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Note-Taking and Listening Comprehension of Conversations and Mini-Lectures: Any Benefit?

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Abstract
This study aimed at investigating the effect of note-taking strategy on listening comprehension of conversations and mini-lectures. The participants consisted of 24 Iranian high-beginner English language learners from two intact groups. One group served as a control and the other one as an experimental. During the study, the experimental group benefited from note-taking strategy instruction (the Sentence Method) and listened to the recordings while taking notes but the control group listened to the same recordings without taking notes. A listening comprehension post-test comprising four sections was administered and a questionnaire surveyed the students' reactions to the opportunity to take notes. The results showed no statistically significant mean differences between the two groups.
Key words: Note-taking strategy; The sentence method; Conversations; Mini-lectures

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One of the cognitive strategies from which students greatly benefit while listening to recordings, especially mini-lectures is note-taking. Taking lecture notes is widely accepted as a useful strategy for augmenting student attention and retention of academic discourse (Carrell, Dunkel & Mollaun, 2002). They also believe that note-taking is intuitively appealing to the lecture-listener and is generally viewed as a way to facilitate the process of learning and remembering lecture material. According to Kiewra (1989, cited in Carrell, 2007, p.2), note-taking is beneficial for at least two reasons. First, note-taking aids lecture learning by activating attentional mechanisms and engaging the learner's cognitive processes of coding, integrating, synthesizing, and transforming aurally received input into a personally meaningful form. Second, note-taking is seen as beneficial because the notes taken serve as an external repository of information that permits later revision and review to stimulate recall of the information heard. Dunkel (1988, p.278) maintains that note taking is perceived by examinees as a strategy that facilitates remembering the lecture content.

According to Ferris and Tagg (1996, cited in Hayati & Jalilifar, 2009) lack of note-taking skills and problems with note-taking as well as listening comprehension are troublesome areas most often reported by international students. A good reason to take notes is that you can never re-listen to speech or a presentation. You must take every opportunity to record and keep information so you can use it later. Many language learners claim that as they listen, they can follow the speakers with some ease, but when it comes to remembering it sometime later, they find themselves behind eight balls (Hayati & Jalilifar, 2009, p.101). According to Ornstein (1994), note-taking should be part of the curriculum. It is critical for learners to master note-taking for school, work, and life in general.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW
Previous research has demonstrated the potential benefit of note-taking during listening to lectures (Rickards, Fajen & Sullivan, 1997; Carrell *et al.*, 2002; Hayati & Jalilifar, 2009; Killikaya & Kokal-Kardas, 2009). However, some research findings provided conflicting evidence concerning the facilitative impact of note-taking (Dunkel, 1988; Hale & Courtley, 1994). Rickards *et al.*

(1997) conducted a study on the effect of note-taking among college students. They concluded that those who were allowed to take notes related to the organization or content of the lecture recalled nearly the whole lecture later. However, when they were not allowed to take notes, they did not remember the whole text.

Kiewra (cited in Rickards *et al.*, 1997, p.511) compared the performance of the students who took notes with those who did not take notes. Her findings showed that those who reviewed their notes performed higher than those who did not review the notes. However, he conducted 24 studies but in 8 of 24 studies, it was seen that there was no significant difference between those who reviewed and those who did not. However, in her study, she did not touch upon the possible reasons why two different results were found; but there might be some factors that affect the results. These factors might be memory or the level of proficiency of the participants.

Carrell *et al.* (2002) allowed their participants to take notes while listening to half of the passages in the study, but not while listening to the other half. Participants performed significantly better on test items when allowed to take notes during the corresponding passage. Both higher and lower-proficiency listeners (proficiency measured by Institutional TOEFL listening comprehension section, higher scores ≥ 49; lower scores < 49) showed the same benefit from note-taking, but note-taking had a larger impact on performance for the short (~2.5 minutes) lectures than for the long (~5 minutes) lectures and for passages with less familiar topics. These results demonstrate that note-taking can be beneficial to performance in listening comprehension tests, but may be less helpful for longer passages or those involving more familiar topics, though in neither case is note-taking likely to be detrimental to performance. It is also worth pointing out that, due in part to the findings of Carrell et al., the 2006 version of the TOEFL allowed note-taking on the listening section of the test (Zareva, 2005).

Hayati and Jalilifar (2009), conducting a research with three groups namely uninstructed note-takers (UNTG), Cornell note-takers (CNTG), and non note-takers (NNTG), found a clear link between note-taking strategy and listening comprehension ability. The results showed that students who were instructed based on Cornell Method performed better than the UNTG. However, the mean difference between NNTG and CNTG was not statistically significant. They concluded that the reason for UNTG low performance in contrast with the CNTG was thought to have originated in some keys such as writing in sentences rather than in phrases, using full words instead of using the symbols and abbreviations, interfering with listening while note-taking, and lack of concentration, comprehension, and retention. In a similar vein, Killikaya and Kokal-Kardas (2009) compared the performance of the students who were allowed to take notes with those who were not allowed to take notes. The findings of this study, which was conducted with 44 Turkish EFL students, showed that participants who were allowed to take notes outperformed their counterparts who were not allowed to do so while listening to lectures.

