The language of English academic lectures: The case of field of study in highlighting importance

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Abstract

This paper explores importance marking in the academic lectures of different disciplines from a functional perspective. Drawing on a corpus-driven and discourse analytic approach, we extracted the importance markers of this study from the 160 English academic lectures of the BASE corpus, which are equally distributed in the four main academic disciplinary groups of arts and humanities, social studies, physical sciences, and life and medical sciences. First, it was observed that in highlighting importance, the discipline the speaker lectures in does not make a difference. Second, we observed that, irrespective of discipline, marking importance involves (1) pointing up the lecture, (2) expressing attitudinal evaluation according to a hierarchy of importance, (3) stating which topics need extensive coverage, (4) revealing what is likely to appear in the assessment, and (5) establishing interaction with the audience. Finally, 'life and medical sciences' lecturers were found to involve the students in the lecture more frequently than the lecturers of other disciplinary groups.
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1. Introduction

Lecturing is now an old convention at the university. Though it has been criticized for its inefficiency as an approach to teaching (e.g., Costin, 1972; Dunkin, 1983; Ramsden, 1992), lecturing is still a widely used teaching approach in academic education. That's why comprehending lectures is believed to be critical to academic accomplishment (Olsen and Huckin, 1990). The importance of lecturing is also due to the fact that what the lecturers present in their lectures as the theoretical knowledge of their discipline is most likely to be examined on the exam paper (Sutherland and Badger, 2004).

Yet, there have been several reports documenting the challenges that comprehending lectures poses to students in English-medium classes (e.g., Biggs, 1997; Flowerdew, 1994; Flowerdew and Miller, 1992). The ephemeral nature of lectures and lack of familiarity with the format, overall structure, and the distribution of information in lectures are among

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the reasons that have made listening to lectures problematic (e.g., Duszak, 1997; Flowerdew, 1994; Lynch, 2011; Nesi, 2001). These factors, along with the students' limited command of English, have made listening to lectures significantly cognitively and linguistically demanding (Thompson, 2003).

Discourse structuring or organization is a frequent theme in the literature of lecture comprehension (e.g., Hanson and Sinclair, 2008; Isaacs, 1994; Morell, 2004; Nesi and Basturkmen, 2006; Simpson, 2004; Thompson, 2003; Wray and Perkins, 2000; Young, 1994). Discourse structuring expressions organize the discourse of lectures and help learners develop a mental representation of the macrostructure of the lecture content. As Nesi and Basturkmen (2006) point out, ''the fact that pre-planned monologic lectures are not co-constructed, and lack normal opportunities for negotiation of meaning, suggests that they may have a greater need for discourse structuring devices'' (p. 288). Discourse structuring statements are reported to aid the lecture comprehension, note-taking and recall of students (e.g., Jung, 2003, 2006; Khuwaileh, 1999; Titsworth and Kiewra, 2004; Wray and Perkins, 2000). Among discourse structuring expressions, there are statements that help students identify which portions of the lecture are important to learn, remember, or take note of (e.g., *bear that in mind*, *the thing is*, *the moral to remember is*). These expressions which are referred to as relevance markers (Crawford Camiciottoli, 2004, 2007; Deroey, 2015; Hunston, 1994), 'emphasizers' (Siepmann, 2005), and 'focusers' (Simpson, 2004) are important too (Flowerdew, 1994).

Importance or relevance markers are defined as the ''lexicogrammatical devices that overtly mark the importance, relevance, or significance of points that are presented verbally or visually'' (Deroey, 2015, p. 2). Importance markers are a combination of discourse organization and evaluation (Deroey and Taverniers, 2011, as cited in Deroey and Taverniers, 2012a). Evaluation of relevance is a prominent function for evaluation in academic research papers (Hunston, 2004). By the same token, evaluation in academic lectures takes place according to relevance. That is, a piece of information may be considered unimportant if it is not relevant to the topic under consideration. That's why importance markers have also been called relevance markers (Hunston, 1994). Highlighting importance using these expressions involves establishing a hierarchy of importance (Deroey and Taverniers, 2011, as cited in Deroey and Taverniers, 2012a) and organizing discourse by conveying an attitudinal evaluation of information along the ''parameter of importance or relevance'' (Thompson and Hunston, 2000, p. 24).

According to Hunston (1994), relevance markers have four distinguishing features. First, they may be retrospective or prospective. This feature relates to the placement of important information, whether they have been placed before or after the importance marker. Second, relevance markers ''overtly mark the relevance of preceding, or subsequent, stretches of text'' (p. 199). This feature is related to the use of evaluative language (e.g., *important*, *unimportant*) to mark un/importance. Deroey and Taverniers (2012b) and Zare, Eslami-Rasekh, and Dabaghi (2017), however, provide examples of importance markers that do not necessarily mark un/importance overtly. These importance markers either relate the contents of the lecture to assessment (e.g., *it is something that you can be examined on*), which are called 'assessment markers' (Deroey and Taverniers, 2012b) and 'relating to exam' markers of importance (Zare et al., 2017), or comment on the topics that need to be covered in detail (e.g., *race is something which needs looking at in detail and I'll be coming back to that question*), which are referred to as 'topic treatment' (Deroey and Taverniers, 2012b). Third, relevance markers evaluate the discourse itself and are thus metadiscoursal. Finally, relevance markers have an important discourse organizational role. The last two features of relevance markers are related to their metadiscursive nature. As Hyland (2005) points out, metadiscourse refers to the linguistic expressions that writers use to organize their texts explicitly, engage the readers, and convey their attitudes toward the material and audience. Examples of importance markers that have been found in 'delimiting topic,' 'marking asides,' 'managing the message,' and 'speech act labelling' metadiscourse (Ädel, 2010); and 'text-structuring metadiscourse' (Thompson, 2003) support their metadiscursive nature.

Taking into consideration the above points, an understanding of importance markers and how they characterize the academic lectures of different fields of study is advantageous to both lecturers and students. The knowledge obtained from these studies may be used for the production of EAP materials in lecturer delivery and comprehension. Though a great many attempts have been made to investigate these expressions, more research seems necessary. Un/importance markers have been investigated specifically in English academic lectures (Crawford Camiciottoli, 2004, 2007; Deroey, 2015; Deroey and Taverniers, 2012a, 2012b), Persian academic lectures (Zare et al., 2017), and in Ted speeches (Partington, 2014). In addition to these, sporadic examples of importance markers have been found in such studies as Ädel (2010), Bednarek (2006), Biber (2006), Chaudron and Richards (1986), DeCarrico and Nattinger (1988), Duguid (2010), Flowerdew (1994), Giannoni (2010, 2011), Lin (2010), Thompson (2003), and Young (1994).

Crawford Camiciottoli's (2004, 2007), and Deroey and Taverniers' (2012a) studies deal with the lexicogrammatical features of importance markers which are not the concern of this study. Here, Deroey's (2015), Deroey and Taverniers' (2012b), Zare et al.'s (2017), and Partington's (2014) studies are reviewed. Next, the present study and what distinguishes it from earlier attempts follow.