STUDIA PHILOLOGICA UNIVERSITATIS VELIKOTARNOVENSIS
VOL. 36/2 2017 VELIKO TARNOVO

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DEVELOPING STRATEGIC LISTENING TO L2 LECTURES IN ACADEMIC DISCOURSE

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РАЗВИВАНЕ НА СТРАТЕГИИ ЗА СЛУШАНЕ НА ЛЕКЦИИ НА ВТОРИ ЕЗИК В АКАДЕМИЧНИЯ ДИСКУРС

This article discusses an approach to course design that can be implemented in the instructional practices focusing on learners' academic literacies in a second language (L2). To this end, the paper proposes a six-phase framework for facilitating university students' ability to comprehend L2 lectures. The main premise of the presented pedagogical sequence is that a systematic guidance in the use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies can enhance learners' skills in L2 lecture comprehension. Therefore, each phase of the cycle consists of activities addressing selected strategies from the two categories.

Keywords: L2 lecture comprehension, strategy-based instruction, language for academic purposes
Ключови думи: слушане на лекции на втори език, стратегийно ориентирано обучение езикът на академичното общуване

Introduction

The teaching and learning of a second language (L2) for academic purposes has become a salient issue in recent years. This is due to the growing global trend for university students to pursue their studies through the medium of L2 (e.g., through English medium instruction – EMI), both in their home countries and abroad. It is critical, therefore, for them to possess the sufficient L2 skills that would ensure their access to the relevant knowledge domains and discourse practices in an academic context. In order to attract and motivate the contemporary generation of learners, nowadays, university teaching has been moving away from the traditional "talk-and-chalk" lecturing style. As a consequence, "new-age" instructional techniques are being introduced towards a more reciprocal and multimedia teaching in a face-to-face and virtual interaction. These, however, still require from students to have mastered the language of education and a range of skills and strategies for processing

and comprehending extended stretches of academic discourse. The present article aims to address the need for developing effective programmes for teaching academic listening, which help learners succeed in their L2-medium studies in the academy in a variety of contexts. Following a general consideration of the characteristics of lecture listening and strategic L2 lecture comprehension, the paper discusses the rationale and the six stages of an instructional framework based on strategy development.

Academic listening and strategic L2 lecture comprehension

From the vantage point of cognitive psychology, the comprehension of spoken academic discourse can be described as an intentional process of selecting, organizing and integrating information (see also Imhof 2010: 98). The listener attentional capacity and his/her metacognition and self-regulatory resources additionally determine the successful flow of the process. In order to comprehend the incoming speech effectively, the academic listener needs to utilize and/or adapt to both internal and external factors. They play an important role in lecture listening both in L1 and L2 contexts. The variables which are external to the learner include, for example, the speaker, genre and discourse variables, length and speed of delivery of talk, etc. The internal factors are associated with the comprehender's L2 proficiency, mental representations of knowledge (schemata), working memory, gender, culture, and other listener characteristics. However, quite often, an interplay of both internal and external variables can limit one's understanding of the spoken text. For instance, comprehension constraints related to the speed of delivery of a lecture (external variable) may actually be induced by problems that are internal to the listener (e.g., failure in word recognition or attentional control).

The discussion above suggests that the (L2) comprehender does not merely decode the linguistic input (bottom-up processing) whereby "the signal is processed through several levels, including auditory-phonetic, phonemic, syllabic, lexical, syntactic, propositional, pragmatic and interpretive" (Field 2003: 326). Activated prior knowledge (e.g., about the discourse, the speaker, the topic) is also utilized by the listener in order to form a coherent representation of the incoming speech (top-down processing). Hence, both bottom-up and top-down mechanisms operate interactively in the decoding, meaning-building and integration of the spoken message (Vandergrift 2004: 4).

