

**NOTE TAKING IN THE EFL LISTENING  
CLASSROOM: AN ACTION RESEARCH<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract**

This small scale action research study explores how the authors incorporated a note taking technique into a preparatory listening class in a Turkish university. This project was an in-class research which aimed at increasing students to ability to make the most of listening passages in the classroom in order to practice the skill of listening. It seeks to determine the usefulness of using note taking technique in the foreign language listening classroom, and to assist foreign language teachers interested in developing listening skills with their own learners. Data were collected from learners through exams, reflection reports and interviews conducted at the end of the term. At this time, learners were asked to reflect on their attitudes about the new technique and how it aided them in practicing listening in English. Findings suggest that learner-perceived benefits of using note taking included increased concentration and understanding of English listening passages in addition to the ability of making inferences and gaining speed. There is also indication, however, that although the note taking technique helped to improve listening skills of students, some learners stated that they had trouble in following the text while they had do take notes. The findings also suggest that some learners who participated in the research claimed that this practice also helped them improve their writing skill in English.

**Key Words:** *English as foreign language, second language learning, listening, listening comprehension, note taking.*

**Article History:**

**Received**

01.05.2016

**Received in revised  
form**

08.05.2016

**Accepted**

15.05.2016

**Available online**

27.07.2016

<sup>1</sup> This study has been presented at the CUELT 2016 Conference.

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## Introduction

Listening is a crucial component for language performance, whether the learners are communicating at school, at work, or in the community. As Vandergrift states (1997), this skill is a complex, active process in which the listener must discriminate between sounds, understand vocabulary and grammatical structures, interpret stress and intonation, retain what was gathered in all of the above, and interpret it within the immediate as well as the larger sociocultural context of the utterance. From this statement, it is clear that managing all this at once requires great skill on the learners' part.

Listening to learn has become an important factor in the EFL classroom as language teaching started to shift towards a more comprehension-based approach (Lund,1990). Hence, as Dunkel (1991) asserts, the study of listening comprehension has become the 'polestar' of second language acquisition theory building, research, and pedagogy.

Therefore, a small scale action research study was designed in order to explore how the author incorporated a note taking technique into a preparatory listening class in a Turkish university as a result of students' low grades in the 1st listening exam. This project was an in-class research which aimed at increasing students to ability to make the most of listening passages in the classroom in order to practice the skill of listening. This study seeks to determine the usefulness of using note taking technique in the foreign language listening classroom, and to assist foreign language teachers interested in developing listening skills with their own learners.

## Methodology

**Rationale of the Study.** On receiving low grades after the first exam, the author was interested in implementing a study incorporating a note taking technique into a preparatory listening class in an English Language Teaching (ELT) department in order to fulfil the following objectives:

- To determine the usefulness of using note taking technique to enhance students listening comprehension,
- To provide insight for other EFL professionals into the pedagogical applications of using note taking in the foreign language classroom

This project was a teacher-initiated small scale action research study. Action research, for the purposes of this paper, is defined as "...a systematic study of attempts to improve educational practice by groups of participants by means of their own practical actions and by means of their own reflection upon the effects of those actions" (Hopkins, 2002). It should also be noted that the research methodology of this study is more qualitative than quantitative, involving reflection reports and open-ended interviews with learners to gauge their perceptions of the educational practice.

**Context of the Study.** This study was carried out in an English preparatory class at Cukurova University, ELT Department in Adana, Turkey. The course had a focus on listening and speaking skills. The class was made up of 38 learners, all of whom were required to pass the preparatory program by the end of the academic year.

This ELT preparatory programme was a skill-based course of up to 24 contact hours per week. Every class shared common features, including work on study themes and preparation for exams. Within this framework, time was explicitly dedicated to each of the four skills. For this class a considerable emphasis was placed on listening and speaking.

During a classical listening class, students listen to a range of theme-related lectures. Firstly, they engage in pre-listening activities such as warm-up questions & unknown vocabulary. Next, as a while listening activity, they answer multiple choice questions as they listen to the lectures. They get the chance to listen to each passage twice. On completing the questions, as a final step, they do follow up discussions for post-listening.

### **The Study**

As stated previously, this study is a teacher-initiated action research which aims to improve educational instruction within an ELT preparatory listening class. Hence, the procedure of the study will be explained in accordance with the steps of an action research cycle.

