RETHINKING THE LECTURING MODE IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A FOCUS GROUP STUDY

Abstract:
Lecturing still remains today the most common form of teaching in Higher Education notwithstanding its critics. Giving lectures has both strengths and limitations. This paper reports on the outcomes of a study that investigates the lecturing mode at the English Department, Oum El Bouaghi University, Algeria. The focus group method is used to characterize lecturers' principles, practices and challenges, and students' views, worries and aspirations. Techniques are eventually suggested to make lectures a true learning experience for foreign language learners.

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ملخص:
تبقى طريقة إلقاء المحاضرات في الوقت الراهن الأكثر شيوعا في الوسط الجامعي على الرغم من الانتقادات العديدة التي لطالما وجهت لها، علما انه لهذه الطريقة سلبيات وإيجابيات. يعرض هذا المقال نتائج بحث علمي أجري بدراسة طريقة إلقاء المحاضرات في قسم اللغة الإنجليزية بجامعة أم البواقي. اعتمدت تقنية focus group لإلقاء الضوء على المبادئ المعتمدة من طرف الأساتذة المحاضرين، ممارساتهم وكذا التحديات التي يواجهونها في هذا المجال. كما يتناول البحث آراء الطلبة، تخوفاتهم وتطلعاتهم اتجاه هذه الطريقة التعليمية. ويختم هذا المقال بمجموعة من التوصيات التي يرجى من وراءها أن تكون طريقة إلقاء المحاضرات نفعية وهادفة إلى ما يسعى إليه طالب اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية .

Introduction:

Today, lecturing is still considered an indispensable teaching/learning method in Higher Education; it enables the imparting of knowledge and experience to large groups of learners. The lecture theatre, where all students meet, seems to be the best place to explain expected learning outcomes and how to achieve them, whether in the lecture or in other learning environments as tutorials and seminars.

In many cases, the lecture per se is not the course though it constitutes a valuable part of it.

Lecturing as a genre is inherently difficult for students, especially in the English language teaching/learning context. It is possible to say that aspects of the language itself and lecturing as a teaching method may be problematic to learners. Indeed, the latter need to understand long stretches of discourse without interrupting or asking questions to the speaker as in conversational interactions. In the framework of the LMD (Licence, Master, Doctorat) system that is implemented in Higher Education in Algeria, most subjects in foreign languages departments do no lend themselves to the lecture format. Instead, teaching is to be done with groups of at most 20-25 students, for the teacher to have the opportunity to work with each one of them. However, given the constant increase in student numbers, teaching faculty cannot help resorting to lecturing in amphitheatres or at least in large lecture rooms. Lecturing should, thus, be effective to get learners to achieve the aims of the course. Lecturers, in other words, should adopt strategies to help learners understand their lectures.

In this work, we will address the issue of lecturing, its features and strategies, pros and cons, before we move on to examining teachers' and learners' views about it and how to lecture effectively. In so doing, we will consider what lecturers can do and what strategies they can employ to support learning. It is worth stating at the start that the task of rethinking one's lectures is not easy, for it may entail questioning some of one's own assumptions and learning new skills.

1. **What is 'Lecturing'?**

Lecturing is not a profession per se, for many lecturers do not consider themselves as 'professional lecturers', but as professional linguists, educators, sociologists, physicists etc. They can, thus, be considered as researchers. Lecturing is usually defined as a traditional form of teaching which aims at imparting knowledge to learners in relation to a particular subject matter. It is often a one-way process where learners play the role of listeners and observers: "the teacher talks, and (hopefully) the students listen" (Cashin, 2010, p. 1). In other words, the lecturer is the one who decides about the content of the lecture and how to deliver it; s/he is viewed as the main source of knowledge. There is little or no interaction between lecturer and audience, except for 'questions' left, usually, to the end of the lecture. Accordingly, educators recognize the limitations of this approach and recommend the resort to more interactive methods to foster active learning.

Researchers in different fields distinguish between 'formal' and 'interactive' lectures according to whether or not students are actively engaged (Van Dijk & Jochems, 2002; Huxham, 2005; Sander, 2005). However, there seems to be a general consensus that lecturing should be conceived of as work to facilitate a large group learning experience. It implies that lecturing means

more than standing up in the front of a lecture theatre and talking to a more or less large audience; it means more than reading out notes to students supposed to write them down again. In a lecture, there is (or should be) information exchange and rapport building between lecturer and audience to assist learning; thus, the lecture is not totally teacher-centred, and part of it is developed by students themselves.

Put otherwise, a lecture is more useful when learners are actively involved in discussing its content rather than kept passive copying or taking notes. Bligh (2000b) argues that activities which require learners to discuss issues in pairs or groups offer valuable learning experiences and are far more effective than non-interactive activities when it comes to developing thinking skills. Similarly, Jordan (1997) advocates an approach to lecturing which gives room to input from students. This type of education is learner-centred and is likely to lead to more successful learning. On the other hand, lectures that are exclusively teacher-centred would lead to 'surface learning'. Both teacher and learners should share the responsibility of learning.

