



A STUDY ON PERCEPTION OF LECTURER-STUDENT INTERACTION IN ENGLISH MEDIUM SCIENCE LECTURES

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Abstract: This paper, which is a part of a thesis, investigates the perception and practice of lecturers and students with regard to lecturer-student interaction in English medium science lectures of a university in Sri Lanka where English is a second language. This paper argues that dialogic lecturer-student interaction, which enables students to take a more active role in discussions compared to the use of recitation scripts (questions-answers-evaluations) developed in non-dialogic interactions, is likely to be beneficial for students' content (lecture comprehension) and language development. The study revealed the complexity of the perception-practice dynamic, and the multi-faceted sub-set of factors which influenced students' and lecturers' behaviour in class, and their perception of that behaviour. Students' lecture comprehension and classroom interaction were influenced by their language proficiency, though the students considered the lecturers' lecture delivery style to be more important than their own language proficiency. This study also revealed that a culturally-embedded behaviour perpetuated by senior students, known as ragging (a kind of bullying), restricted the classroom interaction of the students.

Keywords: Interaction, English Medium Instruction, dialogic, non-dialogic

Özet: Bir tezin bölümü olan bu çalışma, İngilizce'nin ikinci dil olarak kullanıldığı Sri Lanka'da bir üniversitenin İngilizce olarak sürdürülen bilim derslerinde öğretmenlerin ve öğrencilerin öğretmen-öğrenci etkileşimine dair algılarını ve uygulamalarını incelemektedir. Bu araştırma, diyalojik olmayan etkileşimlerdeki ezbere senaryoların (soru-cevap-değerlendirme) kullanılmasıyla karşılaştırıldığında öğrencilerin tartışmalarda daha aktif bir rol almalarını sağlayan diyalojik öğretmen-öğrenci etkileşimlerinin öğrencilere içerik (dersi anlama) ve dil gelişimleri için daha faydalı olabileceğini ileri sürmektedir. Bu makale algı-uygulama dinamiğinin karmaşıklığını, sınıfta öğrencilerin ve öğretmenlerin davranışlarını etkileyen çok yönlü faktörleri, ve öğretmen ve öğrencilerin bu davranışları nasıl algıladıklarını ortaya koymaktadır. Her ne kadar öğrenciler öğretmenlerin ders verme tarzlarının onların dil yeterliğinden daha önemli olduklarını düşünseler de, öğrencilerin dersi anlamaları ve sınıf etkileşimleri onların dil yeterliğinden etkilenmektedir. Bu çalışma aynı zamanda ortaya çıkarmaktadır ki zorbalık veya bir tür sataşma olarak da bilinen son sınıf öğrencileri tarafından gösterilen kültürle iç içe geçmiş bir davranış öğrencilerin sınıf etkileşimlerini sınırlamaktadır.

Anahtar sözcükler: Etkileşim, Öğretim Dili Olarak İngilizce, diyalojik, diyalojik olmayan

1. Introduction

This study was undertaken in the context of English medium science lectures at a small faculty in a Sri Lankan university where English is spoken as a second language (ESL). This study focuses on investigating lecturer-student interaction as a remedial measure to overcome the problems faced by students in ESL science lectures, in particular the students' lecture comprehension difficulties and limited oral language proficiency in their second language (i.e. English). In this study, I argue that dialogic lecturer-student interaction is likely to be beneficial to both students' content and language development. Dialogic interaction can be defined simply as a mutual dialogue that takes place between a lecturer and students. In other words, an interaction in which

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both the lecturer and the students mutually contribute to the discourse with a view to exploring or developing a concept in a lesson.

This study is not experimental in nature, nor does it aim to find a direct relationship between variables, for example, between interaction and content learning. Rather, it collects evidence to investigate the feasibility of practising dialogic interaction in ESL science lectures at the Faculty of Applied Sciences (hereinafter referred to as FAS) of a Sri Lankan university as a pioneer study in the South Asian region. For this purpose, this study examines the extent of dialogic interaction practised and the factors that influence interaction in ESL science lectures at FAS, by analysing data relating to both (i) student and lecturer perceptions about ESL science lectures and (ii) the actual practice and discourse of a sample of such lectures. This analysis helps to explore the nature of the existing situation and make recommendations for future changes, having given due consideration to political, institutional and personal factors. Within the scope of this paper, I include the methodology and findings pertaining to the student and lecturer perceptions of lecturer-student interaction and the factors that influence interaction.

2. Context of the study

This study is undertaken in an English Medium Instruction (EMI) context in tertiary level science undergraduate classes, with students whose entire school study has been conducted in L1 (Tamil), and who now have to study in the university through English.

English is used as a medium of instruction in the tertiary institutes in Sri Lanka to teach different subjects/courses to undergraduate and postgraduate students, while L1 instruction is also widely available for courses, especially in the Arts and Humanities. All universities have a mandate to develop the language competency of the students by means of teaching them through English.

3. Locating this study

Classroom interaction is considered to be important for learning, so any attempt to improve teaching and learning should consider classroom interaction as a potential area for development (Walsh, 2011). This claim is made based on the assertion that language is the medium of acquiring new knowledge and also, in language classes, language is used as both the medium as well as the goal of the study (ibid.). Similarly, oral interaction that occurs between teacher and students and among students is deemed to be important in creating a suitable learning environment and for learners' development (Hall & Verplaetse, 2000). In addition, interaction in content classes may help students' academic L2 competency (Verplaetse, 2000) by giving them the opportunity to practise the language to reach fluency and hear the academic talk and later appropriate it. Hence, it is generally believed that through interaction, not only students' academic communication skills, but also their second language develops (ibid.).

