

The Lecture Buddy Project: An Experiment in EAP Listening Comprehension

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This article describes a study of the listening comprehension of first-year, non-native speakers of English (NNSs) in a large North American university. The goal was to find out how the students, all economics majors, were coping with listening to economics lectures and to try an experiment in mentoring by linking them with a "lecture buddy": a native speaker in their course who would meet with them weekly and help them with notetaking. The lecture buddies kept journals of their meetings, made copies of their lecture notes, and wrote a final report on their experience. In addition, the author interviewed the informants at the end of each semester, and these interviews were transcribed. The study confirms that these students were having substantial difficulty with their lectures, were taking poor notes, and were doing poorly in the courses as a result. The mentoring project was judged to be helpful to the informants, and the help that the lecture buddies gave went far beyond working on notetaking. The article ends with a list of recommendations about what the university and the professors could do to make it easier of the NNS students and what the students themselves could do.

Dans cet article, l'auteur décrit une étude portant sur la compréhension auditive d'étudiants dont l'anglais n'est pas la langue maternelle et qui sont en première année dans une université nord-américaine. Le but en était double: d'abord, déterminer comment les étudiants, dont la majeure était la science économique, se débrouillaient dans les cours de leur spécialisation et ensuite, évaluer l'utilité d'un programme de "partenaire de cours" qui consistait en le jumelage d'un étudiant allophone avec un étudiant qui suivait le même cours et dont l'anglais était la langue maternelle. Les deux étudiants se rencontraient une fois par semaine pour que l'anglophone assiste son partenaire avec sa prise de notes en classe. Les mentors anglophones ont tenu un journal des rencontres, ont fait des copies des notes qu'ils prenaient en classe et ont écrit un rapport final décrivant leur expérience. De plus, l'auteur a passé en entrevue les étudiants allophones à la fin de chaque semestre. L'étude confirme que ces derniers trouvaient les cours assez pénibles, ne prenaient pas de bonnes notes et donc ne réussissaient pas très bien. Il a été déterminé que le jumelage avec un "partenaire de cours" a été utile aux étudiants allophones et que le mentorat ne s'était pas limité à de l'aide avec la

prise de notes. L'auteur conclut avec une liste de recommandations portant sur des moyens que pourraient adopter l'université, les professeurs et les étudiants allophones pour faciliter l'expérience universitaire à ces derniers.

Background of the Project

Drawing on my experience in teaching credit, content-based ESL courses to first-year university students for many years, I have long been aware that these students did not cope well with their lectures in the first year despite having entered the university with a TOEFL score of approximately 560 (on the old scale). Moreover, there is a sense in many ESL programs for university students, including our own program, that the one skill that will "take care of itself" is listening comprehension because of the large amount of exposure that the students will have.

My nagging discomfort has been exacerbated by some of the research findings on academic listening: Dunkel and Davis (1994) found that the non-native speakers in their study, all with TOEFL scores of above 550, were still "at a distinct information-processing disadvantage vis-à-vis native speakers" (p. 65). McKnight (1997) confirmed my feeling when he reported that the listening competence of entering non-native speaking students in an Australian university was also problematic. Mason (1994) found that when lectures were interactive and not "straight talk-and-chalk," even a score of 600 on the TOEFL did not assure comprehension when listening.

The listening difficulties identified in these three studies are hardly surprising when we consider that the International TESOL Organization's official statement on the acquisition of language proficiency: "The acquisition of academic language proficiency ... is more demanding and [it] takes LEP (limited English proficiency) students from six to nine years to achieve parity with their native English peers."

For the reasons described above, I decided to launch a pilot research project, which I titled the Lecture Buddy Project with two specific goals:

1. to find out how students were in fact coping with listening in their first year of university study, and
2. to try an experiment in mentoring some non-native-speaking economics students by linking them with what I called "lecture buddies" to help them in their notetaking and in their courses in general.

This study also serves as a preliminary study to a larger and broader study on the special language needs of non-native-speaking students at university, which will be reported on at a later stage.

The Project Design

Two first-year students, referred to as Buddy 1 and Buddy 2, were selected as the lecture buddies. They did this work in return for a "service bursary" from the university and were selected by me. They were native speakers of

English, majoring in economics, required to take the first semester Introduction to Microeconomics and the second semester Introduction to Macroeconomics courses (referred to below as Micro and Macro). The project ran through the fall and winter semesters.

Each of the buddies worked with six non-native-speaking students (NNS) who were also first-year economics majors taking the same Micro and Macro courses with the same professors. The Micro and Macro courses are offered in multiple autonomous sections taught by various members of the Economics Department. Each professor gives his or her own tests and exams as well. Buddy 1 and her NNS students were all in what I call Prof 1's section of Micro and Prof 2's section of Macro. Buddy 2 and her NNS students were in Prof 2's section for both Micro and Macro.