A skilful lecturer is the one who, at the outset, helps students build a general framework for understanding, and then guides them to view this framework critically and develop their own, or at least stimulates their thinking and interest to learn more about the lecture topic for themselves. It can be implied that there is 'good' and 'bad' lecturing (Brown & Race, 2002): The former is thought-provoking actively engaging the learner in interactive learning experiences; the latter is the traditional unidirectional process of transmitting information that is not necessarily conducive to effective learning. It is up to each one of us, university lecturers, to identify where one's lecturing practice lies in the continuum ranging from the ''traditional monologue'' model (Jordan, 1997), 'me talk, you listen' (Brown & Race, 2002), to the interactive 'give-and-take' process (Barnes, as cited in Johnson, 1995), or the collaborative construction (and de-construction) of knowledge and its application. Most lectures fall between these two extreme points in that they include lecturing or direct teaching besides assisting learners to learn by themselves individually and with peers. According to Murray & Murray (1992, p. 109), "a well-delivered lecture rarely replicates the prepared lecture"; the difference is due to interaction. In other words, a good lecture is designed in a way that sets interaction in motion.

2. Why do Lectures Survive?

Lectures (or forms close to them) are said to go back in time to ancient Greece and Rome (Brown & Race, 2002). In the late 12th century universities, 'the Master' would deliver memorized material to students, which was followed by comments and debates. This points out that even in early centuries, lecturing entailed some participation on the part of the audience. However, the traditional didactic lecture was clearly lecturer-centred, a 'Master-Apprentice'

approach in which the Master was purported to be the source of accurate and comprehensive knowledge, and the Apprentice was the recipient of this knowledge, noting down what he can of it. Then, it was assumed that knowledge is an unchangeable entity.

Contemporary models of knowledge are, in contrast, fluid and uncertain; focus in teaching is laid on the student and what s/he can learn or do rather than on the content to be taught. Knowledge is believed to be constructed by learners in an interactive manner, drawing on a variety of sources, in addition to the content provided by the lecturer, namely all types of printed or audio/visual materials and more recently web-based materials, as well as peers, family and life experiences.

Laurillard (2002, p. 93) explains that lectures are not discarded as teaching methods because lecturing is a practice that has been made use of at the university for hundreds of years notwithstanding the fact that it is not, according to her, a good choice:

> If we forget the eight hundred years of university tradition that legitimizes them, and imagine starting afresh with the problem of how best to get a large percentage of the population to understand difficult and complex ideas, I doubt that lectures will immediately spring to mind as the obvious solution. Their success depends upon the lecturer knowing the capabilities of the students very well, and on the students having very similar capabilities and prior knowledge.

However, even standardized entrance examinations do not guarantee a class of students with similar background, abilities and learning styles.

Economic or cost factors also compel the resort to larger classes making this method of delivering content unavoidable as a teaching method. Put in other words, though lecturing is no longer thought to be that effective, institutions are still opting for this method of delivering content in order to cope with the increasing number of learners.

3. Pros and Cons of Lectures

The lecture approach is reported to have many drawbacks. It is largely teacher-centred with little (or no) interaction with students; the latter remain silent and passive most of the time, which does not promote learning. In a lecture, it is presumed that students have the same background, ability, learning style and learning pace; the latter, for instance, is determined by the lecturer and not the learners. Lecturing is also criticized on the grounds that it does not develop high order thinking skills such as application, evaluation and creativity. Above all, effective lecturing depends on a skilful lecturer: a fluent speaker with a high voice, varying pitch and speech delivery when need be and

using non-verbal cues appropriately, in addition to other skills; not all lecturers are skilful lecturers.

Ramsden (1992) argues that the problem of lecturing lies in the way it is done: it merely serves to transmit a pre-defined content in an overloaded curriculum. He also argues that the structuring of a lecture or a series of lectures usually leaves much to be desired and does not raise the students' level of interest. On these grounds, he recommends lecturers not to lecture in a lecture: "The task the lecturer faces … is paradoxically how to make 'lecturing' less like a lecture (passive, rigid, routine knowledge transmission) and more like an active communication between teacher and students." (p. 167). In more concrete terms, he suggests that lecturers communicate with the students and consider them as full participants in the lecture rather than mere receivers of information. He also recommends lecturers to give special attention to signals which enable learners to recognize the general structure of the lecture, and to identify major ideas from minor ones, principles from examples; to explain and justify the content being delivered; and to monitor the effects of lecturing on students' learning.

This negative view of lecturing is not unanimously agreed upon; indeed, many scholars are strongly for lecturing. Cox (1994, p59), for instance, believes that a good lecture can achieve a variety of purposes, even those related to high order thinking skills such as synthesis and evaluation, but one should be aware of its limitation as well as potential:

> It is currently fashionable to criticize the formal lecture method as being inappropriate in the modern learning environment (…) Some authors claim that formal lecturing is only appropriate for certain objectives (conveying knowledge, facilitating comprehension), but not for others (application, analysis and synthesis, evaluation and criticism). I believe that a properly designed and delivered lecture can achieve all of these objectives. Put bluntly, a lecture can achieve anything that can be done by talking to someone. Of course, it cannot perfect the students' skills—only their *activity* can do that and that is the purpose of the tutorials and their private work.