On this basis, the argument developed in this study is that dialogic interaction could enhance the students' content as well as language development in tertiary level ESL science lectures. In order to provide a solid basis for this argument, I locate this study within the direct principles of dialogic perspectives to teaching and learning, which are built on the premise of sociocultural perspectives toward learning situated within the broader Second Language Acquisition (SLA) studies, as I explain below.

Interaction has been investigated under the SLA umbrella in different contexts such as ESL (English as a Second Language), EFL (English as a Foreign Language) and ‘immersion’ – where students study all their school subjects through the medium of a second or foreign language for its benefit in developing language among Non-native Speaker (NNS) students, on the assumption that negotiated interaction between the learners and the teacher can enhance comprehension of the input and in turn lead to language development. However, as these SLA studies were carried out for many years under the influence of psycholinguistic oriented research, concern was raised for the need to conduct the studies with more focus on social and contextual factors. For example, Firth & Wagner (1997) argued for sociolinguistic perspectives. In response to this type of request, in recent years, studies based on the sociocultural perspective have emerged as dominant (e.g. Nassaji & Wells, 2000; Hall & Walsh, 2002; Lantolf, 2006) within SLA research, with increased awareness of social concerns (Block, 2003).

Recently, attention has been drawn to interaction in first language (L1) primary level content classes in the form of whole class interactive teaching (e.g. Mroz et al., 2000; English et al., 2002; Hardman et al., 2003; Smith et al., 2004; Myhill, 2006), and in L1 tertiary level content classes (e.g. van Dijk et al., 2001; Huxham, 2005; Ernst & Colthorpe, 2007) as well as second language (L2) lectures (e.g. Kumar, 2003). These studies focused on how content learning can be facilitated through interaction. However, the studies conducted at tertiary level in the area of interaction mostly consider only content learning, while the present study considers both content and language learning. In order for effective content and language learning to take place, it is suggested that interaction should be dialogic.

The importance of dialogic interaction in learning has been emphasised in sociocultural perspectives on learning in both L1 and L2 contexts. Sociocultural theory, built on the work of Vygotsky (1978) argues that the role of language and interaction between the teacher and the learners is important for the L1 as well as L2 learners (Mercer, 2001). Following the path of Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory, social constructivists (e.g. Mercer, 1995; Staarman & Mercer, 2010) argue that teacher-led discussions are important for learning in the classroom. In this kind of learning the teacher has an important role as he or she is the one who should exploit students’ present understanding and ‘make explicit their thoughts, reasons and knowledge’ through appropriate use of questions (Rojas-Drummond & Mercer, 2003: 101). The argument is that this kind of talk should be dialogic with mutual contributions from both the students and the teacher to the discourse, which in turn can be a good platform for content and language learning (Swain & Lapkin, 1998).

A small number of previous studies have investigated how dialogic interaction can assist the content and language development of ESL learners (Haneda, 2005; Haneda & Wells, 2010), though they focused on primary level content classes. This study also treats interaction as important in accordance with other studies, but it is built on the construct of sociocultural theory and treats the dialogic approaches to teaching and learning in classroom settings as more important than non-dialogic interaction at tertiary level.

Dialogism, which has its origins in the conceptual work of Bakhtin (1981), was further developed as a dialogic teaching approach by Alexander (2006), while the dialogic value of

interactional episodes has been identified by the work of Mortimer & Scott (2003) in secondary level science classes. In this study, the occurrence of dialogic interaction in a small corpus of lecture discourse that was collected from the lectures delivered to ESL undergraduate science students has been investigated using an innovative analytical framework. The framework, which was designed exclusively for this study, categorises the lectures from highly monologic to highly dialogic. This framework incorporates the dialogic concept of Mortimer & Scott as well as the MICASE (Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English) classification of discourse types, which was used to analyse a larger corpus of academic encounters (e.g. lectures, seminars, discussions, etc.) at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. Therefore, the present study is also carried out under the purview of sociocultural theory and dialogic approaches to learning and teaching, but as an exploratory one to investigate the presence of dialogic/interactive lectures within the FAS lecture discourse.

4. Research Questions

The research questions are designed based on two constructs: investigating perceptions and practice. Within the scope of this paper I focus on the following research questions:

1. In ESL undergraduate Science lectures what are the NNS students' and NNS lecturers' perceptions regarding lecturer-student interaction (defined as the asking and answering of questions in lectures)?
2. What factors do influence lecturer-student interaction in ESL undergraduate Science lectures?

5. Methodology

This study used a mixed methods approach. In this approach data were collected at different stages.

In stage 1, two kinds of questionnaire surveys were administered: students and lecturers. 30 students and 4 lecturers were included in the survey and in addition interviews were held with both the students and the lecturers. In stage 2, Classroom observation was carried out using classroom observation schedule and checklist on lecture delivery style, which are not discussed in this paper. Stage 3 acts as a reinforcing stage for stages 1 and 2. At stage 3, group interviews were chosen for the students, whereas semi structured interviews were conducted with lecturers. At stage 4, 24 lectures were audio recorded (while observed). Of the recorded lectures, a total of 12 from Biotechnology, Animal Physiology, Physics and Statistics were transcribed verbatim and analysed using an analytical framework, which was especially designed to analyse the FAS lecture discourse. This framework was also used to locate these lectures on a scale from monologic to dialogic. But these lecture discourse data are not included in this paper.