It is important to note that expert listeners process the text largely automatically (especially, bottom-up) through their highly developed retrieval structures, which help them shift rapidly between top-down and bottom-up processes (Kintsch 2009, Vandergrift & Goh 2012). For novice listeners, on the other hand, the listening process requires a conscious effort and their understanding is subject to a more controlled processing. What is more, not only low-proficiency L2 learners can find themselves in the role of "novice" comprehenders. Even for L1 listeners and highly-proficient L2 speakers, who have to deal with an unfamiliar listening task, topic, situation or contextual constraints (e.g., a noisy room), the processing of the message may become

a challenge. They will, as a result, need to consciously and intentionally go through the many steps required for the construction of a valid and coherent meaning representation of the text (see also Kintsch, 2009: 226-232). In general, both for expert and novice listeners, from the stand of discourse psychology and constructivist theories, the successful understanding and learning from text requires active processes of meaning construction or "active processing" skills (see, for instance, Kintsch 2009: 224).

The major difference between listening to L2 lectures, as compared to other types of listening, is related to its main function as a "learning channel." Hence, it involves three interacting processes and purposes – the overarching process of listening to learn from text, and the other two subsidiary processes that determine the success of the first one – learning to listen in L2, and listening to learn L2. Therefore, L2 lecture listening has its unique characteristics. It subsumes a range of cognitive and linguistic attributes or sub-skills, such as the listener ability to comprehend global and local information; to understand implicit meaning (inference making) and explicit information; to take notes and make mental connections between ideas in the text; to apply knowledge of genre-specific characteristics of the lecture; to draw upon knowledge on the subject matter; to sustain his/her concentration and attention; to hold items in memory while attending to long chunks of text; to connect the incoming message with information derived from other media; to recognize key lexical items and to apply effective parsing procedures when processing input (see also Richards 1983, Flowerdew 1994, Aryadoust, Goh, & Lee 2012). A potential shortcoming of the skills-based taxonomy is that it generally promotes a product view of listening development. This is so because it describes "what", in terms of competences, should be mastered, instead of "how" the internal comprehension process can be improved. Especially, in instructional terms, practising the specific sub-skills alone through implicit learning may not be enough for learners to increase their listening expertise.

Strategies, in contrast to skills, are concerned with the "how" of learning to listen and approaching the listening task. They are also associated with theories that emphasize self-control or self-regulation in information processing. These, in turn, align closely with the notion of self-regulated learning, seen as "an active, constructive process whereby learners set goals for their learning and then attempt to monitor, regulate, and control their cognition, motivation, and behavior, guided and constrained by their goals and the contextual features in the environment" (Pintrich, 2000: 453).

Research also suggests that listener metacognitive activity (Flavell 1979) is instrumental to the monitoring and regulation of the comprehension process (Vandergrift 2004, Janusik & Keaton 2011, Vandergrift & Goh 2012, among others). Thus, a conceptualization of L2 lecture listening from a cognitive perspective takes into account the executive functioning processes of cognition (which include metacognition). These are conducive to a strategic, goal-directed, and self-regulated

behaviour. A distinction is made here between two components of metacognition: metacognitive knowledge and metacognitive regulation[1].

Metacognitive knowledge refers to one's world knowledge about his/her cognitive processes. It consists of knowledge or beliefs about three general factors: *knowledge of personal variables*; *knowledge about a task*, its purpose, demands, and how these can be met under varying conditions; and *knowledge about strategies* for accomplishing the task.

Metacognitive regulation (or the executive aspects of metacognition) include *planning, comprehension monitoring (metacomprehension), and evaluation*. Applied to our understanding of listening metacognitions, *planning* involves identification and selection of appropriate listening strategies and allocation of resources. It can also include goal setting. *Comprehension monitoring* involves realizing without explicit/direct feedback when understanding is successful and when it fails or is inadequate. *Evaluation* includes assessing the overall acceptability of one's comprehension and interpretation of information. It also entails evaluating the effectiveness of strategies and an individual's own listening strengths and weaknesses.

