STRUCTURE AND LANGUAGE FEATURES OF UNIVERSITY LECTURE INTRODUCTIONS

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ABSTRACT

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The case study examined the spoken discourse in lecture introductions for core courses in an institution of higher learning in Malaysia. The objectives of the study were to (1) determine the structure of lecture introductions; (2) identify the frequencies of the types of personal pronouns used by the lecturers to activate students' prior knowledge; and (3) analyse the types and functions of questions asked by the lecturers during lecture introductions, and student responses to these questions. Forty-seven lecture introduction sessions were audiotaped and analysed based on Schuck's (1970), Davies's (1981), Rounds's (1985; 1987a; 1987b) and Athanasiadou's (1991) frameworks. The findings reveal that 'activating students' prior knowledge' stage emerged as the main purpose of the lecture introductions in bridging the gap between what the students already know with new information the students will learn in the subsequent lecture content. There were two types of lecture introductions, namely, (1) "typical type" of lecture introduction which consisted of the presence of two compulsory stages ('activating students' prior knowledge' and 'stating aims and objectives'); and (2) lecture introduction that involved "physical activities", that is the activity conducted by the lecturers particularly in the course of creative arts. While activating students' prior knowledge, the lecturers used mainly pronoun "we" to encourage students' involvement in order to create a favourable condition for developing a friendlier lecturers-students relationship. The study also shows that display questions were most commonly used when the lecturers activated students' prior knowledge, but referential questions elicited the most verbal responses from the students. However, as the students were generally passive in giving responses, the lecturers were found to take control over the speech event throughout the lecture introductions.
ABSTRAK

STRUKTUR DAN CIRI-CIRI BAHASA DALAM PENGENALAN PENGKULIAHAN UNIVERSITI

Yeo Jiin Yih

Satu kajian kes telah dijalankan untuk mengkaji wacana lisan dalam pengenalan pengkuliahan di institusi pengajian tinggi. Objektif kajian ini adalah untuk (1) mengenal pasti struktur pengenalan pengkuliahan; (2) menentukan kekerapan jenis kata ganti diri yang digunakan oleh pensyarah untuk mengaktifkan pengetahuan awal pelajar; dan (3) mengenal pasti pelbagai jenis soalan yang digunakan oleh pensyarah dan fungsi soalan tersebut dalam pengenalan kepada pengkuliahan. Empat puluh tujuh sesi pengenalan pengkuliahan direkod secara audio dan ditranskripsikan. Dapatan kajian ini menunjukkan bahawa pengaktifan pengetahuan awal pelajar merupakan tujuan utama dalam pengenalan pengkuliahan dalam merapatkan jurang antara informasi yang pelajar sudah ketahui dengan maklumat baru yang pelajar akan belajar dalam isi kuliah seterusnya. Hasil kajian ini juga menunjukkan dua jenis pengenalan pengkuliahan, iaitu, (1) jenis pengenalan pengkuliahan “tipikal” yang terdiri daripada dua tahap wajib (pengaktifan pengetahuan awal pelajar dan penyataan tujuan serta objektif kuliah) dan; (2) pengenalan syarahan yang melibatkan “aktiviti-aktiviti fizikal”, iaitu kegiatan yang dilakukan oleh pensyarah khususnya dalam program seni kreatif. Semasa mengaktifkan pengetahuan awal pelajar, pensyarah biasanya akan menggunakan kata ganti diri “kita” untuk menggalakkan penglibatan pelajar untuk mewujudkan persekitaran belajar yang positif. Dalam perbincangan komunikatif, soalan jenis pemaparan adalah paling kerap digunakan oleh pensyarah untuk mengimbas kembali pengetahuan awal pelajar. Manakala, soalan referensial didapati dapat membangkitkan maklum balas daripada pelajar pada rapat belajar dengan lebih baik. Walaubagaimanapun, pensyarah-pensyarah didapati lebih cenderung untuk mengambil alih perbincangan tersebut disebabkan oleh maklum balas pelajar-pelajar yang biasanya bersifat pasif.
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT iii
ABSTRAK iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT v
LIST OF TABLES xi

