Lecturing

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1. The main issues: getting started

Some students in your lecture will be still developing their English language skills and/or becoming familiar with necessary background knowledge. This means some may struggle with both understanding the lecturer’s language and with understanding what the lecture means. Many must work hard to make a record for later study, either by making notes or a recording. Some also say they are not clear about how lectures link with other elements of the course, and especially cannot see how lectures link with assessment.

For some teachers, lecturing to diverse student groups can feel like trying to reconcile conflicting requirements – slower for some but not too slow for others; more repetition but still achieving coverage; being clear but not simplistic and so on. Teachers may find they are more self-aware, perhaps monitoring their own use of language or looking more carefully for student reactions. It can be even more important to build in ways to check students’ understanding during the lecture and to develop ways for students to review lecture material outside of the timed delivery slot. They may need more time to prepare and to organise supporting material. All these factors probably mean that, even when teachers have made changes and modifications to reflect the diverse learning needs of their students, lecturing will remain a demanding and challenging aspect of teaching.

Where teachers do make changes, reports from students show that these are often noted and appreciated. Many of the student stories in this resource mention teachers’ efforts as being a significant aid to the students becoming effective learners.

2. Suggestions for action

Your lectures are likely to be more effective for international students (and all students) if you focus on:

- Transparent structure
- Essential content
- Improved understandability
- Effective note taking

2.1 Structure

Try to be more explicit and transparent about how the lecture is organised. Instead of expecting students to spot the sections and understand the functions of each part, you could:

- Use an introduction and a summary and repeat key ideas e.g. ‘This is an introduction/ summary….’
- State links to previous/future lectures and topics
- Signal moves between sections as in ‘Now I am going to talk about how you apply this idea with an example….’. Try pointing to where you are: ‘On the outline, I am now here…’ or you could name the section ‘In summary, this lecture has covered….’
- State the importance of ideas: ‘This is a key point…..’
- Repeat. ‘In the last section, I talked about (a) and now in (b), I will cover…..’ [then] ‘In (a), it was about… and in (b), about …. and now, in (c), etc.’.
‘This building up and rehearsal of the content of a lecture as it develops can help us to link chains of ideas together, and can work well when the lecture is structured as a story, investigation, or other logical sequence’ (Gibbs, 1992)

2.2 Content

If you devote time to structure and to making the lecture more understandable, you may well cover less material. One experienced teacher who has delivered a familiar lecture in many different contexts reports that she covers about 10-15% less material when the audience is listening to English as a second or third language; others claim smaller variations. To address this, you might:

- Provide additional readings, handouts or supplemental multimedia instruction
- Explore and develop ideas rather than only introduce new knowledge

When one teacher heard a suggestion that she differentiate between the essential and the supplemental in what she covered (then to focus on the former), she replied that this was impossible sometimes – some lectures are just very detailed summaries of complex ideas and everything was essential. In such cases, the argument for making an audio or video recording and for encouraging students to review the content themselves, perhaps several times, becomes especially strong. You might warn students beforehand of the need to make a recording of a particularly content-heavy session which is coming up or arrange for an audio or video version to be made.

2.3 Understandability

International students may only understand 50% or less of lectures at the start of their studies. You will lighten the students’ ‘language load’ so they can attend to the content of the lecture if you try to:

- Be aware of your own use of English. Using a slower pace (but not too slow) may help all your students.
- Use plain English and straightforward sentence structure. One way is by cutting out introductory clauses (‘So, whilst not wishing to underestimate the importance of xxx, I think it is important to stress yyy’). Another is by choosing vocabulary that is in common use as in ‘living in’ rather than ‘domiciled at’.
- Seek out and use concrete words. Metaphors are often camouflage within ordinary speech (You probably noticed the ‘camouflage’ but did you notice the ‘concrete’?).
- Provide pre-reading. Consider making a discipline-specific glossary, and offer lecture notes or Powerpoint slides in advance, perhaps on the intranet or via a unit website.
- Encourage students to ask questions and seek clarification (though probably not in the lecture where students may not be brave enough to speak). Students often appreciate being able to ask individually after the lecture and where this is not possible, suggest how they can do so at another time, perhaps via email.
- Provide ways for students to record and replay lectures. (A staff case story on using screen-capture movies is accessible from the download page for this section).

2.4 Effective note-taking

Non-native speakers’ lecture notes are less likely to reflect the way ideas connect together. They often do not reflect or show the underpinning structures for ideas (Clerehan, 1995). Also, many students have difficulty using Powerpoint slides as the basis for their notes. Examples provided orally by the lecturer can be difficult to record or connect to slide material. The underlying structure of ideas being conveyed may not match the slide’s list-making template. Slides often use only single words or parts of phrases to represent a whole idea
yet many students, especially those working in translation or within an unfamiliar cultural context, will need the full idea to be written out in order to understand its meaning when they review them later. To improve students' notes, you could:

- Structure explicitly (see above) so the students are more likely to add headings and sections in their notes.
- Record the lecture so that students can listen, translate and record at their own pace. One student from Vietnam described this as ‘very boring but useful’ (Gosper et al, 2007).
- Provide handouts with key information and any complex diagrams or data. Some lecturers provide gapped handouts where students can annotate or add new information as the lecture is delivered.
- Provide pauses so students can review and reconstruct their notes during the lecture itself.

Observation of many lectures would show that fewer and fewer students are now making notes and instead, are perhaps relying on slides and handouts - only to find these are of limited use for later review. The changes made for international students may encourage all of them to become more engaged in lectures and to construct a written resource for later study.

3. Top Tip

“The pause is one of the most critical tools of public speaking. It is an important device for gaining attention. Pauses can be used as punctuation - to mark a thought, sentence, or paragraph - and also for emphasis, before or after a key concept or idea. If you suddenly stop in midsentence, students will look up from their notes to see what happened. Planned pauses also give you and your audience a short rest. Some faculty take a sip of coffee or water after they say something they want students to stop and think about. Other faculty deliberately pause, announce, "This is the really important consideration," and pause again before proceeding.”

(Barbara Gross Davis, Tools for Teaching, University of Berkeley)

4. Top resources

Universities Scotland Race Equality Tool Kit: Learning and Teaching, Meeting the needs of UK and international bilingual students

'The Empathetic Structuring of Lectures for International Students: The Nolandese Lecture Experience' by Tom Hunter of the University of Ulster, accessible on the download page for this section. This staff development resource was developed for lecturers to help them to understand the difficulties with language that international students can experience during lectures and provides some suggested strategies.

5. Further reading:

Lectures have many purposes: they provide new knowledge, offer examples of theory in practice, make links to course readings and activities, and generate notes for later review for exams or coursework. International students’ language skills or background knowledge can make it much harder for lecturers to be confident that these purposes are achieved. Many teachers with experience of lecturing to diverse student groups say they need to pay extra attention to some aspects of the lecture.

Most suggestions about lecturing to diverse groups are similar to those for effective lecturing for any group although modifications that take specific account of students’ cultural and language skills will be particularly appreciated by many international students.

6. Related resources

Strategies to address a reluctance to ask questions in lectures - Martin Binks et al University of Nottingham
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