**Planning.** Since the students looked at the questions as they listened to the lecture, it was realised that they only concentrated on getting the correct answer instead of concentrating on the comprehension of the passage. Hence, little improvement was observed in their listening comprehension. This was evident in the grades of students' first mid-term exam which had a mean of 45.8. As a result of this, the author decided to manipulate the while-listening activity.

**Acting.** Instead of listening to the lecture as they were looking at the questions, the students were required to close their books after the pre-listening activities and take detailed notes as possible while they were listening. Later, they referred to their notes and then tried to answer the questions. During the first two weeks, students were accompanied by the teacher during the note taking process. While the students were listening and taking notes, the teacher also took notes on the board so that students can conceptualise the process. Then, they compared their own notes with the teachers. After two weeks, the students continued taking notes for 4 more weeks on their own.

### **Findings: Observing the results**

For reliability and validity purposes, several data collection tools were utilized in order to gather necessary information. In order to observe the profound effect of note taking technique on students' listening comprehension, data were acquired from 38 students' exam results, reflection reports, and interviews conducted at the end of the term with 7 students.

Firstly, following the receipt of the essay-type reflection reports from the students, each response sheet was perused with due attention, and themes emerging from each sheet were categorized forming convergence topics. As a second step, for each re-emerging theme, frequencies were calculated. The same procedure was carried out for the interview responses.

**Results from 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> mid-term exams.** As mentioned previously, the need for this study rose out of curiosity as a result of student's low grades from their 1<sup>st</sup> mid-term exam. After 8 weeks of using the note taking technique, the students had to take another exam as a natural requirement of the program. The nature of exams were equally the same. The students had to listen to a lecture on a certain topic and answer multiple choice questions. However, the topics of the lectures were different for each exam. The first was related to "Tango", the second was related to "Extinction". In Table 1 below, the mean of the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> exam are presented:

Table 1. Mean of the exams.

	1 <sup>st</sup> Mid-term Exam	2 <sup>nd</sup> Mid-term Exam
<b>Mean</b>	45.8	67.2

As it is seen from the above, the mean of the 1<sup>st</sup> mid-term exam, where the note taking technique was not implemented, was 45.8. However, after note taking, the mean of the 2<sup>nd</sup> mid-term increased to 67.2. Between two results, there is a difference of 21.4.

**Results from reflection reports.** The reflection reports were firstly viewed in order to determine the number of students who benefited from the process of note taking. In Figure 1 below, we can see the frequencies of these students:

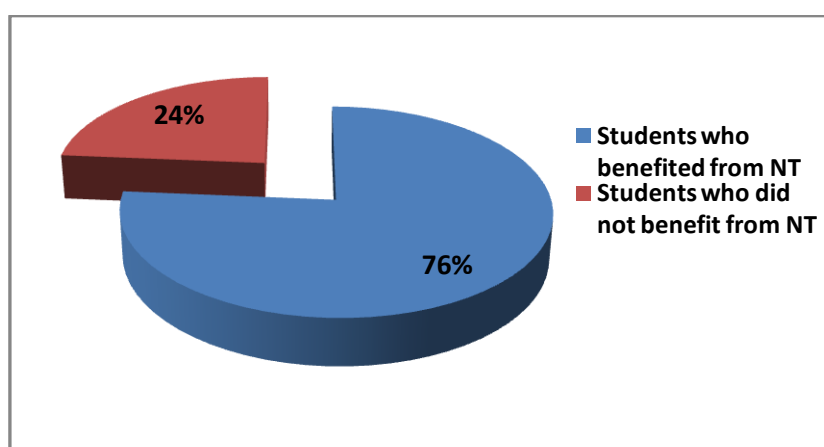


Figure 1. Percentage of students who benefited from note taking

As it is seen in Figure 1 above, while 27 students with a percentage of 76 claimed that they benefited from the process of note taking, the remaining 9, which is the equivalent of 24%, stated that they did not prefer this method. The below excerpts can be given as examples:

*Excerpt 1: "I think note taking is a very good technique because we try to both understand and take notes at the same time."*

*Excerpt 2: "For me note taking is not good because while taking notes I miss the upcoming parts of the lecture."*

Following a deeper analysis of reflection reports, the positive themes which emerged can be defined as below in Figure 2 below:

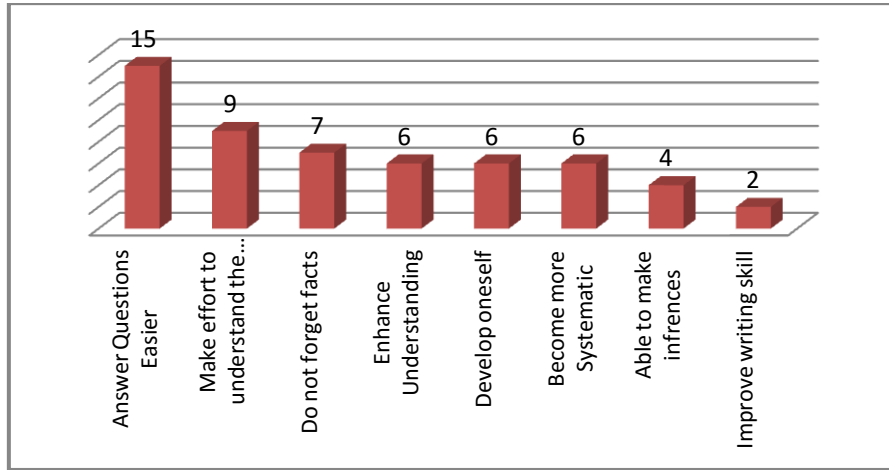


Figure 2. Positive themes which emerged from reflection reports

As it is observed from the above figure, a total of 8 positive themes with different percentage appeared in the reflection reports.

Theme#1 was related to the ability of being able to answer the questions with less difficulty. This was the most frequently appearing theme with an occurrence frequency of 15 (27.2%). Another theme, which is related to the ability to make an effort to understand the whole lecture, was theme#2. This theme appeared in student reports 9 times with a frequency of 16. Then comes theme#3 which represented the ability to not forget the listened facts. This theme occurred in reports 7 (12.7%). The following theme, theme#4, has a frequency of 6 with a percentage of 10.9. This theme clarifies that students believe note taking enhance their understanding of the lecture. Other themes which have the same frequencies as theme#4 are theme#5 and theme#6. While the former represents the fact that students believe this technique helps them develop themselves, the latter shows that students think that note taking has helped them become more systematic. The following theme, theme#7, has a frequency of 4 with a percentage of 7.2. This theme clarifies that students are able to make inferences thanks to note taking. And the final theme which occurred in students' reports is theme#8 which was related to the perception that students were able to improve their writing by the implementation of this technique. This theme emerged with a percentage of 3.6 and a frequency of 2. Below excerpts from student can be effective in terms of representing these themes:

*Excerpt 3: "Note taking helps us answer the questions in relation to the lecture with more ease." (Theme#1)*

*Excerpt 4: "I think note taking is better because before I used to just try to hear the answers to the questions, but now I try to take as much notes as I can understand." (Theme#2)*

*Excerpt 5: "Thanks to note taking, I do not forget the facts I have listened to." (Theme#3)*

*Excerpt 6: "Before I used to miss some important parts. But now, thanks to note taking, I can understand the important parts and write them down." (Theme#4)*

*Excerpt 7: "Note taking is a good technique for me to develop myself." (Theme#5)*

Excerpt 8: “Note taking helped me become more systematic. I know what to listen to.” (Theme#6)

Excerpt 9: “Note taking is better because we write down what we understand. Even if we cannot hear the exact answer we can guess from our notes.” (Theme#7)

Excerpt 10: “Note taking also helps me improve my writing skill because I write as I listen.” (Theme#8)

On the other hand, there were also negative themes in relation to the implementation of note taking which appeared in students’ reflection reports. These can be seen below in Figure 3:

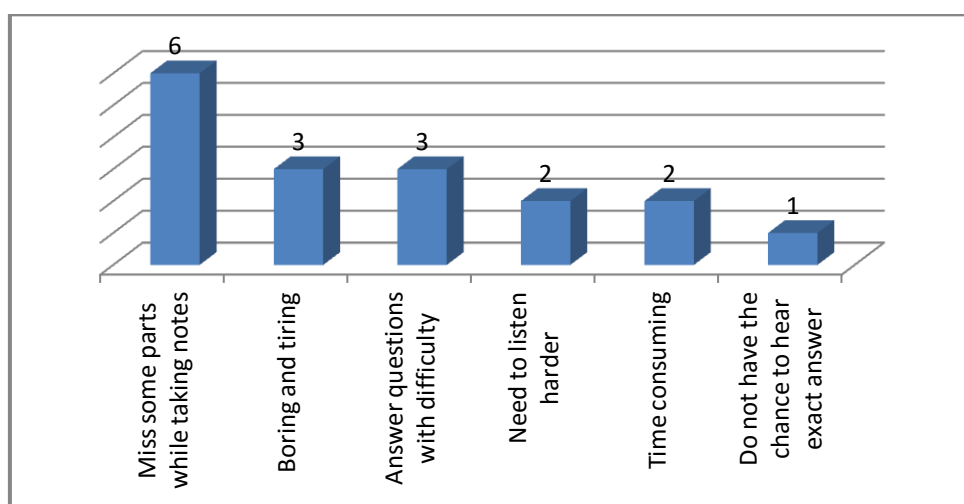


Figure 3. Negative themes which emerged from reflection reports

As we can see from Figure 3 above, 6 themes in total emerged from the reflection reports of students. As the findings suggest the most frequently occurring theme is theme#1 with a frequency of 6 (35.3%). This theme suggests that students do not like note taking because they miss some parts of the lecture while taking notes. The following theme, theme#2, has a frequency of 3 with a percentage of 17.7. This theme clarifies that students do not like this technique because they think that it is boring and tiring. Theme#3 is another theme with a frequency of 3. This theme states that student do not like note taking because they claim that it is much more difficult to answer the questions. Next is theme#4 which was related to the perception that students do not like note taking because they claim that they have to listen much harder. This theme emerged with a percentage of 11.8 and a frequency of 2. Another theme, theme#5, has again a frequency of 2 with a percentage of 11.8. This theme clarifies that students do not like this technique because they think that it is time consuming. And finally for this section theme#6, with a frequency of 1 (5.7%), shows that there are also students who claim that note taking is not good since they do not have the chance to hear the exact question while listening. The excerpts below can form good illustrations for these themes:

Excerpt 11: “While taking notes we spend too much time and miss some parts of the lecture.” (Theme# 1)

Excerpt 12: “I think note taking is very tiring and boring.” (Theme#2)

*Excerpt 13: "I don't like note taking because it is much harder to do." (Theme#3)*

*Excerpt 14: "I do not like note taking because I have to listen harder to hear the answers." (Theme#4)*

*Excerpt 15: "I think note taking is not that good because it takes too much time." (Theme#5)*

*Excerpt 16: "Before I used to hear the answer to the question while listening, but now I can't." (Theme#6)*

Having looked at the results from reflection reports, the following section will present the data from interviews.

**Results from interviews.** After a content analysis of the interview responses of students, the following themes in Figure 4 emerged:

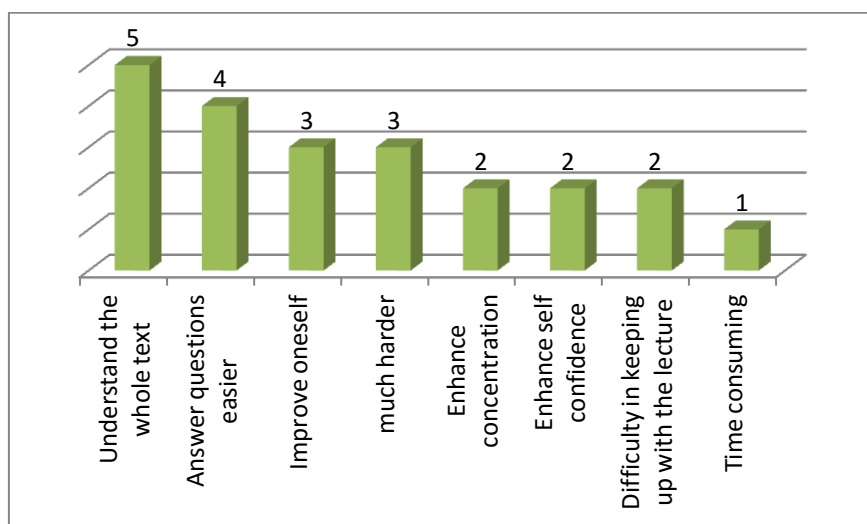


Figure 4. Themes which emerged from interview responses

As it is observed from the above figure, a total of 8 themes with different percentage appeared in the reflection reports. Theme#1 was related to the ability of being able to understand the whole text. This was the most frequently appearing theme with an occurrence frequency of 5 (22.7%). Another theme, which is related to the ability to answer questions with more ease, was theme#2. This theme appeared in student reports 4 times with a frequency of 18.3. Then comes theme#3 which represented the improvement of oneself. This theme occurred in reports 3 (13.6%). The following theme, theme#4, also has a frequency of 3 (13.6%). This theme clarifies that students believe note taking is much harder compared to the previous technique. The next theme, theme#5, has a frequency of 2 with a percentage of 9.1. This theme clarifies that students believe that note taking enhances their concentration during the listening process. Other themes which have the same frequencies as theme#5 are theme#6 and theme#7. While the former represents the fact that students believe note taking enhances their self-confidence, the latter shows that students have difficulty in keeping up with the text while note taking. And the final theme which occurred in students' reports is theme#8 which was related to the perception that this technique was time consuming. This theme

emerged with a percentage of 4.5 and a frequency of 1. Below excerpts can be good representatives for these themes:

*Excerpt 17: "While note taking, I try to understand the whole lecture. But before, I used to just try to hear the answers to the questions." (Theme#1)*

*Excerpt 18: "After we started doing note taking, I realised that I can answer questions much easily." (Theme#2)*

*Excerpt 19: "Thanks to note taking, I feel I am improving myself." (Theme#3)*

*Excerpt 20: "Note taking is too hard to do...that is why I don't like it." (Theme#4)*

*Excerpt 21: "While note taking, I can concentrate on my listening. Before, I just tried to answer the questions." (Theme#5)*

*Excerpt 22: "Thanks to note taking, I am much more confident with my listening." (Theme#6)*

*Excerpt 23: "While taking notes, I cannot keep up with the lecture." (Theme#7)*

*Excerpt 24: "Note taking is not that feasible because it takes too much time." (Theme#8)*

#### **Reflection: Discussions and conclusion**

The research reported here presents only a snap-shot of a learning phenomenon since it is limited to 38 student-teachers. Therefore, the results might be special to this specific situation and drawing conclusions should be made with care. Yet, some essential implications may still be drawn from this particular set of findings.

First of all, when we look at the findings from the mid-term exams which the students had to take as a requirement of the program, we can see that there is an important increase in the mean of the classroom score. These results seem to support other research in the field (Hayati and Jalilifar, 2009; Carrell, 2007; Huang, 2006; Hale & Courtney, 1994; Clerehan, 1995). However we cannot be sure to what extent this increase is a result of the note taking technique since they may have been other psychological and physical factors. Nevertheless, from what the results obtained from reflection reports and interviews suggest, we can assert that note taking has more positive effects than negative ones.

One positive attribute reported by students both in the reflection reports and interviews is that they were able to answer questions related to the listening passage with more ease since they had to concentrate on the whole lecture instead of specific sections. Another advantage students asserted was development of one's self. Students claimed that, thanks to note taking, they felt an improvement in themselves not just in listening but also in writing. They further added that they felt much more self-confident since they can now make inferences in regard to the questions. Lastly, students who participated in this study stated their concentration in listening has enhanced and they are now more systematic. As a result, they do not forget the facts they listen to. On the other hand, although not much in number, there were also students who believed that note taking was not that good of a technique. Both in reflection reports and interviews, themes occurred which showed that students think that note taking is much harder and time consuming. They also added that while trying to take notes, they miss some parts of the lecture. Furthermore, a few students also claimed that note taking was boring and they complained that they cannot hear the exact answer since they do not have the questions in front of them while listening. However, isn't this desirable situation on the teacher's half? In order to enhance listening comprehension, we must target extensive listening.



While doing this, students can take notes which they could use later for post listening activities.

Our main job as teachers of foreign language listening is to help our students develop knowledge about how to process spoken language with ease and automaticity. While we may need to devote some time teaching students some strategies, the bulk of our classroom time should be used to provide our students with lots of listening practice, the kind of practice in which they actually listen to a lot of meaningful, enjoyable, and comprehensible spoken text. This study has shown us that, note taking can contribute to help both students and instructors to make the most of these listening experiences and hence should be included in instruction (Boch & Piolat, 2005; Hayati and Jalilifar, 2009).

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