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION ................................................................................. 1

1.1 The research problem .................................................................................. 1
1.2 Statement of the problem ........................................................................... 4
1.3 Purpose of the study .................................................................................... 6
1.4 Operational definition of terms .................................................................. 6
   1.4.1 Lecture introduction ........................................................................... 7
   1.4.2 Structure of lecture introduction ....................................................... 7
   1.4.3 Students' prior knowledge ................................................................ 7
   1.4.4 Core courses ....................................................................................... 8
   1.4.5 Personal pronouns ............................................................................. 8
   1.4.6 Questions ............................................................................................ 8
      1.4.6.1 Display questions ......................................................................... 9
      1.4.6.2 Referential questions ................................................................. 9
      1.4.6.3 Response-eliciting questions .................................................... 10
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3.3.3 Framework for analysis of personal pronouns</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3.4 Framework for analysis of questions</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4 Data collection procedures</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5 Data transcription</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.6 Data analysis procedures</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.6.1 Structure of lecture introductions</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.6.2 Personal pronouns used in academic lecture</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.6.3 Questions used in academic lecture</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.7 Limitations of the study</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1 Structure of lecture introduction</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1.1 Results based on Schuck’s (1970) framework</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1.2 Results based on Davies’s (1981) proposed framework</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1.3 Additional stages in the lecture introductions emerging from the data</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1.4 Types of lecture introduction</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2 Personal pronouns</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2.1 First person pronoun “we”</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2.1.1 First person pronoun “we” for “you and I”</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2.1.2 First person pronoun “we” for “I”</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2.1.3 First person pronoun “we” for “you”</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2.1.4 First person pronoun “we” for “we”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.2.2 Second person pronoun “you” ................................................................. 102
4.2.3 First person pronoun “I” ........................................................................... 104
4.3 Questions ........................................................................................................ 108
  4.3.1 Questions asked in the 12 stages in lecture introduction ....................... 108
  4.3.2 Types of question .................................................................................. 118
    4.3.2.1 Display questions ........................................................................... 119
    4.3.2.2 Response-eliciting questions ......................................................... 125
    4.3.2.3 Referential questions ..................................................................... 130
    4.3.2.4 Rhetorical questions ..................................................................... 131
    4.3.2.5 Indirect questions .......................................................................... 133
    4.3.2.6 Student responses to the questions ................................................. 134
  4.4 Discussion ...................................................................................................... 139

CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS .......... 144
  5.1 Summary ...................................................................................................... 144
  5.2 Recommendations for future research ....................................................... 148
  5.3 Implications of the study .......................................................................... 150
  5.4 Conclusion ................................................................................................... 151

References ......................................................................................................... 153

Appendices .......................................................................................................... 163