6. Data analysis

In this study, the quantitative data obtained from student and lecturer questionnaire surveys, mainly the data from ranking scales, were analysed using SPSS. Other student responses were analysed using simple descriptive techniques (i.e. Microsoft Excel). The number of respondents was limited; 30 students and 4 lecturers; so that the analysis of data was manageable including the analysis of open-ended questions.

The qualitative data came from three major sources: student group interviews, lecturer interviews and lecture recordings. In addition, there were data from the checklist on lecture style, classroom observation schedule and the researchers' field notes. However, the last three sources provided only supplementary data that were used to fill any gaps in the main sources of data, or provided some additional information.

The student group interviews were held in Tamil and they were translated into English and transcribed. In the translation, the key idea stated in the sentence was preserved. In the group interviews the overall idea expressed in the discussion was important, therefore, only broader important aspects were considered for transcribing. When transcribing group interview recordings, attention was also paid to identifying the students. As the voices were familiar to the researcher, it was not difficult to identify the students from the recording. The transcript followed the general pattern of transcription convention and whenever any English words were used, they were indicated differently including the omission.

Three of the four lecturer interviews were held in English, so they were transcribed, and the one which was conducted in the mother tongue was translated into English and then transcribed. The transcription was similar to the group interview. During the transcription process, the details that were not directly relevant to the research questions or were highly confidential were omitted.

6. 1. Identifying themes from interview data

After the transcription, the qualitative data obtained from the student group interviews and lecturer interviews were arranged into different themes. These themes were previously used to construct the questionnaires and interview guides and also they were derived from the research questions. This kind of analysis is known as thematic analysis (Vanderstoep & Johnston, 2009). The student group interview guide used the following themes: lecture comprehension problems, reasons and suggestions; students asking questions and answering questions; enhancing interaction, etc. The lecturer interview data were also arranged into more or less similar themes to reflect the students' discussion. These themes were pre-identified based on the objective of the research (i.e. students' lecture comprehension and lecturer-student interaction). By using pre-defined themes, cross checking the responses given by the students and the lecturers during the questionnaire survey became possible.

6. 2. Identifying emerging themes

Any emerging themes from the interview connected to classroom interaction were also taken into account. The interview transcripts of student group interviews for the two groups were entered into a coding sheet separately. Likewise, each of the four lecturers' interview transcripts were also entered separately. In this process only the answers/responses given by the respondents were entered but the questions were not included. These responses were then transferred to an initial coding, followed by subthemes and finally into themes that emerged. These themes were purely emerging from the data but not pre-identified themes (e.g. lecture comprehension or lecturer-student interaction). The initial themes and subthemes were discussed with the peers and supervisors and upon mutual agreement a few themes such as university atmosphere and student factors were identified. Later these coding of students and lecturers were transferred to two Microsoft Excel sheets each and the data were compiled based on the subthemes in order to

facilitate data integration and presentation. Of these subthemes only those directly addressing the research questions are presented in section B of the findings.

The analysis of lecture discourse data were not covered within the scope of this study.

7. Findings

In order to answer the research questions I have drawn data from two sources. One is from the survey and interview and other source is the emerging themes as identified purely during the data analysis stage. I have organised these two different sources of data into two sections: Section A and B respectively. In section A, I have arranged the findings obtained from survey and interview under two themes: answering questions, and asking questions. In this study, interaction was measured as either asking questions or answering questions and therefore I have considered them individually to explain how each of them is influenced by different factors.

Section A: Perception of lecturer-student interaction and factors that influence interaction Answering Questions

Almost all the students (97%) mentioned that they did not answer questions asked by the lecturer. The reasons given for not answering questions are presented below in table 1. The major reason (reported by nearly three-quarters of the students) was fear of giving a wrong answer. In addition, nearly two-thirds of them (63%) stated that they had language problems too.

Table 1
Reasons given by students for not answering questions

<i>Reasons</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Shyness to talk in the class	37
Fear of giving a wrong answer	73
Language problem	63
Lecturer gives the answer before I attempt to answer	7
Think that other students would answer	23
Not knowing the answer	47

When they were asked to mention any other reasons other than those listed above in the questionnaire, a few students mentioned that they did not answer questions because of the fear that their lecturers would penalise them in the examination, thinking that students are trying to ‘show off’ their knowledge. This fear is different from the fear of giving a wrong answer mentioned above and I will take up this point below.

The lecturers’ point of view on answering questions by students was also investigated from the survey. Two of the lecturers (BL1 and ML2) stated that a few students readily answered questions, while BL2 and ML1 stated that even those few students who answered did so only after repeated requests. When the lecturers were asked about the reasons for students’ limited answering of questions, the reasons given by them were similar to those given by the students such as shyness to talk in the class, fear that the answers would be wrong, students’ language problems or not knowing the answer. Nevertheless, the lecturers did not mention the students’ fear of them, which students had mentioned.

Interestingly, during the interview both Mathematics and Biology students stated that they did not answer questions for fear. It was revealed that their fear occurred mainly for two reasons. One was the fear of giving a wrong answer. This was reported by very few students (e.g. BMS1 and MMS1²) in the interview, even though in the survey 73% of the students had selected that option. Students claimed that they feared that if they gave the wrong answer their colleagues would make fun of them outside the class, and at the same time they also worried that their lecturers would also think badly of them. Hence, this fear mainly refers to an embarrassing situation the students would need to face if they gave a wrong answer.