Similarly, McKeachie (1994, p53) believes that successful lecturers have the competences of 'scholars', 'writers', 'producers', 'comedians', 'showmen' and 'teachers'. According to him, properly designed lectures have several advantages: they provide learners with the latest information in the subject being studied; they synthesize information from many sources, print and non-print materials, facilitating greatly the task of learners; and lectures can be adjusted to meet the needs and interests of a particular audience. According to Bligh (2000a), a lecture assists memory and revision, builds a structure for a

topic, offers a basis for further study, highlights major points to be learnt and sustains interest. For Brown & Race (2002), lectures can, in addition, guide learners to read more effectively by suggesting structures and raising expectations regarding a defined topic. Lectures can also motivate learners to investigate debatable issues and daunting questions. In fact, skilful lecturers are reported to have a strong impact on learners' attitudes and behaviours.

We think that several purposes can be achieved through lectures: planning and presenting materials in a way that meets the needs of a more or less large audience; communicating one's enthusiasm and interest in a topic, an aim which cannot always be attained via other means; and making available to learners up-to-date information in the target discipline. Lecturing is above all practical in the case of large classes; in the Algerian context, for example, there are groups of up to 50 students or more, a fact which constrains the resort to the lecture method. This method, however, should not be exclusively used in class but should, instead, pave the way to other methods based on individual and pair / group work activities, which give a more active role to the learner. In other words, lecturers have to give room to more students' participation, interaction and active involvement as an attempt to minimize the potential shortcomings of whole-class teaching or lecturing. In the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) class, effective interaction involves the negotiation of meanings like in real life situations, which in turn facilitates language acquisition and learning.

4. English Teachers' and Students' Views on Lecturing

This study is based on the focus group research method. Focus groups are group discussions organized to examine a specific topic; they "encourage a range of responses which provide a greater understanding of the attitudes, behaviours, opinions or perceptions of participants on the research issues" (Hennink, 2007, p6). In this work, this research tool is used to investigate the issue of lecturing with a sample of informants involved in giving lectures, or are in the receiving end of lectures.

The focus group method has been gaining popularity in recent years among researchers, particularly in social sciences. One reason is that it can provide complex data in a short period of time and at low cost. Another reason is that, unlike conventional interviews, it allows group dynamics and interaction, which may reveal hidden features leading to an in-depth understanding of the topic investigated (Liamputtong, 2011).

4.1. The Sample

The study was carried out at the University of Oum El Bouaghi, Algeria, in March 2015. A random sample of academic staff and another of students majoring in EFL were asked what they thought of 'lecturing'. Both samples were balanced in terms of gender and in terms of age; the latter ranges from 18 to 24 years for students, and from 32 to over 60 years for teachers. There were two focus group sessions: one for students and another for teachers.

The group of teachers comprised six lecturers with a professional experience ranging from five to over twenty five years. The students who participated in the focus group session were representative of all five levels of study, namely L1, L2, L3, M1 and M2, with two participants from each level.

4.2. Focus Group Questions

Lecturers and students were invited to raise any point about lectures; nevertheless, the following set of questions was used by the researcher to open, guide and sustain discussion:

• Why lecture? /Why do (not) you attend lectures?
• What difficulties do you face when giving/attending lectures?
• What makes a good lecture? Why?
• What makes a bad lecture? Why?
• What do you think of interactive lectures?
• What changes would you make to better the current EFL lectures? What materials/tools would most aid your lecturing/learning? Why?

Teachers and students do not necessarily share the same attitudes towards lecturing, its goals and procedures; they may have different assumptions and expectations, a fact which may engender conflicts.

4.3. Analysis of the Results

This section sums up the discussion that emanated from the previously listed questions. The illustrative quotes below are from both focus groups, the group of teachers and that of learners. The discussion was carried out in English; there were, however, instances of code switching when some students resorted to Arabic, their mother tongue, to express their thoughts.

4.3.1. Lecturers' Views

In the focus group we conducted with lecturers, we recorded the following major thoughts:

- **Lecturing is important but not enjoyed by all lecturers**

Teachers seemed to agree that lectures are important to raise students' awareness about up-to-date issues in the subject matter being taught, and to motivate them to learn by themselves. One teacher pointed to lectures as an opportunity "*to develop the learners' discussion skills and critical thinking*". Another one said that: "*lecturing is a useful and economical approach to teaching*". However, not all lecturers enjoy lecturing; two teachers stated that they would not lecture if given the choice; one of them stated: "*I prefer working with students in small groups in TD ('Travaux Dirigés') sessions or tutorials*". The other four teachers do like lecturing; they look forward to their lecture sessions which they consider as fundamental to promote students' learning, in the words of a senior lecturer: "*I enjoy lecturing since it is a way for me to express and share my knowledge with my students and inspire them to work more on [a given subject is identified]*." Two lecturers expressed their

willingness to integrate more technology in their lectures to further stimulate learners and facilitate their task.

