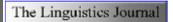Home
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Title
Discourse Markers in Academic Lectures

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Abstract
With the expansion of English, academic English has established itself a firm position in curricula for all university fields. Consequently, the need for research into the processes underlying academic performance in English has increased. The aim of the present study was to gain insight into the effect of discourse markers on academic listening comprehension of university students in English as a foreign language setting. Two groups of students listened to two different versions of a lecture. The two versions were different according to quantity and type of discourse markers. Listening comprehension tests and their mean scores were compared. The findings clearly indicate that subjects comprehended the lecture better when discourse markers were included than when they were deleted. The findings have implications for material designers, teachers, teacher trainers, and lecturers and provide suggestions for further research.

Key words: Discourse markers, English for Academic Purposes, Academic lectures.

Introduction

Interest in learning English has increased to such an extent that English is now considered by many researchers to be an international language (McKay, 2002). In expanding circle (Kachru, 1992) countries like Iran, where English is mainly used for academic purposes, EAP plays a highly important role. Additionally, in Iran, after the Islamic revolution, in an effort to defy westernization of the country, there has been a strong tendency to teach a variety of English that can somehow be taught/learned as a value-free system. It is believed that in EAP, the teaching of language can be separate from the dominant culture attached to it. Therefore, EAP has increasingly expanded so that currently it forms a considerable part of the curricula for all academic fields at university.

In parallel to the EAP programs, a considerable amount of research has been conducted and reported concerning the description of academic discourse in English (Flowerdew, 2002, p. 2). Academic lecture, as one type of academic discourse, is an important part of most university fields worldwide. The ability to comprehend academic lectures in English is thus an important need for university students (Flowerdew and Miller, 1992).

Some researchers (Long, 1985; Flowerdew, 1994; MacDonald, Badger, and White, 2000) have investigated the features of lectures (repetitions, paraphrases, rate of speech, authenticity, and syntactic complexity) that might aid L2 learners' comprehension. However, the role of discourse markers in aiding listening comprehension has not been fully explored yet.

Additionally, while several researchers have studied discourse markers from the descriptive and contrastive perspectives, there is a relative lack of experimental work on this topic. In order to fill the gap in research, this study investigates the effect of the use of discourse markers in academic listening comprehension of Iranian university students. The research is based on the premise that the knowledge derived from this investigation will provide insights to facilitate the academic listening comprehension.

 Discourse Markers
Theoretically, discourse markers are a functional class of verbal and non-verbal devices which provide contextual coordination for ongoing talk (Schiffrin, 1987). Discourse markers are "metalingual comments" in which the speaker specifically comments on how what he is saying is to be taken (Brown & Yule, 1989). It is clear that the thematized metalingual comments are not integrated with the representation of content which the recipients are constructing. They merely give them directions about the type and structure of mental representation they should be constructing. Fraser (1993) believes that discourse markers are one type of commentary pragmatic marker. Fraser divides discourse markers into discourse topic markers, discourse activity markers, and message relationship markers. Each type has a list of markers. According to Hyland (1999), in expert to non-expert communication discourse markers help to present information in a clear, convincing and interesting way in an effort to promote acceptance and understanding. Discourse markers are an important persuasive resource used to influence listeners' reactions to texts according to values and established conventions of a given discourse community.

Several studies have discussed the positive effects of the presence of discourse markers in texts (Chaudron & Richards,

1986; Flowerdew & Tauroza, 1995; Williams, 1992). The presence of more global discourse makers and phrases which signal a change in topic or point of emphasis appears to aid recall in lectures (MacDonald et al. 2000). Flowerdew and Tauroza (1995, 449) found that the presence or absence of lower level discourse markers, "words that speakers use to mark relationships between chunks of discourse such as *so, well, OK,* and *now*" aids comprehension.

Chaudron & Richards (1986) found that macro-markers help more than micro-and macro-markers together and more than micro-markers alone in second language learners' understanding and recall of lectures. However, Dunkel and Davis (1994) study indicated that discourse markers do not assist L2 listeners in comprehending English-medium lectures. Inspired by Chaudron & Richards' (1986) research, Perez & Macia (2002) conducted an exploratory study to find out to what extent the presence or absence of discourse markers effect comprehension as perceived and reflected upon by students and to see if students notice the presence or absence of discourse markers in a lecture. Their results suggest that students' level of language proficiency in English and different types of discourse markers present in lectures are two intervening factors that influence the level of listening comprehension. This research expands the previous studies to other contexts and focuses on the role of discourse markers on listening comprehension of Iranian EAP students. In EAP courses in Iran, the focus is mostly on written texts and students do not have much access to spoken discourse. Listening comprehension of academic discourse is a required skill and therefore it needs to be addressed in EAP/ESP courses. Students need to be able to understand academic information presented in English at professional conferences in their academic fields and therefore focus on the comprehension of academic lectures as an area of study is worthwhile.