Buddies were required to meet weekly one-on-one with each of their NNS students. The students were asked to write summaries of the previous lecture and to bring them plus their lecture notes to the meetings. Buddies were to go through the summaries, go over the lecture notes, and clarify anything that the NNS student had missed or not understood. Only one student (NNS11) actually ever wrote a summary, so that part of the plan did not materialize. Buddies were required to keep a journal of what happened at each meeting, and also to write up a report on the whole project at the end.

In addition, I interviewed the informants at the end of the first course and again close to the end of the second, and these interviews were transcribed. The interviews at the end of the first semester were more structured (see Appendix). Interview 2 focused on such matters as what they were doing differently from what they had done in the first semester, what they had learned, and whether the second course was easier for them than the first. In the case of NNS15,¹ who did not take part in the first interview, I also covered many of these questions.

The Informants

The 12 non-native-speaking (NNS) participants had all been admitted to the university with the requirement that they take a credit ESL course in their first year: TOEFL scores were between 530 and 590. They had all been in Canada for three years or less. Participation in the project was voluntary. The informants were from the following countries: People's Republic of China, 2; Taiwan, 1; Hong Kong, 2; Chinese speaker, country not specified, 4; Ukraine, 2; Russia via Israel, 1.

Like the buddies they were first-year economics majors in the same Micro and Macro sections as their lecture buddies. Of the 12 informants who participated in the project, 10 took part in at least one of the interviews: 4 were interviewed twice; 5 came only for the first interview, and 1 came only for the second interview. Issues of attendance and retention are discussed below.

General Observations by the Two Lecture Buddies and the Non-Native-Speaking Informants

Buddy 1 commented,

I was trying to help the students understand their lectures. What I think I ended up doing was ... providing them with a tutorial service where they could ask me questions about economics. I think that students can only understand their lectures with better understanding of the language and better preparation for each lecture.

Buddy 2 believed that the students definitely improved, but that she had to push them.

I asked each of the NNSs what they felt about this project, and they were consistently very positive—they spoke of it having helped them to take notes, and to clarify unclear points without embarrassment. Informants reported that in the second course (Macro) they read ahead more and put more effort into the course. It would be naive to claim that this more positive feeling was a result only of the lecture buddy project. The NNSs reported that because the material was more interesting, they concentrated more in the lectures. I personally feel that an additional factor here is that by this stage they were probably coping better with the language, had mastered much of the economics jargon, and therefore did not feel as defeated or hopeless.

Findings

In this section I describe the the buddies' journals and reports and the interviews with the various students.

The NNSs took very few notes. In general, the buddies observed that the NNSs either took few notes or no notes at all, and furthermore that the notes they did take were inadequate at best and often incomprehensible (e.g., NNS21, who was described by Buddy 2 as "very weak in English," and had no background in economics). The buddies photocopied the lecture notes and passed them on to me, and I confirm their incomprehensibility. The most common reasons given by the NNSs for this were that the professors spoke too fast, used unknown words, and made little use of the blackboard. Overheads corresponded to the contents of the students' course kits, but the NNSs tended not to use these much. NNS14 did not take notes at all, or would not share them with his lecture buddy because he was ashamed.

The buddies pointed out that the students not only need to have accurate notes, but they also need to "fully understand the notes they are taking." "We know that notetaking has proven to be very beneficial because once [NNS22] began to take notes and we compared our notes, his marks began to rise" (Buddy 2). However, Buddy 2 went on to note that good notetaking

alone is not sufficient to achieve success. Talking of NNS23, Buddy 2 wrote, "I find it hard to believe that with such beautiful notes she is having trouble." In fact NNS23 failed the Micro course and withdrew from economics.

Vocabulary was a major problem for the NNSs. The lecture buddies were not trained in linguistics or second-language acquisition, but still made some extremely insightful comments about what impeded and what helped their students, particularly about vocabulary. They identified gaps in vocabulary as the biggest single factor hindering the NNSs. Buddy 2: "Once the students begin trying to understand the vocabulary, they lose sight of the general ideas that are being taught." In other words, when the NNSs encountered a word they did not know, they "got stuck" and lost the thread of what was being said. This would also explain the recurrent complaint that the professors spoke too fast (NNS11, 12, 21, 22, 23). They clearly would have benefited from some strategy instruction in listening, for example, focusing on the stressed words at the expense of the unstressed words, guessing from context and moving on, and so forth (Mendelsohn, 1994).