It can be concluded then that the strategic listening behaviour is an important (internal) individual factor impinging on the process of L2 lecture comprehension. In the literature, there has been much debate about the definitions and classifications of strategies in the broad field of language learning and use. Further questions have been raised about whether they are teachable and the effectiveness of strategy training.[2] In regard to L2 lecture comprehension, empirical studies suggest that its successful completion is also a function of the teaching and effective use of both cognitive (directly involved in the comprehension of the incoming speech) and metacognitive strategies (which oversee and support the cognitive strategies) (see Velikova 2016, among others). More specifically, these strategies can be referred to as goal-directed mental procedures used by learners in listening to L2 lectures in an academic environment, and which (if appropriately selected and applied) can facilitate their comprehension of the incoming speech. There are also a number of distinctive characteristics of the strategy construct that have been put forward by scholars (see Macaro 2006, Cohen 2012). First, it is suggested that strategies relate to a goal-

[1] See also Goh (2010: 185) who makes a distinction between metacognitive knowledge and metacognitive strategies for self-regulation in learner listening, as well as Vandergrift & Goh (2012: 85) whose metacognitive instructional framework for listening instruction consists of three components directly relating to metacognition: experience, knowledge, and strategy.

[2] See also Grenfell & Harris (2014) for an exploration of research and debates in the three interrelated areas of learning strategies, autonomy and self-regulated learning. In a teacher education context, Markova & Stefanova (2015) carried out a research project to evaluate the effectiveness of strategy training with 7th-grade school students in Bulgaria. They reported inconclusive results as to the impact of strategy instruction on students' learning. However, the authors came up with a number advantages and challenges as a result of the experience. These would be worth taking into account in future strategy research and pedagogy.

directed (mental) action. Second, they are orchestrated in clusters (and chains) and these are situation- and task-specific and transferable to other situations and tasks. This, in turn, leads to another defining feature – that strategies are neutral. Hence, they cannot be "effective" or "ineffective" by their nature. The appropriate deployment of a strategy cluster/chain (according to the situation and task at hand), and not the strategies themselves, is what determines the successful utilization of existing linguistic resources (especially for L2 learners) and skilled language use. Additionally, strategies can become automatized or proceduralized. This frees up space in working memory, but may again come under controlled attention when the listener needs to transfer them in a different situation and/or to achieve a new learning goal (Macaro 2006: 329).

There are a number of studies reporting that learners tend to apply different strategies in lecture comprehension without any training in their use (see Velikova 2005, among others). A plausible explanation is that these strategies have been implicitly developed from students' L2 experiences or/and transferred from their L1 use for similar tasks and situations. However, not all learners seem to deploy the strategies effectively in a novel situation and task. For this reason, even university students who are "expert" listeners in their L1 and/or L2 in familiar domains (e.g., everyday conversation, movie watching, etc.) may lack the necessary automatic retrieval structures to successfully form a textbase and a situation model when comprehending and learning from L2 lectures (see, for instance, Kintsch 2009). In this line of thought, although some first-year university students may have reached high levels of L2 proficiency, they would still need to acquire the relevant skills and strategies for dealing with unfamiliar tasks (e.g., listening to lectures in L2). New discipline-specific content and academic situations that are beyond their current level of expertise may also challenge the ability of the high-proficiency L2 learners to understand university lectures. In other words, first-year university students can be referred to as "novice" academic listeners, who need further training in the use of metacognitive and cognitive strategies for effective L2 lecture comprehension.

Research that aims at further teasing out the subtleties between the strategic behaviour of the more-proficient and less-proficient listeners, points to some significant differences between the two groups (O'Maley & Chamot 1990, Vandergrift 2003, Velikova 2016, among others). First, and most importantly, the high-proficiency comprehenders more effectively utilize a range of metacognitive strategies, such as selective and directed attention. Expert listeners also demonstrate higher self-efficacy associated with their self-evaluation of performance on the comprehension task. It is also consistent with their actual listening effectiveness. The low-proficiency listeners, on the other hand, do report using inference and elaboration strategies as frequently as the more proficient comprehenders. Yet, they fail to build a coherent representation of the text. This could be attributed to their inadequate use of attention as a controller in inference generation (Iza & Ezquerro, 2000), and to a preference for focusing on the local details than on the global structure of a text.

To sum up, there are qualitative differences between the strategy use of expert and novice listeners. The pedagogical framework that will be presented in the next section is elaborated with a view of reconciling these differences through strategy-based instruction (SBI) and a process approach to listening development (see Vandergrift & Goh 2012). These principles centre on "the notion of an expert listener, who can provide a process model for L2 learners to emulate" (Siegel 2015: 46). It is important to note that the proposed pedagogical sequence has been empirically tested and its effectiveness has also been supported by data obtained through the use of various statistical procedures[3].