In some studies, it was seen that note-taking did not facilitate examinees' performance. Hale and Courtney (1994, p.29) found that allowing participants to take notes in TOEFL on lectures or mini talks had little effect on test performance. They added that the reason why the effect of note-taking was not seen might have been due to the questions asked in the listening part. TOEFL mini talks were followed by questions that tapped the general understanding of the passage. Students were not asked to remember very specific details, such as names and dates.

Since mini-lectures and long conversations comprise a substantial portion of listening materials in TOEFL and IELTS and note-taking is permitted throughout the tests, further research needs to be conducted on the topic to yield more reliable results (Wilson, 2003; Chen, 2007; Carrel, 2007). With due acknowledgment to the aforementioned efforts, the question of whether note-taking has a facilitative impact on listening comprehension of long conversations has been left unanswered. More importantly, the literature is remarkably slim concerning studies conducted with high-beginner students since some educators (Bakunas & Holley, 2001; Ornstein, 1994) believe that note-taking should be explicitly taught from the very beginning. Additionally, since in some tests like IELTS and TOEFL, recordings are played only once which makes students take as many notes as possible and using other note-taking methods due to having rather complicated details might prove time-consuming for some students, the Sentence Method was selected for the purpose of this study.

2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The present study will seek to answer the following questions:

1) Does the Sentence Method as a note-taking strategy affect comprehension of conversations?

2) Does the Sentence Method as a note-taking strategy affect comprehension of mini-lectures?

3) What are the students' reactions to the effects of note-taking on listening comprehension of conversations and mini-lectures?

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Participants

The subjects participated in this study consisted of 24 high-beginner English language learners. Seventy percent of the students were female and the rest were male, ranging from 20 to 24 years old. They were two intact groups studying Top Notch 3A at Besat Language School in Gachsaran, Iran.

3.2 Instruments

The materials used in this study were composed of a CD player, the standardized Nelson Proficiency Test (Fowler & Norman, 1976), a post-test comprising two conversations and two mini-lectures chosen from People, Places, and Things 2 (2010), and a questionnaire.

3.3 Procedure

The study was conducted during the course of 5 weeks. At the beginning of the study, the standardized Nelson Proficiency test (Fowler & Norman, 1976, Book 2; Test 300 D) was administered in order to ensure that the two intact groups were homogenous. The assigned time for this test was 40 minutes. Then one group served as the experimental and the other one as the control (each consisting of 12 students). The experimental group, who benefited from the Sentence Method, was instructed how to break up long sentences into shorter ones when they listened to long recordings. They were also told to use abbreviations as much as possible so that they could easily follow the recordings whereas the control group listened to the same materials without being allowed to take any notes. One of the researchers met both of the groups twice a week. Finally, both groups took the post-test, which was comprised of two conversations and two mini-lectures (each recording was 4 minutes long and was followed by eight multiple-choice questions). The topics of conversations and mini-lectures were as follows: conversation 1 (Asia's biggest water park); conversation 2 (seasonal affective disorder); Lecture 1 (Beaches); Lecture 2 (Festivals for the dead). It is also necessary to point out that the recordings for both groups were only played once. The experimental group was given A4 papers to take notes while the control group was carefully proctored not to take any notes. There was an interval of five minutes between each recording for the students in the experimental group to review their notes and answer the questions. The reliability of this test calculated through KR21 for the experimental and the control groups were 0.74 and 0.79 respectively. After the post-test, students in the experimental group were given a modified version of the questionnaire used by Carrell, et al. (2002) to read each statement and circle the number that best indicated their opinion.

4. RESULTS

After the post-test, using t-test, the performances of the two groups on conversations and mini-lectures were analyzed to determine any significant differences.

Table 1
The Performances of Control and Experimental Groups on Conversations

Groups	N	M	SD	SEM	F	t	df	Sig.
Non note-takers	12	7	3.07	.89	.055	-.131	22	.81
Note-takers	12	7.17	3.16	.91				

As shown in Table 1, the probability value is .81, which is greater than our specified alpha value of .05. It means that there is no significant difference in scores for Non note-takers and Note-takers; t (22) = -.131, p= .81.

Table 2
The Performances of Control and Experimental Groups on Mini-Lectures

Groups	N	M	SD	SEM	F	t	df	Sig.
Non note-takers	12	7.58	3.60	1.04	.250	-.382	22	.62
Note-takers	12	8.08	2.75	.79				

With regard to the second research question, to determine the impact of the sentence method on listening comprehension of mini-lectures, another t-test was performed. As it is clear in Table 2, the probability value is .62, which is greater than our specified alpha value of .05. In other words, again there is no significant difference in scores for Non note-takers and Note-takers; t (22) = -.382, p= .62.

In order to have an overall picture of students' performance on both conversations and mini-lectures, table 3 is presented below. The table shows that the probability value is greater than the specified alpha value of .05; t (22) = 398, p = .69. Hence there was no significant difference between the two groups in terms of their performance on both conversations and mini-lectures.

