

University Lectures? We're Ready!

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An ESL listening textbook preparing students for academic work typically consists of a pre-listening section introducing a topic and new vocabulary, a taped lecture, exercises to help students listen for main ideas and supporting details, recognize transitional words and phrases, and take notes in outline form, and some type of comprehension check. While the format and exercises of these texts are helpful, teachers and students have become increasingly discontented with the use of tapes and the sometimes unrealistic listening situations presented. Students are rarely expected to listen to and understand taped materials outside an ESL classroom, or be in listening situations where there is no communication between the speaker and listener. Even in formal academic lectures students have the benefit of visual clues and the opportunity to ask questions and get feedback, an element often not accounted for in listening text materials. Baxter (1981) observes that most ESL material is based on native-speaker models, and therefore listening comprehension and related skills are developed from situations that offer little variation. Students may have an unrealistic view of what is involved in listening based on these materials as in the case of recorded dialogues in which the speakers have no difficulty understanding each other.

The Lecture Series

Because the need for more realistic listening situations was perceived by the English Language Institute (ELI) at BYU-Hawaii, a lecture series was initiated and has been evolving for the past five years. Students from four different levels (intermediate to advanced) who are enrolled in listening courses meet together once a week. When the lecture series first began, lectures were mostly given by ELI faculty and tended to be extremely well-organized. Students listened, carefully jotted down the main points and supporting details, copied new vocabulary words from the board, and raised their hands to ask the teachers to repeat information. In order to teach note-taking skills and outlining, teachers would sometimes stop during the lecture and show an overhead transparency of a sample outline and notes, and allow students to compare it to their own, or give the students an outline to follow while listening. The lectures were 20-30 minutes long. During the last ten minutes of the class, students were given a quiz and could use their notes to answer the questions.

Occasionally a teacher would invite a guest lecturer to speak to the students on such topics as the American musical, cowboys, the medicinal value of Hawaiian plants, physical fitness, campus elections, and so on. Students were asked to take notes, and the guest lecturer gave a quiz at the end to test listening comprehension.

This version of the lecture series definitely had some strengths. Students were exposed to a variety of native and non-native English accents, new idioms and vocabulary, various organizational patterns and styles, and a broad selection of topics. Teachers and students both had a break from the regular routine of daily classes, and enjoyed meeting together as a group. However, even though students were receiving the benefit of live lectures as opposed to taped lectures, they were still being primarily exposed to formal classroom English carefully modelled by a teacher. Likewise, the lectures given by guests offered variety, but were often more entertaining than academic, and didn't require much note-taking.

As the English Language Institute (ELI) began to implement adjunct courses (see Brinton, Snow, and Wesche, 1989, for a discussion) in which students were enrolled in a language class and a content class, teachers began to realize that although students in the adjunct class had fulfilled their ELI listening course requirements, they were not prepared for the lectures in their non-ELI or content classes. Students frequently complained that they couldn't understand their content teachers because they talked too fast or the lectures were unorganized. They were able to comprehend the well-organized, carefully articulated lectures of their ELI teachers in class and in the lecture series, and the taped lectures in the language lab, but were often disconcerted when they experienced their first "real" university lecture. Varied organization patterns and lecturing styles, the use of rapid speech, unfamiliar idioms, vocabulary, asides, and gestures were disorienting and confusing for students in spite of their previous preparation. Gone were the words written on the board, the repeated information, the explanations of vocabulary and idioms, the confidence and time to ask questions, and the measured speech of their ELI instructors.

Modifications

In order to better prepare students for future university classes, a change in the lecture series was introduced. In recent years, each ELI instructor who has taught a listening class has been assigned two departments on campus from which to select lecturers. Professors currently teaching required university (general education) classes which ELI students will soon enroll in are approached by the ELI teacher who explains the objectives of the lecture series, and invites the professor to participate. The professor is asked to lecture on the same material he has prepared for his general education class. This saves him preparation time and makes the lecture realistic. The lecture lasts for 50 minutes which gives the students a sustained listening experience and the opportunity to take notes. A different professor lectures each week on topics such as biology, math, literature, American history, music, politics, and business.