Strategic L2 lecture listening: an instructional framework

The pedagogical framework, discussed and illustrated in this section, adopts a cognitive perspective, but also integrates a sociocultural stance by "taking into account the 'situated experiences'" of the university students in real-life academic contexts (Wray & Hajar 2015: 5). The instructional cycle is composed of six phases: *consciousness-raising, modeling, guided practice, reflection and feedback, independent practice, self-assessment* (Figure 1). Each step addresses cognitive and metacognitive strategies, selected and further refined from previous research (O'Maley & Chamot 1990, Goh 2002, Goh & Vandergrift 2012, among others).

The selected **cognitive strategies**, directly involved in such cognitive activity as perception, decoding, processing, storage, and retrieval (Macaro 2006: 328), include:

- *Inferencing* – using information within the text of the lecture to figure out meaning that is not explicitly stated and that is essential to the coherence of a text;
- *Elaboration* – making meaningful associations between the incoming message and world knowledge (acquired both in academic and non-academic contexts), personal experiences, and knowledge of the target language. O'Maley & Chamot (1990: 138) refer to *imagery*, using mental or actual images to represent information, as an aspect of elaboration.
- *Reorganizing (note taking)* – transferring the processed material into forms that help understanding, storage and retrieval. One overt manifestation of this strategy is note taking or writing down important words and showing relationships between ideas to maximize the organization and storage of the lecture information (storage and cognitive encoding function of note taking). Note taking is also seen as a process of listening and organizing a structure of retrieval cues which help the listener to build a coherent structure of the main ideas in the lecture. The structure, in turn, provides helpful scaffolding for the details related to the main ideas. This supports better recall because the listener

[3] The instructional framework has been developed as part of a larger study on the strategies for L2 lecture comprehension in an EFL academic context (Velikova 2016). See, for instance, Tsvetkov (2015a & 2015b) (in Bulgarian) for an examination of the application of IRT models and CTT, as well as for an introduction on the use of statistical procedures in education and psychology.

is likely to remember more specific information supplied by the successful identification of relevant details (Cook & Mayer 1983).

The **metacognitive strategies** involve thinking about (or knowledge of) the process of lecture listening in L2, planning for listening, comprehension monitoring, self evaluation of lecture comprehension and strategy use after the task. They "oversee" (Macaro 2006: 328) the cognitive strategies and include:

- *Planning* (pre-listening preparation) – developing an appropriate action plan (strategies for successful task completion) and/or appropriate contingency plans to overcome difficulties that may interfere with successful completion of the lecture listening task. These include, for instance, deciding to use a note-taking format or to extract specific information based on the pre-viewed abstract or title of the lecture (advance organization);
- *Comprehension monitoring* – continually checking the success of one's understanding and identifying comprehension failures or misunderstanding while listening to the lecture;
- *Directed attention* – maintaining attention during the lecture and avoiding distractions;
- *Selective attention* – attending to specific aspects of language input or situational details that can assist lecture comprehension (e.g., listening and focusing on key words, phrases, or ideas; listening for content words; noticing how information is structured; paying attention to repetitions; noticing intonation; listening to specific parts of the input; paying attention to paralinguistic and lexical signals – transition and importance markers);
- *Evaluation* – self-appraisal of one's ability to comprehend the L2 lecture and strategy use. Evaluating listening effectiveness can include *problem identification* after the listening event, with a view of subsequent action planning to maximize the future performance on a similar task.

The pedagogical sequence, although designed for use with EFL university students, can be introduced flexibly to correspond best to the needs of L2 learners in different learning contexts. The overarching principles of language instruction, rooted in cognitive psychology, incorporate activities and procedures that guide learners through three stages of skill acquisition: *cognitive* (thinking about explicit ways of implementing strategies or what needs to be done to comprehend L2 lectures successfully); *associative* (proceduralization of these strategies); and *autonomous* (the complex skill of listening to L2 lectures becomes a more automated and rapid process, as well as there is less demand on working memory) (see also Anderson 2015: 211-212).

