to be compared with what they perceived as new knowledge acquired from the lecture input.

Thus in order to explore the students' conceptualizations of CLT before attending the lecture with those developed after listening to the lecture, the ideas, assumptions, and concepts the students most frequently focused on were identified and carefully examined.

Results and discussion

A detailed comparison of the two sets of the students' statements made it clear that the after-lecture set of statements contained more words, namely 1237 words as compared with 863 words in the sets compiled before the lecture. While articulating their prior knowledge of the topic they brought to the lecture, the students not only produced shorter sequences of words but 8 of them did not complete the required set of statements as 7 students wrote only 4 statements, and one student provided just two short points ("Groupwork", "Interaction between students"). The second set definitely contained statements that were longer, more detailed and more precise in the use of adequate terminology to express the students' ideas developed on the basis of the lecture material. They also referred to the theoretical underlying concepts of CLT methodology more often than to its practical applications.

As mentioned above, in order to work out a better comparison between the two conceptualizations of CLT methodology outlined by the participants of the study, the two sets of the students' statements were analyzed so as to identify and examine the key concepts and ideas addressed by the students.

The students' conceptualization of CLT before the lecture

Describing the fundamental communicative aspects of CLT the students produced as many as 25 statements containing the noun 'communication', but also the verb 'to communicate' and the adjective 'communicative'. One of the general statements provided by a student was: "CLT is based on the assumption that communication is the most important function of language", and another was "focusing on describing language in a communicative way". A similar meaning was expressed in such simple statements as "teaching language for communicative purposes" or "the way of teaching language through communication". Looking at the language classroom from the point of view of the learner, the students stated that "Students learn how to communicate successfully in English" and that it is in CLT that learners "study language first of all, through communication [...]", or in other words "learners are involved in real communication". Two students referred to the concept of communicative skills by asserting that

"developing communicative skills is the main goal" and that CLT means "Communication put above other skills". Two students mentioned the term of communicative competence ("CLT helps students to develop their communicative competence"; "emphasis on communicative competence").

While five statements written by the students referred to the concept of speaking, more than half of them (14 responses) included the concept of interaction. Many of the statements, however, were of a general kind, mentioning just the emphasis on speaking and interaction or their role in CLT (e.g. "CLT emphasizes interaction as the means and the goal of teaching"). When introducing the term 'interaction' the students completed it by adding "between two speakers", "between students", "users of language", "students and the teacher". One of the students defined one of the goals of CLT as that of "developing students' ability to interact immediately, to respond to environmental stimuli". The concepts of speaking and interaction were associated with some practical activities advocated by CLT supporters to develop speaking skills. Some of them were listed in the statement "focusing on speaking activities like role-plays, interviews, real-life situations". The list was supplemented with such CLT practices as role-play, dialogues, games and drama.

Pair and group work as representative of communicative methodology found its place in the statements of 8 students, who treated it primarily as a form of classroom practice that ensured communication and interaction between learners. Two students highlighted its significance by contrasting it with individual work. The two statements illustrating such an opinion were: "Pair and group work [is] considered more important than individual work" and "Pair and group work instead of individual [is emphasized]".

Some students also stressed the significance of referring to real-life situations in FL instruction adopting the principles of communicative methodology. As a result, they touched upon the issue of the importance of using real-life materials, in particular, learning with the use of authentic texts. The two points made by the students that illustrate their conviction that it is the real-life use of language that contributes to language learning are connected with the belief in "using everyday life experience to reinforce learning", as well as "real-life examples in grammar teaching".

As for the concepts of accuracy and fluency, they appear in the students' pre-lecture statements only four times. Three of them are just general observations that CLT focuses on or stresses the development of fluency in learning a foreign language. One person presents the now controversial description of the attribute of CLT, namely "less attention paid to accuracy/ grammatical correctness". The students' knowledge on the current approach to the fluency/accuracy dichotomy was expanded due

to the scope of the lecture material and it was definitely one of the core concepts identified by the participants of the study.

The students' conceptualization of CLT after the lecture

In defining the main assumptions concerning Communicative Language Teaching after the lecture, the students not only exploited a larger scope of theoretical knowledge in their statements, but their ideas were generally better expressed with the help of relevant terminology. First of all, several students recognized the need of mentioning the context for the rise and development of CLT mainly by pointing at its contrast to teaching methods traditionally used at that time. One student gave the names of Audiolingualism and Structural-Situational Approach, whereas some other students specifically referred to Brumfit's view of this relationship stating that "The differences between traditional and communicative models – in communicative models, drills are optional".