- **Lecturers face problems related to students, lecture theatres and other obligations**

When asked about the problems they face when lecturing, teachers referred to students' high absentee rate; they may be delivering lectures to half-empty rooms. One reason could be that students' absence is not tracked in lecture theatres. Students' poor level, short attention span, misbehaviour were also raised as problems. One teacher complained that "*most students nowadays are too lazy; they expect you to spoon-feed them, to provide them with answers to questions, to tell them what to expect in exams, and even to entertain them when they attend your lecture... [laughter].*" This statement was reinforced by another teacher who said: "*Yeah, that's true! In my lectures, few students are willing to work with me. I can see that only those sitting in front rows take notes and answer questions. Some students come to lectures without even a pen.*" A third teacher added: "*I personally don't tolerate students texting with their cell-phones or students who attend the lecture not to learn but to have fun*". Most teachers complained also about non-equipped lecture theatres; they may find it difficult to get their voices heard by all students, or find themselves compelled to bring their personal data projector to deliver lectures based on PowerPoint presentations.

Answering the question about the difficulties associated with lecturing was an opportunity for the teachers present to refer to their other obligations in addition to lecturing, namely coping with the demands of the administration staff and the requirements of research. All in all, they listed lessons/lectures to plan and slides/handouts to prepare; students' assignments to correct; Master dissertations to supervise; exams to design and exam papers to grade; faculty meetings to attend; and research works to carry out. One of the interviewed teachers, a relatively young lecturer, added that preparing a lecture is not an easy task: "*When I have a lecture to prepare, I find myself overwhelmed with work, a whole process to go through… First, I have to do enough readings on the topic; second, I have to design a plan for the lecture; third, I have to type and print my notes; and above all, I have to manage to get handouts or photocopying requests in time*".

- **In a 'good' lecture, students take notes and do not interrupt the lecturer**

Most teachers believe that a lecture of a high academic standard is not necessarily interactive. What counts, according to them, is that students pay close attention to what the teacher says and does, take notes and work hard to grasp the lecture content. A lecturer stated: "*I know that interaction is useful sometimes, but I dislike being interrupted by students; they make me lose my train of thoughts.... And ... precious class time may be wasted in questions that*

just rush things…, I mean things planned to be dealt with later in the lecture. We shouldn't forget that we have a syllabus to cover each semester". Another teacher added: "*At any rate, most of the students who attend my lectures are unwilling to participate.*" Only one lecturer holds a different view: "*In my class, questions are welcome 'cause I know that when students aren't allowed to ask for clarification, they get confused, then bored, then they stop listening to me.*" A lecturer raised another point, namely that a 'good' lecture is the one after which students continue learning putting into practice acquired knowledge. A teacher summed up the characteristics of a 'good' lecture in a word: 'inspiring'.

- **A 'bad' lecture is associated with a feeling of failure on the part of the lecturer**

The group of lecturers put forward different aspects that they related to a 'bad' lecture.

One of them referred to the lecture plan: "*I feel my lecture is a 'bad' one when I don't have time to cover what I planned to cover.*"Another one pointed to students: "*A 'bad' lecture, for me, is the one in which you're constantly interrupted either by students misbehaving in a way or another, chatting or laughing…, or by another type of students asking you to repeat again and again the same point you've been explaining for a while*". A third lecturer rather said the opposite: "*I personally hate finding myself in front of blank faces, unresponsive however hard you try with them,… they sometimes give you the impression that you're speaking Chinese, not English.*"A female teacher added that in a 'bad' lecture she finds it hard to get her voice heard by all students in a large lecture room. All in all, it is possible to state that a 'bad' lecture is associated with a feeling of failure on the part of the lecturers due to their inability to achieve their purpose.

- **Technology is not welcome in all lectures**

Four out of six lecturers declared that they did keep sets of lecture notes; they do not think they need to introduce any change apart from updating these notes when need be. A lecturer said: "*In my lectures, I just use chalk and talk, I need nothing more.*"In contrast, two lecturers expressed their wish to integrate more technological tools in their lectures. One of them stated: "Technology *caters for learning strategies and promotes learning. In addition to simple PowerPoint slides, I would like to use other means like Internet downloads and live web links and so on.*" Generally, teachers believe that lectures of this kind entail well-equipped rooms. At the University of Oum El Bouaghi, most amphitheatres have ceiling mounted data projectors. There is also a data cable ready to plug into the appropriate socket on the lecturer's computer or tablet. Classrooms, even large ones, are not, however, equipped. Some lecturers who recognize the value of technology in teaching/learning take

the trouble to bring a data projector (sometimes their own) and content themselves with working on a blank wall instead of a screen.

4.3.2. Students' Views

In the students' focus group, the following main aspects emerged:

- **Lectures are needed to prepare for exams**

Students' views towards lectures are on the whole positive; they are used to them and believe they can get the gist of what they are required to learn in a given subject matter, and to learn how to pass exams through lectures. For most students, attending lectures is a pleasure given that they highly "respect" their teachers and enjoy learning from them. An L3 student stated: "*I can't miss lectures; I prefer to have my own notes; I don't feel comfortable with others' notes or photocopied materials*". Students, for the most part, raised the issue of assessment; one L2 student put it explicitly: "*If we take notes, it's mainly for passing exams*". Two Master students only attend the lectures they think are useful. The notes and handouts they get from them pave the way for further work to be done on recommended books and articles.