Academic Lectures

1. Academic lectures have been identified as a register distinct from written text or conversation (Flowerdew, 1994; MacDonald et al.; 2000; Morell, 2004). Obviously, lectures tend to be monologic and relatively planned with respect to the content. Still a certain amount of adjustment and unplanned speech can be evident, indicative of the lecturer's awareness of listener's presence and needs (Chaudron, 1995).

With the status of English as an international language and the expansion in the use of English an increasing number of second language learners are engaged in academic pursuits that require them to listen to and comprehend great amounts of second language input. Academic lecture, as one type of academic discourse, is an important part of most university fields worldwide. The ability to comprehend academic lectures in English is thus an important need for university students (Flowerdew and Miller, 1992).

In recent years, applied linguists working in academic settings have increased our knowledge concerning academic listening tasks and their significance for second language teaching and learning. Some researchers have dealt with the macro structure of lectures (Olsen & Huckin, 1990; Young, 1994), others have analyzed the rhetorical function of introductions (Thompson, 1994), others with interactional practices of

lecture comprehension (Morell, 2004), and yet others have investigated the use of specific variables in lectures. Flowerdew (1994) is one the most comprehensive publications on this topic which includes specific papers dealing with cognitive discoursal, ethnographic and pedagogical issues involved in academic listening and lecture comprehension.

The use of discourse markers in academic lectures has been investigated by other scholars (Chaudron & Richards, 1986; Flowerdew & Tauroza, 1995; Perez & Macia, 2002). A prominent characteristic of lectures is the use of certain lexical phrases or rhetorical markers which help to signal the major content and sequence in argument, and to demarcate boundaries of non-essential information. These have attracted researchers' attention both for their inherent usefulness in understanding the structure of the discourse, and as-potential aids in training listeners to understand better (Chaudron & Richards, 1986; Flowerdew & Tauroza, 1995; Morell, 2004). Nattinger & Decarrico (1992) display at some length the differences in such forms between less and more formal lecture styles, making the further distinction between "global" and "local" macro-organizers. Strodt-Lopez (1991) shows that asides, which have identifiable markers, are important features of lectures that maintain audience-speaker rapport and may in fact clarify the speaker's orientation to the main points.

Discourse markers signal the information structure of discourse by emphasizing directions and relations within discourse. Nonetheless, the research regarding the role of discourse markers in listening comprehension is meager (Perez & Macia, 2002). The present study, therefore focuses on the use of discourse markers in academic lectures in an EFL setting. Thus, we are dealing with a context of language learning that has not been the focus of most academic lecture comprehension studies.

Methodology
Subjects
The participants of this study were 72 EAP students. There were 14 male and 58 female students majoring in teaching English as a foreign language at Najafabad Azad University. All the students were native speakers of Persian. They aim to be teachers of English at the secondary level or enter a field where expert use of the English language is required. The students had at least 6 years of formal education in English. The participants were enrolled in language lab two and language lab three courses which are part of the bachelors' degree curriculum for students majoring in English. These courses are designed in order to improve the listening comprehension of the students.

The reason for using students from this academic discipline was to ensure a certain level of language proficiency (intermediate or above) required for discourse markers to be noticed and to show their facilitating effect (Perez & Macia, 2002). The participants were randomly divided into two groups of experimental and control. To assess their language proficiency a Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) which included three parts of listening comprehension section; structure section; and vocabulary and reading comprehension section was used and based on the students' scores which were between 350-450, they were categorized as intermediate to upper intermediate EAP students. The TOEFL test was chosen from the book "Reading for TOEFL". The result of the proficiency test (see tables 1 and 2 below) showed no significant difference between the two groups in terms of

language proficiency in general and listening comprehension in particular.