In addition, professors are encouraged to provide a reading for students to prepare before coming to class. This can be part of a chapter, a short story, a magazine article—whatever the professor has asked his own students to read in preparation for the class period. If a reading is provided, the ELI teachers preview it with students before the lecture, help them with vocabulary, check reading comprehension, and ask questions to get the students thinking about the subject. Student questions regarding subject matter are referred to the lecturer. The reading provides students with background information in preparation for the lecture, and gives them an idea of what will be expected of them in various courses.

During the lecture the students take notes. The next day in class all the listening students take a quiz, which is made up after the lecture by the teacher in charge and the lecturer. Students can use their notes to answer the questions since they are being tested on what they understood from the lecture and how well they took notes, not on the material itself. At the end of the semester, a final test is given on all the lectures. This motivates students to attend the lectures, to take notes that they can read and understand several weeks later, and to revise their notes if necessary, in other words, to do what will be expected of them in other university classes.

In addition to testing, a variety of teaching activities are used by teachers as a follow-up to the lecture. To introduce methods of note-taking some teachers put their notes on an overhead transparency, pointing out abbreviations, main ideas, and details. Students can then compare their notes and see what they missed. Students also have the opportunity to ask questions about the lecture and discuss difficulties, and the teacher can highlight vocabulary, gestures, asides, or other pertinent details about the lecture. Lectures are videotaped and filed in the Language Center where students can review them, and teachers can check them out. A library of these tapes and accompanying materials is being built up, and is available for follow-up discussion, assignments, and individual work.

Evaluation

One of the advantages of the present lecture series is that students are introduced to a variety of academic subjects which they will be required to take at some point in their university career. In addition, the listening situations are more like those they will encounter in their non-ELI classes. An added benefit of the lecture series has been to introduce students to the teachers of their future university courses, and to introduce non-ELI teachers to their future students, which has helped increase their understanding of international students. Through the lecture series the university community at large has become involved. Other professors on campus are now more aware of the ELI program and the needs and challenges of international students.

Problems encountered with the lecture series have been few. Professors have been willing to participate, and some have even asked what they could do differently next time. Because the students all speak English as a second language, however, a few professors have simplified the content and language as they have become aware of the students' responses even though they have been asked to teach the same way they would their own classes. Even so, students generally are being exposed to more realistic university lectures and the content and vocabulary they will encounter.

Student feedback regarding the lectures has been positive. Questionnaires administered to students during two different semesters identified that students felt their note-taking, vocabulary, and listening comprehension had improved as a result of the lecture series. Following are student responses when asked if the lecture series had been helpful in improving their listening skills, and if they liked having general education professors give the lectures:

"The lecture series help me by giving me more ideas of how to take notes and also how to listen carefully. It also helps me to know new words which added to my vocabulary. My listening skills is improving more and more now."

"Lecture series were very useful for me. I don't feel worry about lecture in General Education any more. I think I learned skills of note taking."

"I have learned a lot. Like how to abbreviate the words. How to take notes faster and listen very carefully."

"Yes, because it will be a beneficial to me as they lecture in any of those G.E. classes so when I get to my G.E. classes I already got familiar with them."

"I like it because those are really good chances to contact the real lectures which we must take someday."

"Yes, because that can be so helpful for our future academic life. We should have some lectures from the biology professor or American Heritage, Anthropology another thing. Vocabulary which they use in the lectures are we really need to learn."

The goal of the lecture series is to better prepare students for what they will encounter in other university classes, and to introduce students to the content of general education classes and future teachers. The opinion of teachers and students is that the lecture series is accomplishing these objectives.

References

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Brinton, D.M., Snow, M.A., & Wesche, M.B. (1989). *Content-based Second Language Instruction*. New York: Newbury House.

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