Vita ..................................................................................................................... 177
# LIST OF TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Examples of macro-markers signalling major transitions and emphasis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Examples of micro-markers used for segmentation and intersentential connections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Number of participants according to faculty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Checklist to record non-verbal behaviour of lecturers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Schuck’s (1970) four stages in the introduction of a science class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Davies’s (1981) proposed stages in lesson introduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Classification of the referent “we” based on Rounds (1985; 1987a; 1987b)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Athanasiadou’s (1991) classification of questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Transcription conventions and definitions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Number of lecturers using stages as proposed by Schuck’s (1970) stages in lesson introductions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>Number of lecturers conducting the stages and frequency of stages in lecture introductions based on Davies’ (1981) proposed framework</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>Number of lecturers conducting the eight new stages and their frequency in lecture introductions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>Number of lecturers conducting recurring stages and frequency of the recurring stages in lecture introductions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td>Genre of lecture introduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.</td>
<td>Functions and co-occurring verbs of the first person pronoun “we” for “you and I”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.</td>
<td>Functions and co-occurring verbs of the first person pronoun “we” for “I”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17.</td>
<td>Functions and co-occurring verbs of the first person pronoun “we” for “you”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.</td>
<td>Functions and co-occurring verbs of the second person pronoun “you”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19.</td>
<td>Functions and co-occurring verbs of the first person pronoun “I … to … you”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20.</td>
<td>Functions and co-occurring verbs of the first person pronoun “I”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21.</td>
<td>Frequency of the types of question asked by the lecturers according to the stages in lecture introductions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22.</td>
<td>Frequency of the types of question asked by the lecturers in the stage of ‘activating students’ prior knowledge’ in lecture introductions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23.</td>
<td>Frequency of the types of question asked by the lecturers in the stage of ‘orientation’ in lecture introductions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24.</td>
<td>Frequency of the types of question asked by the lecturers in the stage of ‘building up students’ general knowledge’ in lecture introductions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25.</td>
<td>Frequency of the types of question asked by the lecturers according to the stage of ‘checking on students’ understanding or problems’ in lecture introductions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
26. Frequency of the types of question asked by the lecturers according to the stage of 'giving instructions and announcements' in lecture introductions 114

27. Frequency of the types of question asked by the lecturers according to the stage of 'greeting' in lecture introductions 115

28. Frequency of the types of question asked by the lecturers according to the stage of 'stating aims and objectives' in lecture introductions 116

29. Frequency of the types of question asked by the lecturers according to the stage of 'vocal warming up' in lecture introductions 117

30. Frequency of the types of question asked by the lecturers according to the stages of 'pointing out importance of task', 'motivation', 'checking students' work' and 'establishing links' in lecture introductions 118

31. Frequency of types of question and open and closed questions 119

32. The four sub-types of response-eliciting question and their characteristics, examples and frequency 125

33. The frequency and percentages of questions with student responses 134
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This chapter describes the research problem, purpose and objectives of the study, operational definitions of terms and significance of the study.

1.1 The research problem

The growing importance of English as an international language is recognisable particularly in the academic world. It is stated that "the spread of English as a world language has been accompanied by ever-growing numbers of people studying at tertiary level through the medium of English as a second language (L2), whether in their own country or in English-speaking countries as overseas students" (Flowerdew, 1994, p. 7). There are nearly 83 percent of college and university faculty using lecture format as the primary instructional method in some or entire of their lecture according to the recent statistics reported by the National Centre (Wirt, Choy, Gerald, Provasnik, Rooney & Watanabe, 2002).

Lectures are traditionally large-scale classes where a large amount of information is disseminated to students predominantly through monologues. However, there has been a movement towards interactive lectures (e.g., Foley & Smilansky, 1980; Morell, 2004; Schwenk & Whitman, 1987; Steinert & Snell, 1999) where lecturers try to promote students' active
learning and heighten students’ attention and motivation. Morell’s (2004) study showed that the indicators of interactive lectures include personal pronouns, discourse markers, questions and the negotiation of meaning. The use of personal pronouns such as “we” and “you” show the effect of personalisation, that is, to reduce the distance between the lecturers and students. Morell describes the importance of discourse markers for elicitation and the usage of questions by the lecturers as indicative of lecturers requesting student participation to facilitate negotiation of meaning. To involve students in an interactive lecture, activating students’ prior knowledge is an ideal strategy (Silver & Perini, 2010). Students need to have some prior understanding of the subject matter to enable them to make sense of the new knowledge. Activating students’ prior knowledge of the content area and related basic concepts helps students to shift from memorisation to meaningful learning (Christen & Murphy, 1991). By activating students’ prior knowledge, lecturers are able to find out the level of existing knowledge in order to provide the appropriate support for them to move to a higher level. Activating students’ background knowledge is one of the constructivist learning strategies (Ciminelli, 2009).