Table 1 (see [PDF file](#))
Table 2 (see [PDF file](#))

Materials
Three academic texts were used for this study. The texts were selected from the materials that students typically encounter in their classes. Two versions of the same lectures were used. The two versions of the three texts differed only in the amount of discourse markers used. An assistant lecturer from the U.S. was asked to prepare a talk based on the three texts provided by the researcher. The version submitted, which included discourse markers, served as the baseline. Two other native speakers in addition to the researcher examined the scripted listening comprehension texts to make sure the texts have an appropriate number and type of discourse markers and added a few more (Chaudron & Richards, 1986; Flowerdew & Tauroza, 1995; Murphy & Candlin, 1979). Another version of the three texts was made in which discourse markers which were not necessary for the propositional content of the texts were removed.

The two versions of the lecture were scripted taking special care to make it resemble a speech (extracts from the texts are listed below with the discourse markers italicized). Based on Dudley-Evans and Johns (1981) categorization of lectures, the present study deals primarily with lectures in the reading style. That is, the lecturer reads from notes, or speaks as if he was reading from notes. This reading style for lectures is typical of the lectures students hear in English language labs and at conferences. The native speaker delivered both versions of the three lectures, reading aloud at a normal rate of speech. Table 3 below gives the details on the composition of the three lectures.

Table 3. (see [PDF file](#))

The following summarizes the steps taken to construct the lectures used in this study:

1. Three texts selected from textbooks.
2. An educated native speaker in the field was asked to give a lecture based on the provided texts with extra care for the inclusion of discourse markers.
3. Lectures were scripted and a few more discourse markers (both textual and interpersonal) were added to the scripted lectures.
4. A second version of the scripted lectures was prepared by omitting the discourse markers which were not necessary for the propositional content of lectures.
5. Both text versions were checked for authenticity by two educated native speakers and necessary adjustments made (one was judged as dry and stiff and the other one as more user friendly and more informal in tone).

The lectures with more discourse marker were delivered to group 1 and the ones without were delivered to group 2.
   The first lecture was on 'Productivity of language' from the book *The Study of Language*, the second one on 'Learning a native language', from the book *The Foreign Language Learners*, and the third one on 'Adapting readings to

encourage slower readers from *Forum*.

The extracts were analyzed in terms of the quality and quantity of discourse markers found in them. The classification and analysis of discourse markers was based on functional criteria, drawing both on the analysis of lecture and on the study of different classifications proposed from functional perspective (Hyland, 2000; Crismore, Markkanen, & Steffensen, 1993). Two main types of discourse markers, textual and interpersonal were identified and used in our classification.

Table 4. (see PDF file)

> Examples from the texts
> Frame marker + booster *must+ person marker*
> *(The first issue we must consider is that ....)*
> Code gloss (*For example, Cicadas have 4 signals......)*
> Logical connectives *(In contrast, the human.....)*
> Code gloss to expand on the concept of '*productivity*'(....*has been termed productivity, which means...)*
> Code gloss to further explain *two opposing forces* (*On the one hand ....)*
> Frame marker + hedging verb (*...it seems best at this stage to have some   engaging activities for ....)*

It should be noted that one discourse marker could be assigned to more than one category. For example, this indirect rhetorical question acts both as a frame marker, indicating a topic shift, and as relational device:
.... you might be wondering what the difference is between human language and nonhuman signaling.....

In other cases, one marker was found to be embedded within a larger discourse marker unit. The following frame marker indicates a change of topic (*Now, let's turn to...)* and includes an attitude marker (...*the more important issue related to ...*), -nevertheless, as part of an idiomatic expression, it was not counted as such.

> Example extract from Lecture 3 (Encouraging slow readers) with discourse markers
> Lecture –With
> *Today I am going to talk about the adaptations in reading activities that teachers can use to encourage the slower readers to read faster. What I am going to cover may sound familiar to those of you who have given your students some in-class reading.*

In our classes, there are some students who finish reading the assigned text quickly and breeze through the post reading exercises. *However, there are* other students who may still be reading and haven't even started the exercises. Many may be leafing through dictionaries. *It is not uncommon for* students who finished first to be *perhaps* chatting, and the slower students to be showing annoyance.

Table 5. (see PDF file)

A multiple choice test of listening comprehension which included 16 items checking for both global and local

understanding was designed and administered to both groups of participants. Each lecture was followed by 5-6 multiple choice questions which tapped into factual, inferential, and global understanding of the lectures. All three lectures and the questions were read by a native speaker of English, tape recorded and presented orally to EAP students in a language laboratory. The listening comprehension test had a high reliability (KR-21 r=.87). Additionally, Pearson product-moment correlations calculated between the dependent listening comprehension test scores and the TOEFL listening comprehension test scores were significant (r=.76).