Interestingly, while the first set of the students' statements contained 25 communication-related expressions, in the second set communication as the main theme of the students' statements appeared only 7 times. It seems to have been treated as an obvious feature of communicative methodology. It was only once that communication was labelled as a primary goal of EFL teaching. In other cases the students referred to it as a meaningful and holistic process (2 students), underlined its verbal and non-verbal properties, as well as using different strategies of communication. Instead, the students produced as many as 15 statements describing some general principles to be adopted in FL instruction. They emphasized the following facets of the language learning process: the use of meaningful, relevant, and purposeful language, negotiating meaning, induction, trial and error, as well as the gradual nature of language acquisition. One of the students developed a sequence of 4 items to define the major guidelines for teachers following CLT methodology. They are: " (1) [...] making language suitable for particular context and unpredictable production of language. (2) Allowing students to negotiate the meaning to add some new ideas and to notice how the language is used in recognition and formulation of the rules. (3) Language content should be relevant, inspiring, suitable to the learners' needs and interests. (4) Language learning is a gradual process and extremely productive and creative." The importance of noticing in language learning was underscored by two students. Seven students referred directly to the concept of communicative competence; the name of D. Hymes as the researcher who introduced the term appeared three times.

As pointed out above, after the students had become familiarized with the lecture content, many more students took interest in the issue of fluency and accuracy in foreign language teaching. In fact, as many as 12 students acknowledged the fluency/accuracy dichotomy to be a major consideration of CLT methodology. Some students just underlined the fact that both fluency and accuracy play an important role in attaining a command of a foreign language by stating e.g. "Fluency and accuracy are equally important". Two students saw the concepts of fluency and accuracy as a fundamental dimension in CLT. They provided the following statements: "Its goal [the goal of CLT] is using language accurately and fluently" and "Method where goal for students is to use language not only fluently, but also accurately". Three other students subscribed to the view that fluency is a dominant factor in foreign language instruction, which is exemplified in the sentences: "Fluency always comes before accuracy, it is more important", "Fluency comes first (because communication is the goal), accuracy comes later", and "Focus on fluency first, alongside accuracy, gradual process".

Another issue frequently commented on by the students after getting acquainted with the lecture content concerned the learner and teacher factors and their role in the language learning/teaching process, with the former clearly recognized as the dominating one. Six students' statements tackled the issue of individual learner differences (needs, motivation, pace of learning, interests, strategy use), as well as that of learners forming a kind of community interacting together through collaboration, sharing, pair and group work. One of the students underlined "that classroom is a community not a collection of individual students". On the other hand, fewer students than before the lecture displayed their interest in classroom activities; only six students talked directly about activities employed in the communicative classroom, and three of them found it important to mention the classification into pre-communicative and communicative activities. As for the teacher role, which was commented on in 6 statements, the teacher was described as "not only the presenter of the materials in the classroom, but also the facilitator of the improvement of the learners' communicative skills". In a similar vein, another student observed that "teachers create conditions and provide opportunities for language use and reflection on language."

It is, however, surprising that only six students touched upon the problems of the weaknesses of communicative methodology and the criticism it received, as the lecturer devoted to the issue quite a large portion of the material. The statements provided by the students were fairly general, for example "It was interesting to look at CLT from the point of its problems" or just "Solutions for improving CLT". It can be speculated that the problem of criticism of CLT was unknown to the students and it proved to be too difficult conceptually to report on it. This might have been the reason why the

students seldom chose to comment on it in their written response after the lecture.

Conclusion

The comparative analysis of the students' self-reports on their prior knowledge of CLT and their reports on the new knowledge gained through the lecture content has demonstrated an increase of the number of ideas and concepts the students chose to express, as well as a change in the quality of their verbalizations and the use of relevant domain-specific terminology. With the qualitative analysis basically drawn upon in the current study, a relatively small group of students who participated in it, and the classroom-based nature of the data no generalizations were expected. However, due to the examination of the students' reports, the lecturer could obtain insights into the change in the students' perceptions of their knowledge of CLT after they had listened to the lecture, taken down notes and formulated their written responses. The task required that they both determine the critical content information and verbalize it adequately in terms of the domain-relevant terminology in English as a foreign language. While listening to the lecture, the students were involved in the process of activating their prior knowledge, identifying gaps in it and making up for them so as to arrive at integrated and restructured knowledge of a topic, and of a domain. It is worth noting that the two self-reporting tasks the students performed not only added some interactive element to a generally monologic lecture, but also contributed to the effectiveness of the students' learning experience.

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