In the context of higher education, students’ prior knowledge has been found to influence academic achievement in various disciplines. For example, Langer’s (1981) study at the Open University of the Netherlands showed that in a language classroom, students’ levels of prior knowledge were highly correlated with students’ organisation of recall in aiding students’ reading comprehension. Another experimental study showed that previewing of prior knowledge helped L2 students to comprehend short stories, particularly selections involving unfamiliar cultural information (Chen & Graves, 1995). The findings of Thompson and Zamboanga’s (2004) study were consistent with other literature in psychology (e.g., Carsteus & Beck, 1986; Federici & Schuerger, 1976) in showing that prior knowledge facilitates new learning and
predicts course success even though students did rather poorly on pre-tests early in the semester. Certain types of prior knowledge were found to be more useful. For Mathematics, complex procedural knowledge (knowing how) which requires deeper understanding of the content has a better predictive value for students' course achievement than course-specific prior knowledge (Hailikari, Katajavuori & Lindblom-Ylanne 2008). Even students recognise the importance of prior knowledge in learning. According to Dochy and Steenbakkers (1988), students in economics, natural sciences and social sciences courses who found the courses easy also indicated that the courses were not entirely new to them. On the basis of these findings, it seems that activating relevant prior knowledge by expressing in some form what one already knows about a topic has been demonstrated to be more effective than not activating any background knowledge (Carr & Thompson 1996; Smith, Readence & Alvermann 1983; Spires & Donley 1998).

The bridging between students' existing knowledge and a new topic or a new sub-topic is particularly crucial at the beginning of lectures. Lee (2009) stated that it is imperative for the lecturers to "set the agenda" in the introduction of a lecture, "giving the listeners the schematic representation of the entire talk prior to diving into it, as it were" (p. 43). It is also essential for lecturers to establish "a mental map" for students (Lee, 2009, p. 43) at the beginning of the lecture so that the students are able to connect their prior knowledge to construct new understanding in the subsequent lecture content. As Thompson (1994) pointed out, students "suffer from problems of processing a densely related network of information delivered at relatively high speed" (p. 180). To assist students in processing the information more effectively, the introduction section of lectures "serves as a framework and context for the remainder of the
lecture” (Lee, 2009, p. 43), and outlining to the audience the formal and conceptual terrain of a substantive part of the lecture to follow (Thompson, 1994, p. 181).

Of the three aspects of lectures, namely, introduction, body and conclusion of lecture, the introduction of a lecture seems to lack a preferred rhetorical order and also vary in its move structures (Thompson, 1994). Thompson (1994) also pointed out, lecture introductions are "largely unpredictable mix of two discrete functions (e.g. set up lecture framework) and their respective sub-functions (e.g. announce topic) with variety types of discourse signalling cues" (p. 181). As a result, it may impede students’ understanding of lecture discourse because students are not acquainted with the knowledge of linguistic cues (Jung, 2003). These linguistic cues are important to signal to the students the structural organisation of these communicative events by indicating the direction of the following lecture (Jung, 2003; 2006). Unfortunately, the salient issue of introduction of a lecture in helping students to comprehend academic lecture is not well-addressed in most of the previous studies (Lee, 2009). In fact, previous studies have mostly not taken into account the structural organisation and language features in the introduction of a lecture (e.g., Dudley-Evans & Johns, 1981; Fortanet, 2004; Long & Sato, 1983). The scarcity of research on lecture introductions suggests a need for more studies on the organisation and linguistic features of the academic discourse in order to enhance students' learning.

1.2 Statement of the problem

In the context of Malaysia, “English stands as one of the most widely used language in addition to its status as the second language of the nation” (Shafiq Hizwari, Ahmad Irma, Ahmad Hifzurrahman & Wan NorHaizar, 2008, p. 538). English as the medium of instruction is highly
emphasised by the government (Badrul Hisham Ahmad, 2009). In this regard, most of the institutions of higher education in Malaysia use English as a medium of instruction in lectures. However, the local students face challenges in learning content subjects in English (Ummul Khair Ahmad, Masputeriah Hamzah & Nesi, 2010).