Data Analysis
The mean performance of the two groups on the listening comprehension test was compared by using an independent sample two-tailed *t*-test, with a .05 level of significance required to reject the null hypothesis that there would be no statistically significant differences between the two groups .
Results

Table 6 illustrates the results of the *t*-test analyses for the listening comprehension test. Out of the maximum score of 16, the mean scores were 10.62 for group 1 and 8.93 for group 2. The difference between the two means was statistically significant at 0.05.

Table 6. (see PDF file)

As shown in table 6 there is a significant difference between the performances of the two groups. Group 1 who listened to the lectures with discourse markers outperformed the other group.

Discussion
The statistical analysis of the mean scores produced evidence that the extracts containing discourse markers were more comprehensible than the extracts without. The findings revealed that the more extensive use of frame markers in which the author's intentions are signaled and the concepts are introduced before exemplification, and the discourse pattern of introduction of concept followed by an example, facilitates the listening comprehension of EAP students. This pattern provides the listeners with repetition and reinforcement of the content. It is also worth noting that the three extracts for group 1 (with discourse markers) make the most use of person markers, which tends to support the idea that this form of speaker-audience solidarity promotes comprehension (Crismore, 1989; Morell, 2004). Furthermore using hedges to mitigate the speaker's authorial stance may render the lectures more user-friendly.

In general, the results of this study lend further support to the idea that discourse markers have a positive influence on comprehension. The greater presence of some types of discourse markers (e.g., frame markers, person markers, hedges, and glosses) could be linked to the better performance of the first group. However, it should be noted that the students in this study were judged to be at intermediate level of language proficiency based on the TOEFL test result. A large-scale study with more participants and more levels of language proficiency (e.g., Perez & Macia, 2002) would yield more reliable statistics. Additionally, only multiple choice test of listening comprehension was used as a dependent variable in this study. Other global measures such as Cloze test, or summary tasks may add to the validity of the

study and provide us with more insights. Nevertheless, the findings of this study indicate that discourse markers as a topic of research in ESP/EAP listening comprehension, teaching, and material design deserve attention. It would seem that certain types of discourse markers (interpersonal/textual; macro/micro) may be more facilitating than others during listening. For instance, the findings of a study by Chaudron & Richards (1986) showed that the combination of micro-macro markers did not seem to help students understand the lecture as much as micro and macro discourse markers alone. It would be valuable to set up more articulated experiments that isolate these different forms of discourse markers in order to determine their effect on listening comprehension of different types of texts for different levels of language proficiency and in different disciplines.

Conclusion

A psycholinguistic approach (Flowerdew & Miller, 1992) to lecture comprehension such as the one adopted in this study yields results which are useful for language processing in relation to second language lecture comprehension. The findings of this study also have wider implications within the content of lecturing in English to speakers of other languages.

Practical implications of this study suggest that our findings may be used to determine instructional actions to be undertaken in different teaching contexts. Students should be made aware of the presence, importance, and facilitating effects of discourse markers for academic lecture comprehension. From the textual viewpoint, students can be asked to identify instances of frame markers previews and then predict content. Attention to logical connectives will help students analyze the writer's/speaker's line of reasoning and rhetorical strategies. Tracing endophoric markers can help students understand the macro structure of a text and also encourage them to retain and build on newly acquired knowledge (Steffensen & Cheng, 1996). On the interpersonal level, students can look for hedges, boosters, and first person pronouns and reflect on why the speaker has chosen to use these features. Attitude markers can prompt students to contribute their own idea and thus critically react to the text. This research not only heightens our understanding of the listening process and different intervening factors, but would hopefully lead to more effective teaching methodologies and will provide more criteria for the selection of materials for ESP listening instruction. Lastly, the use of discourse markers can be considered as an area of strategic competence that can be taught and may have an immediate effect on comprehension. This means that nonnative speakers can compensate for skills that they lack by using appropriate strategies.

In conclusion, our study has revealed the facilitative effect of discourse markers in the comprehension of lectures in a second language. The findings show that how the academic content should be delivered to the student is of high significance and that content lecturers should consider how best they could assist the students to cope with the academic system of education faster and better.

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