Another dimension of the fear arose, even though the students knew the right answer. Students feared that lecturers may penalise them, thinking that they had tried to ‘show off’ their knowledge, when they answered questions. Though the latter seems to be a misconception, all the students unanimously mentioned that it was quite risky to answer in a particular subject. MFS1 reported that ‘even if we know the answer we don’t tell in xxxx [[name of the subject]]’ (MFS1, interview). Others also expressed the same view. In this connection, an interesting personal episode was shared by a student (MMS1). In the first year, the IT lecturer asked the students to run a program based on C+. Even though MMS1 had successfully completed writing the programming path, before running the program he feared that the lecturer may misunderstand him, thinking that he was trying to ‘show off’. Therefore, he deleted the lines in the programming and pretended not to know the program.

Despite this fear of lecturers, students reported that they answered questions in some lectures, mainly when the lecturers were friendly with them. The reason given by a student for answering questions was:

In xxxx [[name of the lecturer]] <L2 class³> she writes one <L2 step> and asks the other <L2 step>. Even if our <L2 answers> were wrong she would not tell you are wrong. She would tell <L2 you are right > and would write the correct <L2 answer>. So we are not afraid to <L2 answer> in her classes. (MMS1, interview)

This quote shares evidence that students felt free to discuss in classes conducted by a few lecturers. In the interview, the lecturers’ opinion on students’ answering pattern varied. Only ML2 claimed that his students answered frequently, while others were on the negative side. Previously in the questionnaire survey, ML1 and BL2 claimed that students answered questions rarely. BL1, who earlier stated that her students readily answered questions, said only one or two students answered the questions because she claimed that even though they knew the answer they felt shy to answer. Similarly, ML1 argued that only those students who concentrated in the class answered well and his accusation was that students did not concentrate well. BL2 was also quite negative on this. She argued that ‘even for a simple question they don’t answer’ (BL2). However, BL2 asked only seven questions over the observed lectures, of which five belonged to the rhetorical type. Her tendency was to give an answer with a wait-time of around 2 seconds,

² BMS1, BMS2... - Biology Male Student; BFS1... - Biology Female Student; MMS1, MMS2... - Mathematics Male Students; MFS1.....- Mathematics Female Student

³ <L2.....> = the word uttered in English in L1 speech

while others (e.g. ML2) maintained a wait of 5–7 seconds to get answers from the students, as shown in the Applied Statistics extract below.

ML2: now next I am going to teach you what is the definition of quality– definitions of quality what is quality? because– ok you can– this– theoretical definition is there when I ask you just what is quality what you can say? what is quality? [5] what is quality? [7]
MS5: better than [...]

In addition, all lecturers, except BL2, insisted on getting answers from students, directed question to individual students, repeated or paraphrased their questions, and went near students to elicit answers (i.e. ML1 and ML2). Later, BL2 agreed that she tended to give the answers without waiting for students' responses because she assumed that students may not answer.

Asking questions

The results of the survey showed that the great majority of students (80%) stated that they did not ask questions in the classroom. As reasons (see table 2) students stated that they did not ask questions because they thought that they could solve their comprehension problems with their colleagues (57%). An equal percentage (57%) of the students felt that among students there was a culture or rather a collective behaviour, developed mainly by senior students during the ragging period that prevented them from asking questions of lecturers in the classroom. I explain ragging further under emerging themes in section B of this paper. As another reason a significant number of students (47%) said that they had language problems. In connection with this, the students were asked about the language they preferred questions to be asked in. Two-thirds of the students preferred a mixed language of Tamil and English, while one-third stated that they preferred only English. Interestingly none of the students selected the option of the mother tongue (Tamil) only.

Table 2

Reasons given by students for not asking questions in the classroom

<i>Reasons</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Language problem	47
Culture (attitude of not asking questions of the lecturers in the class)	57
Fear of speaking publicly	43
Thinking that the questions would be too easy for other students	30
Lack of opportunities given to ask questions	3
Thinking that I could solve the comprehension problems with my colleagues	57
Thinking that I would solve the comprehension problems with the lecturer later	20

During the interview, students presented several reasons for not asking questions in the classroom. The reasons were similar to the reasons given for not answering questions and also their reasons confirm their previous views in the questionnaire survey. One is their poor language proficiency. Students were hesitant to ask questions fearing that their language may be wrong. One student reported the following:

If we want to ask questions in the <L2 classroom>, we need to ask in <L2 English>. If we want to ask in <L2 English> there will be language problem. So we avoid asking in

the <L2 class> thinking that we can clarify it from the <L2 friends> in Tamil [[L1]]. (BMS1, interview)

However, it was revealed that if some lecturers insisted on using English to ask or answer questions, students who had limited language proficiency kept quiet in the class, but later they approached the tutors or demonstrators to overcome their comprehension problems because they could conveniently use their mother tongue with tutors. Alternatively, students also approached the lecturers whom they could talk to in their mother tongue. For example, 'MMS3' reported that understanding the subject was easy when the lecturers explained something in the mother tongue. In this connection, 'BMS2' stated that some lecturers encouraged them to ask questions in the mother tongue, but students did not ask questions, because when the lecturers used English, they felt a kind of inferiority problem to use the mother tongue in the class.

During the observation of lectures there were only three instances of student questioning, including one in which a student asked questions of the lecturer using the mother tongue in ML1's class. Another two questions were asked when the lecturer (ML2) was near the students but the questions were not audible to the researcher. Later, students and lecturers agreed that students rarely asked questions of lecturers.