Buddy 1 observed that students also had difficulty when looking up words in the dictionary because many words have more than one meaning, and she cited an example of the word *yield*. NNS students at this level still insist on using bilingual paper or electronic dictionaries, and this is often the source of this problem. Buddy 2 pointed out a glossary of terms at the back of the textbook, and she encouraged her students to use it, but the NNSs did not seem to do so.

Buddy 2 made an important observation about vocabulary: Students were having difficulty "not because they do not understand the concept, but because they do not understand the meaning of the words." The example she cites is of the terms *implicit costs* and *explicit costs*. Elsewhere in her report Buddy 2 said, "I believe the results of this study would have been different had it been in a subject that did not use such elaborate vocabulary." These two observations almost seem to contradict each other. The second is saying that much terminology (jargon) is specific to the discipline of economics. Her earlier comment suggests that the problem is not the jargon of economics, but rather a general weakness in more general words (another example cited is *consumer surplus*). I believe that both observations are correct: that in much economics terminology words are used as denoting specific economics constructs and that in addition these NNSs do not have sophisticated general vocabularies. Two months after the start of the academic year, Buddy 2 wrote: "The students are not having extreme difficulties with words as they once were. Now they are simply having trouble keeping up with the professor's pace."

Some of the lectures did not correspond to the textbook. The NNSs made this point repeatedly, that one of the professors' lectures corresponded to the textbook, and one did not. The NNSs strongly disliked the former approach,

clearly because it made it that much harder for them, and they could not really prepare the material by reading ahead or reinforce the lecture content by subsequent reading in the textbook (NNS14,15, 25). NNS14 described the lectures as being "more like psychology than economics," and moreover, "you get 20% information from 100% of lecture."

Some of the NNSs had a sense of "unworthiness and insecurity." The buddies reported that the NNSs were easily discouraged and felt insecure and even "unworthy" (Buddy 1's word). NNS13 and NNS14 did not go to class very often and did not take many notes when they were there. "It was as if these two were embarrassed that they had difficulties, so they wouldn't do anything at all... I tried to make them feel OK." "[NNS14] didn't show up very often, [and] both wanted to get away as fast as possible, didn't like showing me their notes and treated them like garbage" (Buddy 1). Their embarrassment also manifested itself as disdain for the professor. Buddy 1 said that neither of these students did well, and they possibly even failed.

NNS24 was also reluctant to take notes. Buddy 2 comments: "I knew that this reluctance ... was due to the fact that he was losing enthusiasm, and was becoming frustrated." However, she goes on to comment that there was also a lack of preparedness on this student's part. This is a classic chicken-and-egg situation.

The reading load was very heavy. Buddy 1 pointed out that the large amount of reading they were required to do was difficult for the NNSs.

The amount of background in economics was a very significant variable. The students who had studied economics previously found the material much easier than those who had not (e.g., NNS22). However, having some background did not guarantee success.

Students did not always avail themselves of the help that was available. Listening to the interviews with the NNSs, one gets the impression that they have many complaints and are unhappy about several aspects of their economics courses. However, when one probes, it becomes clear that the students did not always work hard or avail themselves of all the assistance that was available. I mention above that they did not make a great deal of use of the glossary provided. Attendance at the weekly meetings with the buddies was also poor. Another example is that one of the professors made a copy of his lectures available in the library on video, but when I asked NNS13 whether he used these, he said that he did not because they were not allowed to take them home and he did not have time to view them in the university. NNS14 said that his lecture buddy helped him a great deal, but he did not attend the meetings often because he had a job and could not afford the time.

Factors and strategies that worked well and helped the NNSs

Reading the textbook ahead or after the lecture. This was stated by several students to be of great help.

Asking the lecture buddy clarificatory questions. Several of the NNSs (and the buddies) reported that the NNSs were scared or uncomfortable asking questions of the professor or even of their official teaching assistants, but found it easy and comfortable asking their lecture buddy because she was a fellow student who made the students feel comfortable and did not mind going over things several times.

Attending an additional set of lectures. Two of the students (NNS15 and 16) reported that they attended (audited) a different professor's lectures prior to their own, and this helped them very much. Buddy 1 confirmed this.

Developing notetaking strategies. Buddy 2 in particular taught her NNSs certain notetaking strategies, which was reported to have helped (particularly noted with regard to NNS24). One strategy that was particularly helpful was for the NNS to note in the margin anything or any word that was not clear, and then ask his or her lecture buddy at their next meeting.

The Human Variable

Prof 1 and Prof 2 clearly have different teaching styles and give different tests and examinations. One of the professors lectured "to the textbook," and was therefore preferred by the NNSs, and the other dealt with topics that were not covered in the textbook. The buddy who took one course with each of these professors felt just the opposite. In the second set of interviews, students emphasized the difference in studying under the two different professors.

On the whole, the informants reported that they were finding the second course, Macro, easier than the first, Micro. The reasons for this were numerous, and the confounding variables make it difficult to determine the main reason. However, clearly the human factor is important.