On the other hand, for one L2 student, attending lectures is not interesting since most lecturers do not care about students and do not attempt to make lectures comprehensible to them; the student even went on to say that some lecturers complicate matters for the learners on purpose to belittle them: "*the teacher of [a particular subject is identified] always… Can I speak in Arabic? [shift to Arabic after approval on the part of the researcher]This teacher always treats us with all names and keeps on repeating that his stuff is too complex for us to grasp.*"

- **Taking notes is not an easy task**

Regarding the problems encountered when attending lectures, students consistently referred to their inability to make a good set of notes in some lectures where teachers go too fast, speak in a low tone, do not simplify complex concepts, or do not clarify the overall structure or framework of the content presented. An M1 student said: "*I really get mad when I find myself unable to make sense of what is being presented or to connect it to what preceded or what is to follow*". An M2 student explained: "*Some teachers don't tell us what we're expected to do: whether to take notes or not, whether handouts are available or not … and things like that…whether to ask questions or not, and if so when? …etc*". That is why some of these students or their classmates do not attend lectures and prefer reading handouts at home. The length of the lecture (about 90 minutes) is another problem students struggle with. Indeed, the longer the lecture, the harder it becomes for students to concentrate and take notes.

-'Bad' lectures are not well delivered and are associated with 'bad' lecturers

All interviewed students do not like lectures merely read out from a script or wholly dictated to the audience, or those in which no handouts are provided. One informant from M2 level stated: "*In the lectures of [a lecturer is named], we just practise dictation for an hour. I can't wait to get away at the end of the class; I find myself rushing out as if I was in prison.*" The other characteristics of a 'bad lecture', as listed by the group of students, are lecturers who are 'incompetent in the subject matter', 'disorganized', 'authoritarian' or 'constantly bored'. Furthermore, students consider that in a 'bad' lecture, they are not allowed to ask questions, and if they ever do (usually at the end of the session), they generally do not get a proper answer.

As discussed in the teachers' focus group, not all lecturers encourage students to ask questions. Students often find themselves at a loss in this respect: some lecturers tolerate questions during the lecture; some leave them to the end of the session; and some never have time to answer them and think that this is the task of the person in charge of tutorials. Students are often not told what they are expected to do, which may be problematic since "students who are not given any indication to the contrary will tend to assume that they can never ask questions in lectures"(Haynes & Haynes: 2012, p11). Another major problem is getting the floor; students raise their hands to indicate that they want a turn to say something, but find themselves ignored or constrained to wait for a long time before recognized by the lecturer. Consequently, they may give up asking questions in class.

-'Good' lectures are associated with 'good' lecturers

Students value lectures which provide them with the basics of the subject being learnt. They unanimously value the teacher who prepares well his/her lecture and who assists them to comprehend it. They find it helpful when their teacher outlines the major points of a lecture right from the beginning, when s/he uses professional, easy-to-read slides, and when s/he gives them enough time to take notes. Furthermore, students like getting handouts in time to be able to follow and understand the lectures. They also respond positively to the teachers who are enthusiastic about their lectures, those who are interested in the learners and in the subject matter.

An L1 student answered the researcher's question about what makes a good lecture in Arabic laying much focus on the affective side: "*A good lecturer makes a good lecture. A good lecturer is approachable and helpful; s/he cares about the students, doesn't ridicule them, and answers all their questions.*" The other L1 student responded saying: "*Frankly speaking, some of our teachers are too tough and too demanding; for example, [a lecturer is named] always calls my name when it comes to answering a difficult question in front of all the class*". An M1 student added: "*It's fair to say that the syllabi and contents of some courses are complex and too long. Sometimes we feel that we are stuffed with information.*"

- **Handouts are indispensable and the use of technology in lectures may be problematic**

Regarding the changes students need to make and the tools or materials they need to have to better the current EFL lectures, all the students insisted on the importance of having handouts and/or printouts of PowerPoint slides in all subjects. An L2 student expressed the wish to be given enough time to take notes: "*We just wish to be able to take notes adequately to learn them for the exam. Taking notes in the lecture of [a lecturer is named] is… a nightmare; this teacher goes too fast and doesn't give us handouts. I'm sorry to say that [the lecturer is named again] doesn't care about us at all!*" An M1 student drew attention to reading assignments which should not be numerous and should be more focused: "*We really find ourselves at a loss when teachers give us a big number of reading assignments plus other homeworks. They don't even specify the areas to work on in books. We'd prefer to have few books to consult*".

The students like when teachers use technology in class. A lecture based on the use of technological tools is likely to have greater impact on them and their learning in that it stimulates their curiosity and thinking, and helps them memorize what they see and/or hear. An L3 student drew attention to the problems students sometimes face when their teacher uses on-screen words and images: "*When I don't manage to find a seat in the front of the room, I find it difficult to see or hear properly what's presented.*" The other L3 student complained about the same matter: "*Some teachers just photocopy pages from a book or scan them, then project them and expect us to read them easily…*"

5. Pedagogy of Making Lectures Work

Most university teachers wish to be 'good' lecturers. A 'good' lecturer is remembered through the years. A 'good' lecturer makes lectures 'learner-friendly.' (Scevak et al., 2015, p.6). Actually, students do not dislike lectures or lecturers; they do dislike "poor quality lecturing'' (Brown & Manogue, 2001, p. 233). This section suggests a set of procedures likely to improve the quality of lectures in the light of the findings of the focus group discussions.

