

English and Persian academic lectures: An investigation into differentiating between important and unimportant information in SOKHAN and BASE corpora¹

Javad Zare²,
Zahra Keivanlou-Shahrestanaki²

Received: 2016/06/13
Accepted: 2016/09/29

Extended Abstract

1. Background

University students have to deal with a number of academic skills and literacies such as listening to academic lectures, taking notes, and writing academic essays. The students' success in their academic work depends on their successful undertaking of these skills. Yet, many students find it difficult to cope with these literacies. English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and English as a Second Language (ESL) students may run further into problem, as they lack the necessary skills to comprehend and produce a diverse range of complex academic discourses.

One of these skills, academic lecturing plays a significant role in academic education. The importance of lectures in academic education has made some scholars believe that comprehending lectures is of critical importance to the students' academic success. Yet, understanding academic lectures is a considerable challenge for students in English-medium classes. Part of this difficulty has been

¹ . (DOI): 10.22051/JLR.2016.2445

²Faculty member of Kosar University of Bojnord; javadzare@kub.ac.ir

² Faculty member of Esfarayen University of Technology;
keyvanlou@esfarayen.ac.ir

attributed to “an overwhelming impression of speed and a lack of control over the speaker” (Lynch, 2011, p. 81). Additionally, academic lectures have “very dense informational packaging” (Lin, 2010, p. 1174). Lectures abound with important information. The dense distribution of information in lectures makes it difficult for the students to comprehend all the information presented throughout the lecture. Therefore, it is important for the students to be able to differentiate between important and unimportant information.

Expressions that help students differentiate between important and unimportant information are referred to as relevance/importance markers (Crawford Camiciottoli, 2007; Deroey & Taverniers, 2012; Hunston, 1994), ‘importance cues’ (Kiewra, 2002), ‘emphasizers’ (Siepmann, 2005), ‘selection cues’ (Titsworth & Kiewra, 2004), and ‘focusers’ (Simpson, 2004).

With these points in mind, an understanding of how important information is distinguished from unimportant information in academic lectures is of crucial importance. Nevertheless, very little is known about them. Except for a few studies that have specifically dealt with importance marking in English lectures (Crawford Camiciottoli, 2004, 2007; Deroey, 2015; Deroey & Taverniers, 2012), what we know about this function is limited to studies that have found examples of importance markers (Biber, 2006; DeCarrico & Nattinger, 1988; Young, 1994; among others). Furthermore, it is now widely recognized that discourse structuring or organization devices facilitate the students’ comprehension, note-taking and recall of lectures (e.g., Olsen & Huckin, 1990). This study attempts to explore importance marking in English and Persian academic lectures.

2. Methodology

The study adopts an approach which is descriptive, contrastive, and corpus-driven. It aims at eliciting the importance markers from the English and Persian academic lectures. All the importance markers in the academic lectures were elicited from two corpora. Afterwards, the elicited importance markers from the Persian and English academic lectures were investigated functionally.

To be more exact, two corpora were used in this research to explore the un/importance markers: the British Academic Spoken English (BASE) Corpus and the Persian corpus of SOKHAN. The BASE corpus was developed at the Universities of Warwick and Reading, England under the directorship of Hilary Nesi and Paul Thompson. BASE comprises the audio and video recordings, and the transcripts of 160 English lectures and 39 seminars, totaling 1,644,942 words (Nesi, 2012). The lecture section which is the basis for the analysis of this dissertation contains 1,186,290 words. The lectures were recorded between 1998 and 2005. Lectures are equally distributed across four broad disciplinary groups, i.e. arts and humanities (ah), life and medical sciences (ls), physical sciences (ps), and social studies (ss).

The Persian corpus of SOKHAN was developed at the Science and Technology Park of North Khorasan, Iran under the directorship of Javad Zare and Zahra Keivanlou-Shahrestanaki. Corpus development was assisted by funding from the Technology University of Esfaryen and the Science and Technology Park of North Khorasan. SOKHAN consists of audio and video recordings, and the transcripts of 60 Persian academic lectures, totaling 480,526 words. The lectures of SOKHAN were recorded between 2010 and 2015. They are delivered mainly by the male native speakers of Persian lecturers. The lectures of SOKHAN evenly spread in the four disciplinary groups of engineering (es), humanities (hs), medicine (ms), and base sciences (bs).

3. Results and conclusion

The findings suggest that regardless of language, importance marking in the academic lectures is done via five discourse functions including audience engagement, discourse organization, subject status, topic treatment, and being related to exam. Besides, differentiating between the important points and the trivial ones is not necessarily done via only a single discourse function. Another finding of this research is that topic treatment markers of importance indicate importance only implicitly. It should be noted that audience engagement markers of importance were found to be the most frequently used markers in the academic lectures. Generally, marking importance in the English and Persian academic lectures mostly involves orienting the discourse to the audience. To put it differently, the presenters mostly tend to get engaged with the audience in order to indicate the important information.

Key words: important information, discourse function, corpus, corpus-based, English academic lecture, Persian academic lecture