Another important reason for not asking question was fear. Just like the alleged fear of showing off and being misunderstood by lecturers when answering lecturers' questions, students feared asking questions of the lecturers. But the reason for this fear is unlike showing off, students feared that lecturers might think that the students were challenging their authority, when they asked questions. Also the students feared that this may lead to a kind of penalty (i.e. failing their examinations). All the interviewed students revealed that they were afraid to ask questions of certain lecturers, mainly from a particular department. Students believed that two or three students failed their examinations because they asked questions of those lecturers. I revisit this point again under emerging themes.

Most of the misconception and fear seemed to arise as a result of the ragging that existed in the faculty. Students (initially MFS1 and later others from the group) quoted an incident which took place while they were juniors. A female student asked a question in English of a lecturer in the class during the ragging period. This was brought to the notice of the seniors and because of this act, that student was subject to severe ragging, particularly for asking a question in English. Therefore, students said that they did not dare to ask a question again in the classroom. However, students agreed that there are a few seniors who encouraged them to get the help of the lecturers too. MMS1 stated the following:

Many of them said that. Don't ask questions. Don't <L2 correct> the <L2 lecturers>, you will be <L2 noted⁴>, etc. At the same time, there a few who advised us not to fear and asked us to go to <L2 lecturers> to solve our <L2 problems>. (MMS1, interview)

⁴ Noted is used when someone is carefully observed by others (i.e. authorities) for committing an undesirable act.

Even though students claimed that discussing with their colleague was a reason for not asking question of lecturers in the classroom later in the interview it was found to be the students' fear of discussing with their lecturers that made students talk to their classmates.

In the survey, the lecturers were requested to indicate what percentage of the students asked questions in the classroom. Two lecturers (ML1 and BL1) stated that 25–50% of their students asked questions in the classroom, while ML2 and BL2 stated that it was less than 25%. The reasons given by lecturers for students' lack of questioning were somewhat similar to those reasons given by students. They were: students' language problem, fear of asking questions, and also thinking that they could solve their problems with their colleagues later.

Similar to answering questions, students' also asked very few questions, as per the responses obtained from the lecturers during the interview. BL2 maintained that students did not ask any question in her classes, and BL1 also had the same opinion. She stated:

Even though we have given enough time for them to come and meet us even in the class we are motivating them to ask questions they are not asking questions. (BL1, interview)

ML2, who previously claimed that his students answered well, mentioned that his students asked questions but not 'up to the level' he expected (ML2). He said that he expected more questions from them. In the survey, he mentioned that less than 25% of the students asked questions.

Even though lecturers mentioned fear and language problems as reasons during the survey, in the interview, they pinpointed the reason behind students' fear. They agreed that the fear is caused by ragging, and this prevents students from interacting with lecturers. ML1 claimed that seniors misguided the juniors. He said:

Seniors have some philosophies. Don't ask questions, don't discuss, etc. They might have used it long ago but it is not applicable now. (ML1, interview)

Improving classroom interaction

Following the findings on asking or answering questions, suggestions to improve the existing level of lecturer-student interaction were sought. The opinion of students and suggestions given by the lecturers are given in two separate columns in table 3. In addition, when both lecturers' and students' suggestions were similar they are presented opposite each other.

Of the suggestions made by students, lecturer friendliness emerged as an important reason for students in enhancing the classroom interaction, as nearly half of the surveyed students mentioned this. Other than this, lecturers' encouragement and opportunities to talk in the classroom were also considered to be important by students. Another suggestion made by the lecturers was motivating the students to talk in the classroom. For example, a lecturer mentioned that a lecture break, in which students were allowed to discuss the lesson just learnt, could be introduced to improve classroom interaction.

Table 3

Suggestions to improve interaction

<i>Students' suggestions (Number of students suggested this opinion is given within bracket)</i>	<i>Lecturers' suggestions</i>
Lecturers should be friendly (14)	
Improve language and get the support of the English staff (4)	Introduce subject specific lessons in English classes
Lecturers should encourage us to speak, ask questions or discuss the things (11)	Tutorial support / Introduce lecture break (give them a break after teaching a concept and allow them to discuss or describe about it)
The culture that prevents students from talking should be removed / build an understanding between lecturers and students (5)	
<i>Others</i>	
Give opportunities to talk in mother tongue (1)	
Link with the practical knowledge (1)	Make textbooks and CDs available so that students can learn at their own pace.

Advantages of classroom interaction

As advantages of interaction students reported that those lectures that had a higher level of lecturer-student interaction (e.g. ML2's lectures) were easier to understand, interesting and also helped them develop their personal skills. They also mentioned that they felt confident to talk in those classes. However, even though students stated that when lecturers asked more questions they interacted more, it was not the case in each lecture. On the contrary, students did not answer or were very reluctant to answer in some lectures, despite the fact that lecturers asked questions. The same students pointed out that they answered or asked questions in some other lectures. As I explained previously, the fear of answering was a reason for not answering in certain lectures and this fear emerged as a result of ragging and the subsequent concept the senior students created of lecturer friendliness.

Section B: Emerging factors to influence lecturer-student interaction

During the data analysis stage several emerging themes were identified and of them I present two themes that influenced the lecturer-student interaction in FAS lectures. They are alleged fear for certain lecturers, and the influence of senior students through ragging.