5.1. Interaction

To begin with, teachers have to make their lectures interactive. Making a lecture interactive means adjusting it to the students' needs, a procedure that is of crucial importance: "The key to effective speaking is an objective understanding of the needs of your listeners." (Atkinson, 2004, p. 8). Making an appropriate interactive decision means responding appropriately to the students' needs as regards aspects like motivation and involvement, understanding and abilities. At certain points in the lecture, the teacher is required to assess what is happening in class and eventually decide to adopt another course of action if need be. There are several questions the teacher needs to ask; for example, 'Have I made myself clear to the students?'; 'How

can I regain their attention?'; 'Is this stage of the lecture taking too much time? Teachers' interactive decisions are important given the dynamic and complex nature of teaching and learning.

In the foreign language teaching/learning context in particular, the quality of interaction and patterns of communication in the classroom are of crucial importance since they are likely to affect the learners' use of language for learning and acquisition (Johnson, 1995). In fact, foreign language learning is, by definition, "a highly interactive process." (Richards & Lockhart, 1996, p. 138). The importance of interaction lies in the fact that it "pushes learners to produce more accurate and appropriate language, which itself provides input for other students." (Hedge, 2000, p. 13). Inviting students to ask and answer questions and involving them in discussing the content of the lecture and in other activities with peers are examples of interactive techniques recommended in a lecture.

Asking questions is, doubtless, a useful activity; in the words of Brown & Race (2002, p. 118), "Even just *thinking* of questions to ask is a useful activity". In the Algerian culture of learning, asking questions may not always be encouraged. Classroom participation in general is highly culture-specific: in Eastern cultures, it means listening carefully to the teacher and taking notes; in Western cultures, it means asking questions, sharing and discussing points (Johnson, 1995). Questions, notably, promote language acquisition, for they contribute to make the language used more comprehensible and more relevant to the learners (Banbrook & Skehan; as cited in Richards & Lockhart, 1996). To motivate students to ask questions in class, the teacher may invite them at regular intervals throughout the lecture to raise questions about points just tackled, to be answered by peers or as a last resort by the lecturer. Questions may also be written on slips of paper for the lecturer to tackle when appropriate.

Answering questions is an equally or even more useful activity. Teachers are recommended to ask questions to the whole audience to think about for some time, and only then shall they select randomly a student or more to speak out their response. The length of time the teacher waits after asking a question is an important factor in the skill of questioning. Long et al. (as cited in Richards & Lockhart, 1996) demonstrate that when the wait-time lasts more than two seconds (three up to five seconds), students' participation is likely to increase in both quantity and quality. Question-and-answer sequences may take place while lecturing and at the end of the lecture to see to what extent students have grasped the content presented. No doubt, students learn from the process of answering questions; they also learn how to perform well in exams. Lecturers are also recommended to elicit students' comments, viewpoints, beliefs and suggestions. Accordingly, when planning a lecture, the teacher

should manage time in a way that gives some room to students' questions/answers or unexpected matters.

Another recommended technique is to actively engage students in learning through interactive activities interspersed with the lecture. It should be noted that interaction in group works is more beneficial than in whole-class work; in fact, the former is likely to lead to more language production (output), more exposure to language (input), and more corrections (Pica and Doughty; as cited in Hedge, 2000), hence the merits of collaborative work. Getting students to explain points to each other, for example, is valuable to both parties: students learn more and better from their peers (Boud et al., 2001); besides, those who do the act of explaining (just like teachers) strengthen their comprehension and mastery of the points being clarified (Mejias, 2012). In addition, "the small group skills are precisely those required in employment and research" (Race, 2015, p. 166). Students can work in pairs or small groups to solve a problem, perform a task or answer a question. Making students work in twos, threes or more can be done according to seating arrangements, not along horizontal rows; students may work with those sitting behind or in front of them to facilitate interaction.

One of the main worries of teachers is failing to cover the official syllabus/curriculum given time constraints and unexpected events (holidays; meetings; weather conditions; travel, health and other problems). That is why they prefer devoting much (or all) of the lecture time to their own presentation and explanation of the lecture elements instead of giving way to students' participation. Going through the syllabus is not the teachers' but the learners' task: The former are purported to cover appropriately the major components of the syllabus, to spotlight major points and learning outcomes, while dealing with the syllabus as a whole and catering for its details lies on the learners' shoulders (Brown & Race, 2002). When a teacher has a lecture class for one hour and half, this does not mean that s/he has to talk for the whole period. Varying activities is the key in this respect. The aim of the lecture should not be to cover specific material but to facilitate learning. If students are unwilling to participate, it is up to the teacher to stimulate their interest and to create opportunities for them to take part in the lecture. Learners should know when to ask and answer questions, whether or not to interrupt the lecturer, whether to answer a question directly or wait until called on, what to do when working collaboratively with other students, whether or not to display knowledge, i.e. rules of appropriate interactional behaviour or 'interactional competence' (Richards & Lockhart, 1996).