In Malaysia, research on students’ listening comprehension in academic lectures has focused on discourse features. For instance, Koh and Ummul Khair Ahmad’s (2010) study on engineering lectures indicated that the Malaysian lecturers use far less discourse markers in their lectures in terms of frequency and variation compared to the native English speaking lecturers in the United Kingdom. In addition to this, Ummul Khair Ahmad, Masputeriah Hamzah, Nesi and Grant’s (2010) study also revealed that marked variations in terms of style, pace of delivery and vocabulary were used commonly by the Engineering lecturers. To signal significant transitions from one information stage to another, structural markers, such as “okay”, “alright”, “right”, “now”, “yes” and “yeah” were used (Sarimah Shamsudin, Masdinah Alauyah Md Yusof & Abdul Halim Abdul Raof, 2010). The findings from these studies offered insights to engineering lecturers to improve their instructional delivery and language instructors in assisting the non-native engineering students to comprehend lectures delivered in English (Ummul Khair Ahmad, Masputeriah Hamzah, Nesi & Grant, 2010). Ummul Khair Ahmad et al. stated that familiarity with the delivery of lectures has important pedagogic implications for facilitating transnational academic mobility of the engineering students.

Nevertheless, these previous studies were conducted with the main purpose of analysing discourse markers in Engineering lectures. To date, the literature search revealed that the organisation of academic lectures in Malaysian universities has not been explored although similar studies have been carried out in universities in English-speaking countries on aspects,
such as lecturing styles (Young, 1994) and lecturing types (Brown & Manogue, 2001). Given the importance of lecture introductions in preparing students for the lecture proper and the facilitating effect activation of prior knowledge has on comprehension, there is a need to focus on the academic discourse taking place in the beginning part of the lecture. Such empirical findings would provide insights into the activation of prior knowledge in monologic lectures, particularly how lecturers facilitate student construction of knowledge in terms of the organisation and discourse features.

1.3 Purpose of the study

This study aimed to examine the spoken discourse in lecture introductions for core courses in an institution of higher learning in Malaysia. The objectives of the study were to:

1. determine the structure of lecture introductions,
2. identify the frequencies of the types of personal pronouns used by the lecturers to activate students' prior knowledge, and
3. analyse the types and functions of questions asked by the lecturers during lecture introductions, and student responses to these questions.

1.4 Operational definition of terms

The operational definition of specific terms used in this study on university lecture introductions are now described.
1.4.1 Lecture introduction

In the context of this study, the lecture introduction started when the instructor entered the lecture hall or tutorial room. The lecture introduction ends when the lecturer begins teaching the content of the lecture, indicated by announcement of the topic followed by specific details and examples. The lecture introduction usually encompass greetings, activating students' prior knowledge, presenting objectives and establishing set, which means to get students ready and to focus their attention on the new topic.

1.4.2 Structure of lecture introduction

In this study, the structure indicates the directional flow of a lecture introduction. It constitutes compulsory stages and optional stages of the lecture introduction. 'Stating aims and objectives' is an example of a compulsory stage and greetings is an example of an optional stage.

1.4.3 Students' prior knowledge

In this study, students' prior knowledge refers to previous knowledge and experiences which are related to the lecture. It may be from students' background knowledge or information provided in the previous lectures.
1.4.4 Core courses

Core courses are compulsory subjects for a discipline. For example, "Introduction to Music" is a core course for students majoring in Music and "Public Finance" is a core course for students majoring in finance.

1.4.5 Personal pronouns

In this study, the personal pronouns used by the lecturers encompass to the first person pronouns "I" (singular) and "we" (plural), second person pronoun "You", and third person pronouns "He/she". Variations in the form of objective and possessive cases of the singular first person (e.g. me, my), plural first person (e.g. us, our) and second person pronouns (e.g. your) were not counted as the occurrence is infrequent in comparison. However, this study focused on the first pronoun used in the stage of 'activating students' prior knowledge' during lecture introductions. The attention to the first pronoun is based on the reasoning that this is a cue used by lecturers to position their students in relation to the knowledge that is being activated.