Alleged fear of certain lecturers

It was revealed during the interview with the students that their fear of certain lecturers influenced the behaviour of the students with regard to lecturer-student interaction. I have already mentioned that the students feared either asking questions or answering questions in certain lectures. Even though one reason for this was ragging and the misconceptions developed as a result of ragging, students' feared that the lecturers, particularly from one department, would

penalise them, not only for asking questions but also for answering questions, and this view seemed to be strong and unanimous. With regard to this claim about these lecturers, they stated the following:

As far as our subject combination is concerned we fear of only xxxxx [[name of the subject]]. (MMS1, interview)

We ask all the lecturers except the lecturers in the xxxxx [[name of the subject]] unit to overcome the comprehension problems. (MFS1, interview)

In the xxxxx [[name of the subject]] we tell the answers to the one next to us but not to the lecturer. (MMS2, interview)

In these quotes, the subjects refer to the courses offered by a particular department. In the department there were two lecturers and two tutors. Hence, the comments made by the students referred to the lecturers. All the interviewed students had a unanimous view on this and quoted different incidents their seniors had experienced with those lecturers. In addition, according to the students, there were only very few lecturers in the latter unfriendly category as they stated:

This happens due to the behaviour of one or two < L2 lecturers>. Our xxxx [[name of the lecturer]] is not like that. There are many such that [[good lecturers]]. One or two < L2 lecturers> for their benefit keep this tradition. Our seniors tell that they will penalise us if we ask questions. (MS2, interview)

ML2, who was the dean of FAS at that time, was asked whether he was aware of these student claims. He agreed that there were such claims among the students and he also explained the reason for this behaviour. He assumed that in that particular department there were only junior lecturers, so they may have acted without any guidance from senior staff, which could have been against the interests of the students, though the extent of their action was not known to anyone, he claimed. Therefore, whether the lecturers really failed or punished the students remained unresolved. It was beyond the focus of this study and against the ethical considerations to investigate this issue further.

Influence of senior students through ragging

It was also identified during the course of the interviews that senior students exerted a considerable influence on junior students through ragging. Ragging is ‘a ritual which has been in existence throughout the history of university system’, (Karunatilake, 2008: 18) and is practiced in Sri Lanka as well as other Asian universities. Ragging is a kind of mental, and most of the time, as far as the male students are concerned, physical abuse. Karunatilake claims ‘ragging has become more violent in contrast to the way it was exercised in the past’ (p. 18).

At FAS, students reported that ragging lasts for a period of nearly a semester, though this duration may vary from faculty to faculty or by university. During the ragging period the second year students (or seniors) verbally abuse the first year students (or juniors) or may ask the juniors to perform some physical activities too, some may be funny (e.g. salute the seniors) and some are hard (e.g. push ups). BMS1 mentioned that though he liked singing songs for ragging, he said that he experienced ‘torture’ in the form of ragging, which led him to think of even giving up the course and going home. It was further revealed by BMS1 that the senior students hit him in the bus while he was travelling to the university because he failed to offer his seat to the seniors. BMS2 added that ragging takes place in student accommodation and also in and around the

faculty. He also mentioned that the seniors physically attacked him in the hostel because he disobeyed the seniors' orders while on campus. Gunatilake (2011) describes how the raggars perform their physical torture against the juniors. For example, she explains that the juniors have to perform difficult exercises in a basketball court from 12 noon to 2.00 pm without any shoes or crawl on their bellies for more than a mile.

Based on discussions with students, seniors' influence on students' educational activities can be broadly divided into two. One is that they gave junior students advice and persuaded them to listen to their advice. Even though this advice was usually against the interests of the junior students, they were not in a position to understand that it was against their interests at the time of ragging. Another one is that they directly threatened the students not to be involved in certain activities. In the latter case, the students were aware that failure to obey would lead to physical harassment.

On the advice side, the seniors told the juniors that if they tried to talk to lecturers they became noted so that lecturers may fail them in the examinations, as reported by BFS5 and MMS4. In addition, seniors cautioned the juniors not to ask questions in class or even answer questions raised by lecturers. If they wanted to answer questions, MMS2 reported, they should do it only after several requests had been made by lecturers. This negative approach to asking questions or answering questions was found to be selective. That is, students should not answer or ask questions in certain lecturers' classes, seniors advised. Students stated the following:

Our seniors have told me that if certain lecturers ask questions you should not answer.

(BMS1, interview)

[..] even if we know the answer. (BMS3, interview)

[..] not in everyone's lectures but in a few lectures. (BMS5, interview)

Not all the seniors seemed to give this kind of advice to students. Students mentioned that there were seniors who concentrate on studies and advised the students positively. That is, they encouraged students to discuss their comprehension problems with the lecturers. In addition, students have realised now that those seniors, who advised students not to approach the lecturers, did not advise it in the interests of the students. This advice seemed to have extended to writing answers in the examinations also. One student said:

We should not write answers using our <L2 complete knowledge>. (BMS4, interview)

On the threatening side, students reported that seniors warned the students not to use English in the classroom, use the library during the ragging period, or carry lecture note books, etc. (BMS4 and MMS3). It was already described under the subsection 'asking questions' how a fellow junior female student was subject to severe ragging for having asked a question in English of a lecturer in the class during the ragging period. Therefore, students said that they feared asking a question again in the classroom.

As a result of these restrictions and harassments, students sometimes stayed away from class, fearing that they would be subject to ragging if they were caught, or they tended to remain passive in lectures. Therefore, in both ways, either through advice or threats, students were affected.

Lecturers' views of ragging

As far as the lecturers were concerned they also realised the influence of ragging on the students' learning activities. All four lecturers unanimously stated during the interview that seniors gave unwanted and unrealistic advice to junior students. For example, as mentioned earlier, ML1 stated that the seniors try to implement unwanted rules (e.g. do not ask questions) on students, while BL2 mentioned they influence students to the extent of subject choice too. Nevertheless, the lecturers did not mention any fruitful measures that have been implemented by the lecturers themselves or the administrators to curb ragging in the faculty.