5.2.   Holding the Attention of the Audience

A critical factor lecturers should consider when planning and while delivering a lecture is students' attention span. There is wide consensus among scholars (Hartley and Davies, 1978; Benjamin, 2002; Goss Lucas & Bernstein,

2005) that a lecturer who does not involve students to think on and do things with what is presented in the lecture is likely to lose their attention. Research evidence suggests that students' attention diminishes after the first ten/fifteen minutes of the lecture. Accordingly, students tend to recall 70% of the beginning of the lecture and only 20% of the end (McKeachie, 1994). Accordingly, one should not give a 60-90 minute lecture without breaking it up with other activities. In other words, lecturers have to plan a range of activities which engage the students actively in their learning and change the pace of the lecture at regular intervals. Instead of spending all the class time in having things done *to* students, lecturers have to care about things done *by* students (Harmer, 2007).

Lecturers may plan a short break for learners to review notes, to reflect upon what has been done or what is to be done, or simply to relax. Teachers may also change the lecturing strategy from a PowerPoint presentation, for example, to video watching, class debate, a reading assignment or even a quiz; this shift from one skill/activity to another is beneficial, in addition to leading learners to uncover or practise points related to what is being discussed. Teachers may also introduce memorable examples or anecdotes or make students work in pairs or small groups.

Some students attend lectures only 'physically' and are most of the lecture time absent-minded. In the Algerian university, some students take tutorials more seriously than lectures given that attendance is generally tracked in the former but not the latter. Another reason may be related to the fact that in tutorials, continuous assessment is usually practised, mainly in the form of small-group work tasks and projects. Besides, tutorials themselves tackle questions and activities likely to be suggested in end-of-semester exams. Holding the attention of the audience is, thus, one of the major challenges facing teachers in lectures. Brown & Race (2002, p. 56) argue that teachers "may wish to abandon attempts to police physical presence and consider instead ways of making the lectures unmissable!"

Atkinson (2004, p. 33) considers laughter "a powerful weapon in the armoury of the public speaker". In fact, teachers who use humour in class enjoy popularity and high ratings from students. Laughter has several advantages: it increases attentiveness, for laughing once makes one expect more fun in what is to be said next; laughter serves as an ice-breaker with the audience; and laughter helps listeners to remember the points tackled. Eye contact is also a significant aspect in addition to other non-linguistic means of communication showing up in one's face, body posture and movements. Maintaining eye contact with individual students for seconds is likely to generate nods, smiles or willingness to take notes. It denotes that the audience is being 'spoken to' not 'spoken at'. Thus, teachers spending more time looking at the slides, screen or board do not do their students a favour. Using humour, eye contact, smiles

are rapport skills which contribute to build a healthy atmosphere that is conducive to learning. In addition, lecturers, like anyone speaking in public, have to vary their voice tone, pitch and intonation in order not to sound monotonous and to keep the audience attentive. Making pauses at regular points is also significant in this regard. Pauses in speech are like punctuation marks in writing; they serve to highlight a point or an idea.

5.3. Planning and Structuring the Lecture

For a lecture to be an effective learning experience, teachers should raise students' awareness about its aims, what they are expected to do before, during or after it and why, and what learning resources they have to use. A further point to be remembered when giving a lecture is the fact that unlike written language, spoken language does not lend itself to transmitting detailed and large amounts of information. Hence, it is not judicious to squeeze much information into slides, for instance; lecturers have to carefully select what should be included and what should be disregarded. Otherwise, learners would experience information overload: they would retain little (or no) information and would lose interest. The solution, according to Atkinson (2004, p. 98), is "to simplify your subject matter beyond the point at which you, as a specialist, feel comfortable." If the aim of a lecture is to introduce a chapter in a book, students would be more interested in a summary of key points. It is the task of the teacher to make the summary thought-provoking and interesting enough to make the learners read the chapter in question.

Furthermore, for a lecture to be effective, it should be presented in an orderly manner. Lectures have different structures in different disciplines. For example, in computer science, lectures follow the problem-solution pattern while in social sciences, lectures are based on the comparison of models and systems. An important strategy is to let the audience, at the start, know about the outline of what is to be presented, a brief overview of the main points to be covered. Another equally important technique is to show how particular items relate to this outline throughout the presentation. These techniques keep the audience attentive and facilitate the understanding of the lecture. It follows that an effective lecture is designed with the audience in mind.

Moreover, a 'good' lecture should be of an appropriate level to students, not too complex and not oversimplified. The lecturer can resort to repetition, pausing, highlighting major points and linking various parts to facilitate understanding. It would be a good idea for lecturers to put themselves in the students' shoes as an attempt to experience complex matters in order to cater for the appropriate conditions for learning to take place. A skilful lecturer stimulates students' thinking skills regarding the lecture content and does not simply care about providing them with a body of knowledge required to pass exams. An interesting activity is to ask students to provide a critique of what was presented in the lecture. Both thesis and antithesis, argument and counter-

argument should be pointed out to develop deep and critical thinking. Asking pertinent questions, pointing to relationships, discussing generalities and specifications, sharing experiences and viewpoints are other equally interesting activities.