The Tests and Examinations

The tests and examinations were difficult for the NNSs. On the whole, the students found the multiple-choice tests/sections easier than the open-ended, short-answer sections. (NNS23 and NNS25 disagreed, explaining that multiple-choice is confusing.)

One of the professors gave only multiple-choice tests and examinations, whereas the other gave a mix of multiple-choice and open-ended questions. Buddy 1 clarified that all students, not just the NNSs, were under time pressure to finish, and Buddy 2 said that the final exam was challenging for everyone.

Buddy 1's experience was that the NNSs preferred the multiple-choice tests because they said there was less to read [sic], [which I find strange], and because "the answer was one of the selections." Also, they had a study guide with practice multiple-choice questions.

I was surprised to learn in the interviews that the students did not feel that the tests and examinations should be in their first language (NNS25 disagreed), nor did they feel it would help them given that all their knowledge of economics was in English. Most did, however, feel that the NNSs should be given extra time on the tests and examinations. NNS24 and NNS13 disagreed, arguing that this would be unfair.

NNS14 was not pleased that the students were not allowed to use dictionaries in their tests and examinations.

Recommendations About the Courses

This and the following section outline the recommendations that were made by the two lecture buddies plus the non-native-speaking students.

1. Professors should be urged to provide lecture outlines, to speak slower in the first few lectures, to make more use of the blackboard to write down key concepts and words (NNS24), and consciously to repeat the main points (NNS22).
2. Students should be paired with a buddy, as in the project. Having a buddy helps to motivate the students (Buddy 2).
3. An alternative to suggestion #2, made by Buddy 1, was that there should be regular tutorials in these economics courses (also suggested by NNS13, 21, 22, 23) and that there should be a tutorial specifically designated as being for the NNSs (also expressed by NNS14).
4. The NNSs should be given extra time on their exams (Buddy 2).
5. Students should be allowed to use dictionaries in the exams and also to raise their hands and ask questions.
6. Students should be taught notetaking skills—even such elementary strategies as using point form (Chaudron, 1995; Morley, 1995).
7. The ESL department should offer courses on how to succeed in university, drawing on the experiences of the successful students.
8. A system should be implemented in the ESL classes that makes it mandatory for students to fulfill reading hours on material related to their major.
9. Buddy 2 made a sensible but, sadly, unrealistic recommendation: that every department should hire two professors “who specialize in both ESL and another discipline.”

Advice Proposed for Future NNS Students Entering Economics

I asked the NNSs in their interviews what advice they would have for non-native speakers entering these courses. It is interesting to note that those listed below are the recommendations of the NNSs, but when I asked them whether they did these things, in the main the answer was No, for example, reading ahead or asking for help. The following would be their advice.

1. Read ahead or shortly after the lecture.

2. Come to class regularly.
3. Choose the professor who is clearest: consult with people who have completed the course.
4. Ask for help. Don't accumulate problems.
5. Be prepared to spend a lot of time reading.

Conclusions and Implications

The answers to the two central questions that this pilot study was designed to answer are clear.

1. The NNS students were found not to be coping very well with listening to lectures in this first-year economics program.
2. Despite logistical and other problems, this mentoring program must be deemed a success.

The nine recommendations listed above warrant serious consideration. Professors with large numbers of NNS students in their courses could implement actions without much difficulty that would greatly assist the students.

For its part, the university could implement several of the recommendations at little or no cost.

The department could be asked to rethink the rules for tests and examinations, for example, to allow NNSs extra time and to allow the use of dictionaries.

Finally, the university could hold more workshops on notetaking, and "Understanding your lectures."

Clearly the implementation of the recommendations from this preliminary study is not simple. Moreover, when planning any such initiatives, it will be essential to set up a mechanism that ensures that the students avail themselves of these supports and put enough effort into their courses.

In conclusion, this preliminary study has shown that much can be done to help the NNSs to understand their lectures and much to be learned from the students themselves (Yorio, 1982).

Note

¹The numbering of the 12 informants is not 1-12: each buddy's group was numbered differently, and some who signed up then dropped out.

The Author

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Appendix

Interview Questions After First Semester

1. How difficult/easy was it to understand the Micro lectures?
2. What was difficult?
3. What was easy?
4. What that your professor did made it/could have made it easier?
5. What that your professor did made it harder?
6. How was it working with Buddy1/Buddy2
7. What would you have the university do help L2 speakers understand their lectures?
8. What suggestions would you have for NNS friends coming into Micro?
9. How do you prepare for the lectures?
10. Do you read ahead?
11. What about the exams?
12. Should the exams be in the students' L1?
13. Should you get more time than the L1 students?