

The Academic Listening Project

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Project Snapshot

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Project Overview

Aural processing in one-way and two-way communication plays a significant role in student education in Higher Education. Listening skills enable knowledge transmission through lectures, facilitate deep learning and positioning in discussions and seminars, and are key to successful interactions in tutorials and oral feedback (Miller, 2009; Rost, 2011). While more attention has been paid to students' transition to the demands of academic reading and writing, equivalent attention to students' transition to academic listening is lacking.

The University of Leeds aims to increase international student numbers while simultaneously giving increasing attention to improving student education experience. However, to reconcile these two objectives more attention needs to be given to the realities of the listening experience for international students with English as a second language (L2) students, their impacts on teaching and learning, and the support the University provides both students and subject lecturers.

Project Objectives

- To investigate the listening experiences of L2 international students studying at Leeds
- To investigate the listening-related experiences of academic staff involved in teaching cohorts with significant numbers of L2 students

Methods

A mixed methods approach was taken to collecting data for this project. L2 international students' experiences of listening during their studies at Leeds were investigated via an online survey in semester 1. Three hundred and nineteen responses were received to the survey. Students were also invited to take part in individual case studies and focus groups. Four L2 international students took part in individual case studies and were each interviewed in semesters one and two. Nineteen L2 students representing seven of the University's schools took part in focus group interviews in semesters one and two.

In a similar vein, an online survey was distributed to teaching staff to gain insights into their experiences of teaching cohorts with significant numbers of L2 international students. Survey responses were received from forty-seven tutors. In addition, nine tutors from six schools took part in a focus group interview in semester 2.



Key findings

- 30% of students surveyed in semester 1 expressed that they faced challenges in listening in lectures (understanding 'some' or 'very little' of a typical semester 1 lecture) but qualitative data from case studies and focus groups suggest that this is a transitional experience for many students and continued exposure to English improves comprehension.
- Quantitative and qualitative data from focus groups and interviews suggest a clear link between students' levels of exposure to English pre-arrival and confidence in listening ability.
- Accent variation, speed of speech and content clarity were identified as common challenges to listening comprehension by many students.
- Tutors surveyed saw listening as almost as important as reading and writing in students' academic success but only around half of tutors felt confident that L2 international students were able to fully/mostly comprehend in lectures and seminars.
- A majority of tutors surveyed believed that more continuing professional development (CPD) on how to teach cohorts that include L2 students would be helpful.

Implications for practice

- A proportion of L2 international student experience a period of transition in academic listening and understanding natural language spoken at speed and could benefit from resources to support this transition.
- Tutors surveyed expressed an appetite for more professional development support in how to effectively teach cohorts which have linguistic diversity.

Outputs/Next Steps

- We have developed two listening resources for L2 students to support their transitions to academic listening.
- We have worked with a colleague in the School of Languages, Cultures and Societies to pilot a research project to investigate the following: Can training L2 speakers from diverse language backgrounds improve their comprehension? Initial results have been promising and we will be rolling out the full research project in due course.
- We have been working with colleagues in Skills@Library and the Digital Education Service to develop a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) called 'Listening Skills to Succeed at University'. This will be a resource available to all students regardless of their



first language and will engaged with areas such as active listening and listening and intercultural communication.

- Two academic articles have been written to communicate full results and we are in the process of submitting these to journals for consideration

Bibliography

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