5.4. Handouts and Illustration

An important aspect to be catered for in a lecture is handouts. Handouts should be designed in a way that shows the overall structure of the lecture, its major parts, sections and subsections. More importantly, handouts, like lectures, should be made 'interactive' (Brown & Race, 2002) in that they should contain activities that involve learners to get the most of the lecture content, whether in-class or out-of-class tasks. Besides, when the handouts include suggested questions, they are likely to make learners more open to the answers when provided by the lecturer. Handouts may also include revision questions on previous lectures to pave the way for the next one. The teacher may devote the first five/ten minutes of the lecture to these questions, to be answered either orally or in writing, individually or in groups. Handouts may also offer free space for learners to add notes, answer questions, write summaries. In brief, handouts should get learners to do some thinking about the lecture content. In this way, they become an important learning/teaching aid. It goes without saying that handouts, printed slides or any other form of instructional materials should be made available to learners to enhance learning. Another point is that lecturers should not read out to learners what they can read for themselves (in handouts or PowerPoint slides); those who do so generate boredom and monotony. Instead, they have to provide further explanation of what is written.

Illustration via audio/visual means or other technological tools is another important component to add to lectures to make them more attractive and to foster learning. In the past, lectures used to rely merely on talk and chalk. Today, modern lecture rooms are equipped with the highest technological tools to facilitate the task of both lecturer and audience.These tools may be used to raise students' interest level, while standing in the front of the room and lecturing may not be of equal interest to learners. A skilful lecturer is the one who manages to engage uninterested students or students with a poor level in the subject matter, and to challenge at the same time those for whom the lecture content seems simple or well-known. It is worth mentioning that what the teacher displays via traditional or modern means of teaching should be visible, readable and/or audible to all students present in the theatre.

5.5. Assisting Learners to Make Notes

In a 'good' lecture, learners are assisted to make notes; in fact, decoding, comprehending and making notes in lectures are not easy tasks (Jordan, 1997). Lecturers may consider giving students some time to make and

compare notes. They might also design some activities to train them in note-making and relevant study skills. Lecturers may, for example, point out important parts via verbal or vocal signals. They have to heed factors as their voice tone, speed of delivery and body language, which, depending on the way they are brought into play, can facilitate or hinder understanding and learning. Though this may seem obvious, the importance of speaking clearly and loudly cannot be stressed enough. Lecturers should also pause from time to time to give students a chance to catch up. Repetition is another useful strategy to promote understanding and remembering. Its role in learning in general and language learning in particular cannot be denied. Repetition together with the use of pauses, short sentences, clear articulation and illustration are recommended in any lecture to assist learners to make notes.

Some lecturers resort to dictating to cover the 60/90-minute lecture period; it is not an effective technique, however, for students may write down dictated words while totally absent-minded. In many cases, lecturing consists in "the transmission of the lecturer's notes to the students' notebooks, passing through the minds of neither" (Atkinson, 2004, p. 7). As in many lectures there is little interaction and almost no feedback, making eye contact with the audience helps in that it gives clues about the students' attitudes and reactions. Skilful lecturers are alert to students' facial expressions, body language and other nonverbal behaviour as signs of interest, boredom or fatigue, and adjust their behaviour accordingly. Yawns and head scratching may reflect boredom or confusion; the lecturer may resort to reformulation, recapitulation or re-explanation to regain the audience attention and interest.

5.6.   Reflection

After the lecture, teachers are recommended to reflect on the way it went to assess its strengths and weaknesses and to make changes accordingly. While lecturing, one may notice, for example, spelling and punctuation errors in the handouts used which, if not corrected in due time, may remain there for several years. Missing words are another common occurrence often detected by students. More importantly, a point (or more) in the lecture may be deemed confusing and hence worth reconsidering or deleting. In case the lecturer uses slides, the latter often need re-adjusting in terms of font size, colour … to be more visible to the audience. Similarly, the teacher's lecture plan needs to be reviewed, that is the questions asked, the instructions given, the pair/group work activities implemented, the sequencing followed in order to note what has worked and what has not.

Learners are also required to reflect on the lecture and on their own way of learning in order to learn how to learn. Learning how to learn is an important skill that needs to be nurtured each time students make progress in their studies, for the more advanced learners are, the more complex abilities they are required to develop. Learning how to learn promotes autonomy among

students; they become able to manage their learning more effectively. Put otherwise, students need to be able to find things out for themselves and not merely rely on their teacher: "We are no longer talking of teachers teaching and learners learning, but of everyone contributing to the management of everyone's learning."(Allwright; as cited in Legutke & Thomas, 1991).

Conclusion

Whether lecturing is an appropriate teaching approach remains a controversial issue. Some teachers enjoy lecturing and believe it is effective; others hold the opposite view. Lectures, however, are here to stay; they remain widely used in Higher Education. It is, thus, reasonable to make the best of them. Lecturers have to plan and prepare lectures; they have to deliver them in a clear, loud voice and a reasonable pace; they have to do their best to make them comprehensible; they have to interact with the audience, inviting questions and feedback; they have to make learners to interact with each other; they have to be alert to the learners' body language and be enthusiastic and humorous. All these recommendations do not guarantee an effective lecture; nevertheless, they do improve the lecturer's general skills and performance.

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