8. Discussion

8. 1. Why is there little interaction between lecturers and students?

The reasons for limited lecturer-student interaction in FAS lectures could be attributed to either the students or the lecturers. I am going to identify four main reasons, of them three reasons are attributable to the students: (i) their limited language proficiency, (ii) influence of seniors through ragging and (iii) students' passive behaviour. The fourth reason was attributable to the lecturers: (iv) the lecture delivery style. I discuss the first three factors within the scope of this paper.

8. 1. 1. Language Proficiency and lecturer-student interaction

Language proficiency is believed to influence students' ability to interact in the classroom. At FAS students might feel reluctant to answer questions or ask questions in the class fearing that their poor language may allow other students to make fun of them. Due to their inability to ask or answer questions in the class, students rarely clarified any lecture comprehension problems either within or outside the class. In Flowerdew et al.'s study (2000) the Hong Kong Chinese students in the BA TESL methods course were reluctant to ask questions and participate in classroom discussions due to their low English proficiency, which is similar to the findings of this study. Nevertheless, language problem was not the only factor which influenced the students' ability to ask or answer questions. Some of the students, whose English proficiency was satisfactory and were active in classroom discussions in English classes, rarely answered or asked questions in content classes. This was partly due to their fear of talking in the class or shyness to do so, as I discuss below.

8. 1. 2. Influence of senior students through ragging

At FAS senior students tried to use ragging as a platform to disseminate their own philosophy of university culture and impose their own rules on junior students. One reason for ragging could be believed to be the maintenance of the status quo. Some seniors expect junior students to respect them. This can also arise from an inferiority complex if some of the seniors think their juniors have better knowledge, etiquette, or wealth (Buddhadasa, 2007).

As I explained in the findings section, the juniors faced two kinds of problems due to ragging. One arises from the direct advice. The seniors advised the juniors on how they should behave in the classroom – the juniors should not have any relationship with lecturers or should not ask or answer questions in the class. As a result of this kind of influence, the junior students did not actively participate in classroom discussions. Further, the direct impact of this situation could be that students might not express their lecture comprehension problems in lectures. As the students did not ask questions in the class to express their comprehension problems or answer lecturers'

questions, lecturers may have found it difficult to gauge whether the students had understood the lecture or not. The students also refrained from asking questions of the lecturers outside the classroom. Therefore, the absence of questions and answers on the students' part may have affected their lecture comprehension.

Another problem with regard to ragging was the direct threat imposed on the juniors by the seniors. The seniors tend to restrict the free movement of the juniors, mainly, as was reported in the findings, they discouraged the juniors from using the library, and at times prevented them from attending classes during the ragging period. These situations might affect their learning, and also distracted their concentration from their studies. Even though the second reason did not directly affect students' classroom participation, the threat and stress caused by ragging might have hindered the students' ability to study freely in their class or participate in classroom discussions.

8. 1. 3. Students' passive behaviour and attitudes

In this section, I am going to discuss the reasons for students' passive behaviour and their attitudes in relation to their lack of participation in classroom discussions. I discuss two reasons: the influence of the school environment and the cultural influence.

8. 2. Influence of the school environment

In this study it was found that students were very passive in the classroom. They asked only three questions in the observed lectures and answered questions only in certain lectures. In Sri Lankan contexts, even though, so far, no studies have been carried out to investigate how students' behave in university classrooms in terms of their classroom participation, some studies have looked at the pattern of students' interaction in school classrooms. One such study reports that the reasons for the passive behaviour of students are the teacher dominance and teacher centred classrooms in schools throughout their entire school life (Premawardhena, 2007). Based on this it can be argued that the students who did not have much chance to interact in the school classroom and are 'trained' to be passive may continue in their reticence at university too.

In contrast, another study in Sri Lanka considers that for effective teaching in Sri Lankan school classrooms, mainly for English Language, teacher dominance, teacher strictness, and mother tongue use are necessary (Karunaratne, 2003). By teacher strictness she means the teacher controls the classroom entirely without allowing students to talk except in answer to the teachers' questions. Karunaratne considers this kind of classroom environment to be supportive and friendly. Though the mother tongue use is supportive for the students in the short term, how the classroom can be friendly is not known. Moreover, such an environment may not be suitable for tertiary level students as the students in this study stated that they liked to interact with lecturers who are friendly. Therefore, one reason that explains the university students' reluctance to interact may be the long term passive learning they have been used to in the schools and when they enter university the twelve years of persistent behaviour may not change easily. Flowerdew et al. (2000) also explain that 'students have passive learning styles inherited from the secondary school system' (p. 125) and I take up their point below for further discussion.

Even though lecturers at FAS tried to encourage students to ask questions, students did not break the monotone of the classroom. It seemed that students' shyness and language problems did influence them, as earlier stated. Though no Sri Lankan studies have reported on students' shyness, in Malaysian ESL school classrooms, Harun (2009) reports that students were shy to answer because they feared that other students would laugh at them. Harun's finding was similar to the findings of this study. Students in this study also stated that they feared their classmates because they might laugh at them, if their answers were wrong. In addition, in the Malaysian schools some students considered that other students would treat the students who answered questions as trying to show off. Therefore, despite their better English proficiency, those students did not answer questions due to this fear. Though at FAS also some students who are fluent in English could have avoided interaction due to their shyness, they did not report this.