The proposed instructional framework has been built around the systematic and *explicit* instruction of strategies (see also O'Malley & Chamot 1990, Siegel 2015, Velikova 2016). This, however, does not preclude learners from experiencing the benefits of *implicit learning* (see Ellis 2005, Rebuschat 2015). But the acquisition of L2, including the ability to comprehend lectures, through implicit learning alone

can be a very slow process. Hence, university students may not have the chance to gain the sufficient expertise to understand extended talks and lecturers in L2 over the period of their studies. Therefore, the approach incorporating both explicit instruction and implicit learning through authentic listening practice has been perceived as the best way to help learners get to grips with the necessary strategies and skills for academic study in L2. This perspective to listening pedagogy has been recommended as more efficient than simple exposure to listening texts and overreliance on implicit skill development and overlearning. The latter tends to underlie the traditional models of listening development (Mendelsohn 2006, Siegel 2015, Velikova 2016).

Scaffolding is another inherent element in the sequence. More specifically, it is to be understood as "supporting a course of action that we want learners to take by providing the means by which they [learners] are reminded to carry out that course of action, in a controlled way, with the objective that it will become automatic and more autonomously applied once the learner judges that action to be efficacious for their learning or for carrying out a particular task" (Macaro 2001: 175). The teacher's support or/and expert (student/listener) modeling is gradually removed as the course progresses.

Although the "internal processes" of listening are emphasized, collaborative learning activities are also thought to support strategy development because "knowledge or experience is not exclusive to an individual: it can be jointly constructed by two or more individuals" (Vandergrift & Goh 2012: 92). In this respect, social learning theories, such as Bandura's social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1997; Bandura, 2005) and Vygotsky's sociocultural model (Vygotsky, 1978) have informed the development of the proposed framework (see also O'Maley & Chamot 1990, Grenfell and Harris 1999, Oxford 2011, Vandergrif & Goh 2012). These theories promote the view that social context and interaction, as well as the integration of individual practice with peer-collaboration are essential ingredients of the learning process. The incorporation of these principles into the pedagogical sequence also takes into account the fact that some learners have a disposition to a more "internal locus of control", while others have a strong preference for social-interactive approaches to learning (Chamot 2007: 319).

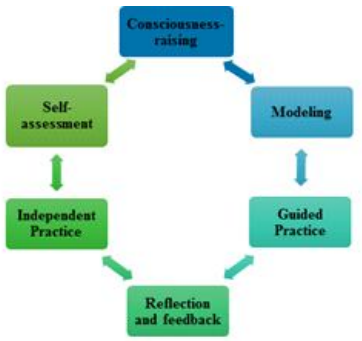

Figure 1. **Instructional framework for developing strategic L2 lecture listening**

The instructional cycle, presented in Figure 1, has been adapted from existing models of strategy instruction, and mainly from the Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (O'Maley & Chamot 1990, Chamot 2009). It is structured around two major components: a focus on high priority academic content through the integration of discipline-specific topics and authentic listening materials (L2 lectures); and, explicit instruction in the use of strategies for L2 lecture comprehension in academic settings.

What follows is a presentation of each framework phase and its rationale.

• **Consciousness-raising (phase 1)**

The aim of this step is to tap into students' schemata and initial metacognitions of L2 lecture listening. Through activities that require individual and dialogic reflection, learners think about and discuss the factors (e.g., genre conventions, purpose of lectures, speaker characteristics, and lecturing styles) that influence their successful understanding of a lecture (task knowledge). Students also consider their strengths and problems in lecture comprehension (person knowledge). The discussions at this stage also prompt learners to reflect on their experiences of attending L1 and L2 lectures and the comprehension strategies they have already been using (strategy knowledge). This helps activate listeners' metacognitions and learner interest and motivation to engage in the strategy development session. More specifically, the schema activation activities focus on content schemata (the topic of the text) and formal schemata (the lecture discourse). For instance, students are asked to brainstorm features which make listening to extended talks different from conversational listening or to provide examples of discourse signaling cues frequently used by their lecturers. The reflective awareness-raising process can also be facilitated through listening strategy questionnaires (completed and discussed by the students), lecture listening diaries or logs (also collaboratively reviewed in pairs or groups). Overall, this phase aims to bring students to the point of conscious understanding of the strategies they already deploy, by providing examples of their previous and current task performance.

