Which condition best facilitates the learning of collocations in an academic lecture?

What this research was about and why it is important

Academic lectures are a potential source for second language (L2) learners to learn collocations (i.e., combinations of two or more words that are likely to co-occur frequently in language use, such as user friendly, strong tea). With the increasing popularity of open-access courses, lectures are now freely available in various formats (transcripts, audios, videos, and videos with captions). To help teachers and learners make the best use of lectures, this study compared the learning of two-word collocations in academic lectures under different conditions: reading, listening, reading while listening, viewing, and viewing with captions. The study found that listening and reading while listening did not lead to collocational learning, but reading, viewing, and viewing with captions resulted in fairly similar amounts of learning.

What the researchers did

- The participants were 165 postgraduate students majoring in technology and engineering from 6 intact classes in a compulsory English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course at a university in China. After this EAP course, the participants would study their discipline-specific courses, delivered in both Chinese (80% of the courses) and English (20% of the courses). Lectures in English were delivered by both native and non-native speakers of English with high English language proficiency. The participants would also need to understand academic spoken English at conferences, seminars, and workshops as part of their academic and professional development. The EAP course aimed to help students develop the skills needed in their English-medium courses. However, activities mainly focused on academic reading and writing. Resources to help students’ academic listening were mostly TED talks and videos related to the topic of each unit. Informal discussion with the teachers revealed that there was a need for identifying other academic spoken resources that might help students learn vocabulary.

- The participants were divided into six groups: control (27 students), reading (27 students), listening (27 students), reading while listening (27 students), viewing (28 students), and viewing with captions (28 students).

- The experiment was conducted over three weeks. In Week 1, all groups completed one multiple-choice test, which was presented in both writing and heard aurally, measuring their recognition of the forms of 19 collocations from an academic lecture. In Week 2, the reading group read the script of the lecture. The listening group listened to the lecture. The viewing group watched the lecturer talk and write on a board, without any written captions. The viewing with captions group watched the lecture with captions. Immediately after the lecture, they completed the same vocabulary test. The control group were not exposed to the lecture, but also completed the same vocabulary test. In Week 3, all groups completed the vocabulary test again. The vocabulary tests used in Weeks 2 and 3 were the same as the one in Week 1, but the order of items in these tests was different.

What the researchers found

- Listening and reading while listening did not contribute to learning, but reading, viewing, and viewing with captions did.

- On average, the number of collocations learned by the reading, viewing, and viewing with captions groups in turn was 4.88 out of 19 collocations (25.68%), 4.68 collocations (24.63%), and 4.42 collocations (23.26%), and the learning gains of these groups were fairly similar.

Things to consider

- This study provides further evidence suggesting that academic lectures are, to some extent and in certain conditions, valuable resources for EAP learners to learn to recognize two-word collocations.

- If academic lectures are used, learners should view academic lectures with or without captions rather than reading the transcript, just listening to the lecture, or reading the transcript while listening to the lecture. Unlike listening and reading while listening, viewing and viewing with captions lead to collocational learning. Meanwhile, unlike reading, viewing and viewing with captions offer L2 learners opportunities to be exposed to the spoken forms of the collocations. This might be especially useful for learners from educational contexts that prioritize written over aural input or those from an EFL context with limited amounts of aural L2 input.

Material, data, open access article: Materials are available on IRIS (www.iris-database.org).


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