8. 3. Cultural influence

In addition to this passive behaviour inherited from school learning, there is another belief among students that lecturers should not be challenged. In this study it was found that students considered asking questions while the lecture was going on as inappropriate behaviour and they also thought this could even be an insult to the lecturer. I explained earlier that the influence of senior students also made students believe that asking questions or answering questions in lectures was inappropriate. Some interviewed students who did not consider themselves to be involved in ragging stated that they advised their junior students not to ask questions of the lecturers while the lecture was going on. Instead, they told the juniors to ask questions out of class or when the lecturer came close to them in the lecture. As I stated earlier the three instances the students asked questions in the class were when the lecturers came near these students. This attitude reflects that asking questions of lecturers during the lecture is inappropriate.

This thinking that lecturers should not be challenged can be considered as a culturally embedded behaviour. In many Asian countries, including Sri Lanka, education in the ancient period originates from religious schools. In religious schools, teachers are considered to hold a very high position and are sometimes worshipped⁵ by students (Weeramunda, 2008), especially in Buddhist religious schools, so asking questions could be treated as an insult to the teachers. Even though the students at FAS did not attend such religious schools, the close cultural mix of the communities, living next to each other, and the mixed student population in the bigger universities would have perpetuated such culturally bound thinking among students.

With regard to the claim I have made above that Asian students are passive in the classroom, Flowerdew & Miller (1995) claim that the reluctant attitude of Asian students in participating in classroom discussions is believed to be culturally linked to Confucianism. These claims were made based on a study conducted among Cantonese-speaking Chinese tertiary level students taught by NS lecturers. Flowerdew & Miller note that the values of Confucianism emphasise that lecturers' authority should be respected; lecturers should not be questioned, etc. In addition, they claim that Chinese students adopt a receptive role in class and look to the teacher to provide the information needed to successfully pass the course. Further, they consider, it is because of the Confucian values the students are rooted in, that they do not want to expose themselves in a weak position. That is, if they answer questions, they may face the risk of giving a wrong

⁵ On special days students give a stack of betel leaves to teachers and worship them as they do for the gods.

answer, they may worry that their English is wrong, or they do not want to be considered by others as showing off.

Despite the fact that this cultural influence explained by Flowerdew & Miller (1995) is similar to the situation at FAS some researchers have challenged the view of Asian students as reticent, for example by Flowerdew & Miller, as an overgeneralisation (e.g. Cheng, 2000). Cheng argues that the reticence of Asian students is not cultural, reluctance or passivity but that it is situation specific. He states that the reticence arises mainly due to methodological differences in the classroom as well as the language proficiency of students in ESL classes. Cheng explains that those Asian students studied in teacher controlled classrooms where students were trained to be passive and, as a result, they may not ask questions of the teachers. In addition, when these students learn in a foreign environment, which is different from the Asian environment, these students may not ask questions because of their limited language skills. Nevertheless further studies may be needed, including in Sri Lanka in the future, to look into the behaviour of Asian students in content classes.

9. Conclusion

In this study it was revealed that the majority of the students (more than 90%) neither answered questions nor asked questions in the classroom. This was also confirmed by the lecturers.

Even though students' language proficiency, shyness, and fear of speaking in public were also important in influencing lecturer-student interaction, more importantly, in this study it was revealed that the ragging that took place at FAS had a considerable impact on students' passive behaviour in the classroom so that they rarely asked or answered questions. In addition to this, it was also found that students feared that the lecturers from a particular department would penalise the students if they asked questions or even answered questions. Students assumed that lecturers may consider asking questions as challenging to the authority of the lecturers, while answering questions might be seen as 'showing off' students' talents to lecturers. Students also believed that some of their seniors were punished by those lecturers for either asking or answering questions. Further, reasons for students' passive behaviour such as influence of school environment and culture were also discussed.

In this study there are a few limitations too. For example, this study focuses on a single faculty of a university in Sri Lanka and therefore, the findings may not have wider implications or be generalisable to other contexts. Further, a part of this study was based on perception data obtained from students and lecturers through questionnaires. Therefore, it may not be possible to obtain an accurate picture of the current situation through self-reports and the reflection of the students and lecturers (Denscombe, 2003), as the self-reported responses may be distorted.

Despite these limitations there are several merits of the study too. There are only a few studies that have focused on Asian students' lecture comprehension problems. Of the few, Flowerdew and colleagues (1992, 1996b, 2000) have conducted three research studies investigating students' perceptions, problems and strategies among Hong Kong Chinese students. However, the current study differs from theirs in two significant ways. One is that students in Hong Kong conducted their secondary studies in both English and Cantonese, whereas students in this study were

educated only in their mother tongue (Tamil). Another key difference is their studies were limited to finding the perception only, whereas the present study investigates the actual lecture discourse and delivery style and considers lecturer-student interaction as an alternative to overcome the students' comprehension problems and develop their limited oral skills in tertiary level content classes. In Sri Lanka, only one study has investigated the lecture comprehension problems of tertiary students, and was carried out long ago (Sally, 1985).

Outside the Asian context, to my knowledge only Pedrosa de Jesus & da Silva Lopes (2009, 2011) have investigated dialogic interaction in tertiary-level subject lectures, but those studies were carried out in an L1 context. Hence, in the absence of studies on lecturer-student interaction or lecture discourse in Sri Lanka at secondary or tertiary level, and also the scarcity of studies in the Asian region in content classes, the present study has emerged as the first known study that has been undertaken in an L2 context in tertiary level science lectures to investigate lecturer-student interaction with an emphasis on dialogic interaction.

In this study, I have investigated the problems related with practising interaction at FAS. Even though this study did not measure how the interaction could develop language and content, this study has been important in identifying the existing situation at FAS, mainly before implementing any intervention and measuring its impact.

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