Table 3
The Performances of Control and Experimental Groups on Conversations and Mini-Lectures

Groups	N	M	SD	SEM	F	t	df	Sig.
Non note-takers	12	14.42	5.85	1.69	.195	-.398	22	.69
Note-takers	12	15.33	5.42	1.56				

To address the third research question, descriptive statistics (frequencies) analysis was conducted (see Table 4). For analysis purposes, the "strongly agree" and "agree" categories were combined into "agree" and "strongly disagree" and "disagree" categories were combined into "disagree".

More than half of the students (58٪) did not feel at ease answering the questions while taking notes. Seventy five percent of the students agreed that they relied more on their memory to answer the questions. Less than half of the students (33٪) agreed that the questions were about the notes they had taken. Although the majority of students agreed that they used their note when answering the questions (67٪), they generally reported scarcity of time to take notes (75٪). However, 58٪ of them reported that they did not need more time to review their notes when answering the questions. The majority of students (75٪) disagreed that being able to take notes helped them listen more carefully to conversations and mini-lectures. When asked about the type of the questions, 75٪ felt that being able to take notes would have been more helpful if the questions had been essay question rather than multiple-choice questions. Finally, all of the students disagreed

with the statement that conversations and mini-lectures were too short for note-taking to help them. In sum, the students did not show a significant tendency toward note-taking and its facilitative impact. This is in sharp contrast with the students' views about note-taking in previous studies (Hale & Courtney, 1994; Carrell *et al.*, 2002; Kilickaya & Cokal-Karadas, 2009), where a substantial number of students considered note-taking quite beneficial.

Table 4
Results of the Questionnaire

	Questions	Response	Percent
1	Taking notes helped me to answer the questions better than if I had not been able to take notes.	agree disagree	42% 58%
2	I relied on my memory more than my notes to answer the test questions.	agree neutral disagree	75% 9% 16%
3	The questions were about things I had written down in my notes.	agree disagree	33% 67%
4	I had enough time to take as many notes as I wanted.	agree disagree	25% 75%
5	I used my notes when answering the test questions.	agree disagree	67% 33%
6	I wanted more time to review my notes before answering the test questions.	agree neutral disagree	25% 17% 58%
7	Taking notes helped me listen carefully to the mini-lectures.	agree disagree	25% 75%
8	Taking notes helped me listen carefully to the conversations.	agree neutral disagree	17% 8% 75%
9	Taking notes would have helped me more if I had had to answer an essay question.	agree disagree	75% 25%
10	Taking notes made the test more difficult for me.	agree disagree	58% 42%
11	The mini-lectures were too short for note-taking to help me.	disagree	100%
12	The conversations were too short for note-taking to help me.	disagree	100%

5. DISCUSSION

This study investigated the impact of the Sentence Method as a note-taking strategy on students' listening comprehension of conversations and mini-lectures. The results of t-tests revealed that there were no significant differences between the two groups. A potential reason why the effect of note-taking was not observed in this study is that students might have chosen not to take notes even though they could, perhaps feeling that they could not manage both listening to recordings and taking notes at the same time (Lin, 2006). Similarly, Hayati and Jalilifar state that students often acknowledge the difficulty they experience in simultaneous listening and note-taking (2009, p.104). Memory effect was another reason that could account for the students' failure to outperform their counterparts in the control group as reported in the questionnaire as well. Seventy-five percent of the students agreed that they relied more on their memory to answer the questions. Dunkel (1988) maintains that listeners with an ability of high short-term memory accurately recall the information in the lecture than those with low memory.

An additional basis for lack of note-taking effect in this study may have been the Sentence Method itself. Since students in any note-taking strategy in general and in the Sentence Method in particular are required to write down what they hear even in very truncated sentences, they may lose their concentration on the recording and may not be able to recall the information. Although in this study, 24 out of 32 questions were about details, note-takers could not perform better than the other group. This is completely opposite to Hale and Courtney (1994)'s research findings. They believed that students could benefit from note-taking if they are asked about specific details. Thanks to technological advances, most students nowadays choose to record lectures rather than take notes. Most importantly, English language learners attend language schools mainly to achieve a native-like competence of English i.e., to understand English movies, news, documentaries, and so on. The question is: how do students deal with long conversations in movies, news, and documentaries? Is it possible in these contexts to take notes at all? Finally, it is necessary to conduct studies like this with a large number of participants to reach more robust findings about this question; should we, in listening classes from the very beginning levels, get students to take notes or to listen more? These questions need immediate research.

CONCLUSION

According to the findings of the present study, we suggest that the Sentence Method is not an appropriate note-taking strategy since in real life situations hardly anyone is expected to listen and transcribe simultaneously. Students' questionnaire responses also implied that it was rather cumbersome to listen to the conversations and mini-lectures and to take notes at the same time, hence their failure to listen successfully. As listening materials in some tests like IELTS and TOEFL are played only once and often note-taking proves difficult, it is better to have students listen carefully without shaking their concentration by imposing note-taking on them. Generally speaking, good listeners are those who possess an ability of high short-term memory (Dunkel, 1988).

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