• **Modeling (phase 2)**

The main goal of the Modeling phase is to uncover the thought processes of a skilled comprehender and to demonstrate concrete examples of the "new" strategies in use. The think-aloud task is a common procedure which allows modeling for the learners. In essence, during this activity, short lecture segments are played as prompts and students are asked to verbalize their thoughts or the strategies they deploy to understand the text. Teachers or more strategic/successful student listeners can serve as "expert models" (Grenfell & Harris 1999, Macaro 2001, Oxford 2011). Another possibility is to use retrospective self-reports: i.e., asking students to listen to a lecture segment and to report what strategies they have applied to facilitate their comprehension or to overcome listening problems. How and why strategies have been deployed is explained and summarized by the teacher. Thus, the construction of metacognitive (strategy) knowledge occurs in response to a concrete task. It should be noted that the teacher provides increased scaffolding through modeling of the strategies for the students.

• **Guided Practice (phase 3)**

In this step, students actively experiment with strategy use. Given that it aims to provide structured strategy practice, scaffolding is still an important part of the training process. In other words, the lecturer and the students work together in order for the learners to gain mastery in the use of a strategy. For instance, students are set the task to listen to an authentic extended talk. The lecturer provides explicit direction into which metacognitive and cognitive strategies they can practice.

• **Reflection and feedback (phase 4)**

Based on their concrete experiences of lecture comprehension in phase 3, students are guided into post-task analysis, which involves reflection, feedback, and self-assessment. Structured reflection can be stimulated, for example, by using a listening log, a self-assessment sheet or questionnaire. Orally or in writing, students respond to the prompts these materials provide and share their answers with peers. Thus, in process-based reflective discussions learners swap their experiences in using the strategies: when, why, and how they have applied them. They also think about and explore difficulties or problems experienced. Feedback is then provided either by the lecturer or collaboratively by peers. Students are further encouraged to set goals for their strategic development in more independent settings. At this stage, self-reflection is seen as a foundation for increasing students' metacognitive awareness of the strategies they can employ in order to improve their lecture comprehension. Hence, stages 3 and 4 can be defined as scaffold practice and preparation for the more autonomous strategy use, which comes in stages 5 and 6.

• **Independent practice (phase 5)**

In this phase, learners experiment with and monitor their strategy use in actual lectures and similar listening situations outside class. During the Independent Practice stage the reminders fade out and scaffolding is markedly reduced. Students take their own decisions into which "new" strategies they try out for the specific task. The aim is for the learners to internalize the strategies practiced in class. Thus, they are encouraged to self-regulate strategy use in novel situations, with no or less control or direction on the part of the teacher or other "expert." The major goal of the phase is to prepare students for the successful transfer of what has been practised in the "training" class to other listening situations. This stage also engages learners in situated, contextualized practice. Strategy use, hence, is flexibly integrated into more meaningful real-world activities of listening to lectures and talks during their regular university coursework.

• **Self-assessment (phase 6)**

This stage aims to facilitate reflection and self-reflection, so that students can self-assess their performance in lecture comprehension and their strategy use. Learners, thus, organize and integrate their metacognitive knowledge (person, task, and strategy) into coherent structures. To that end, they are encouraged to analyze the specific listening situation, in which their independent strategy practice has occurred, and the problems they have experienced. Students are also guided to explore

paths for solutions by consciously revisiting the effectiveness of their strategy use. This way they can become aware of unproductive processes (e.g., overreliance on bottom-up strategies, such as word-for-word processing) and replace them with a more effective ones (e.g., elaborating from what has been understood and verifying predictions). Learners are also encouraged to keep track of their progress in lecture comprehension and to navigate their continuous self-development as listeners.

Concluding remarks

This article makes the case for a strategy-based approach to the development of a lecture listening pedagogy in an L2 academic context. As noted above, although designed with the EFL student in mind, the six-phase cycle is presented from a more general perspective, with the aim of providing a wider instructional framework well-suited for learners studying through the medium of L2 in a variety of disciplinary domains. It is hoped then that this proposal will provide LAP instructors and course developers with relevant ideas for designing and implementing academic listening programmes, which adequately address the L2 communicative needs and study skills of the students in today's academia.

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