1.4.6 Questions

Questions were identified based on the interrogative structure and questioning intonation. According to Celik (2001), declarative questions has a rising intonation (e.g., "You mean this?"), wh-questions a falling intonation (e.g., "When is your exam?"), and closed questions a rising end (e.g., "Do you still remember?"). Questions asked by the lecturers throughout the lecture
introduction were broadly categorised into open-ended questions and closed questions. The questions can be a word ("Yes?")", clause ("Are you sure?") or sentence ("Did you remember what you learnt in the last lecture?") in a high-pitched tone. Questions were also classified into display questions, referential questions, response-eliciting questions, rhetorical questions and indirect questions.

1.4.6.1 Display questions

In this study, a display question refers to a question in which the lecturer already knows the answer (Long & Sato, 1983). A display question is the type of question that lecturers usually ask when they want to check whether their students have learnt what has been taught. An example of a display question is "What topic have we discussed?".

1.4.6.2 Referential questions

Referential questions are those that the lecturer does not have a single correct answer for, but are interested in listening to the students' answers (Long & Sato, 1983). For instance, "Alright, has anyone worked at supermarket before?".
1.4.6.3 Response-eliciting questions

Response-eliciting questions refer to questions that elicit minimal responses from students, require merely a “yes” or “no” answers. For instance, “Motivation level might go down, right?” and “You still need to note down, no photocopy, OK?”.

1.4.6.4 Rhetorical questions

Rhetorical questions refer to questions that do not require responses and they often serve to provide information and emphasise certain facts. For instance, “I said, how come it is so dark? Because everyone dressed in black…”.

1.4.6.5 Indirect questions

Indirect questions are asked to make recipients act in this study. An example of indirect question is, “Soprano can you come nearer? (soprano students came forward)”.

1.5 Significance of the study

The study on the structure of lecture introduction can contribute to extension of the empirical database on academic discourse. A number of previous studies focussing on lectures (Benson, 1989; Johns, 1981; Richards, 1983) have shown that students were able to internalise and comprehend the lecture better when lecturers make the lecture content explicit (Fortanet,
2005). Some studies have examined lecturing styles and structural patterns (DeCarrico & Nattinger, 1988; Dudley-Evans & Johns, 1981). Although the organisation of a whole lecture has been studied, the moves in the introduction of a lecture have received less research attention. Thus far, the review of related literature on academic lectures showed that there has been only one study focussing on the introduction of a science lesson (Schuck, 1970). Schuck found positive impacts of the set induction on students’ academic achievement and long- and short-term knowledge retention. Besides Schuck’s experimental study, there is another proposed framework for a lecture introduction that is applicable across disciplines (Davies, 1981). However, the framework has not been empirically tested. In view of the lack of research on lecture introductions, the findings of this study would contribute towards a better understanding of how lecturers use the first part of the lecture as a bridge to help students make a transition between their own world and the subsequent lecture content. The use of linguistic markers to signal the directional flow of lectures to assist students in the processing of new information (Young, 1994) would provide insights into the macrostructures of lectures.

The study on the genre of lecture introductions has pedagogical in applications in higher education. The findings can offer insights on the textual and language features commonly used to scaffold students’ learning at the beginning of a lecture. The study is also useful for raising awareness on the types of question lecturers are asking and the function of their questions to enhance the development and conscious use of appropriate questioning techniques (Shomoossi, 2004) in the context of lecture introductions. The discourse functions of questions during lecture introductions would reveal how lecturers use questions to draw out relevant prior knowledge and experiences of students to help them to understand the lecture. The focus on pronouns would also indicate how lecturers indicate students as referents in order to involve them in the lecture.