Perspectives on Note Taking in EFL Listening

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Note taking is an important academic skill. Despite that, it has received relatively little attention in EFL circles. This paper is a report on a forum on note taking. The purpose of the forum was to stimulate interest in this important area and address some of the issues that teachers are likely to face when teaching note taking in Japan. The first part of this paper provides an overview of note taking and explains why teachers should give it more attention. The second and third parts present the results of surveys designed to gather information about the current state of note taking in Japan. The second targets university students, and the third is for university teachers. The fourth part includes results of a study conducted at a high school in Japan. In the study students' perceptions of note taking and the effectiveness of training were examined. The fifth part deals with key areas of concern that teachers should consider when undertaking note-taking instruction.

ノートテイキングは重要なアカデミックスキルである。しかし、これまでのEFL環境において、それに見合った十分な注目は注がれていない。このフォーラムの目的は、この分野への関心を高め、教員が日本でノートテイキングを指導する際に直面するであろう様々な問題を顕在化することであった。冒頭部では、ノートテイキングについての概要を述べ、なぜそれが教員にとって注目するべきものであるのかについて論じた。第2部、第3部では、日本におけるノートテイキングの現状を把握するために実施された2種類の調査の結果を報告した。一つは大学生を対象にし、もう一つは教員を対象にした調査である。第4部は、日本の高校生を対象にした調査についての報告で、ノートテイキングに対する認知や、そのトレーニングの効果についての分析が行われた。最終部では、ノートテイキング指導を展開する際に指導者が考慮すべきことについての考察が行われた。

Why Note Taking?
Michael Crawford

Note taking is an important academic skill. According to van de Meer (2012), "Note taking in lectures is often taken to be the distinguishing characteristic of learning at university" (p. 13). Although certainly note taking has a role in secondary education as well, large-scale lectures are for the most part unique to universities, and in such courses note taking is a particularly critical skill. Not only is it one of the main ways in which students acquire knowledge, but it is also a powerful means for students to gain control over their own learning (Burns & Sinfield, 2012).

Despite the importance of note taking, it has received relatively little attention from researchers working in EFL contexts, including those in Japan. Textbook authors, on the other hand, appear to recognize its importance, as most textbooks that focus on academic listening include activities and exercises that aim to develop students' note-taking skills. This is probably due to the fact that the authors are aware that many L2 students struggle with note taking in English. This should not be surprising, especially considering

that extensive research in L1 contexts has shown that even when students take notes in lectures given in their first language, they do not necessarily perform well. According to Kiewra, Benton, Kim, Risch, & Christensen (1995), "Students left to their own devices are terribly incomplete note takers recording only about 30% of lecture idea units for future reference" (p. 173). Research comparing the note-taking skills of L1 and L2 learners in an ESL context has confirmed this, with one researcher stating that L2 learners are at a "huge disadvantage" (Clerehan, 1995, p. 145).

Although clearly L2 students studying in a tertiary ESL context need good note-taking skills, this is not necessarily the case in many EFL contexts. Until relatively recently here in Japan, most Japanese university students did not have to be too concerned about any lack of note-taking skills in English because the vast majority of subject courses were taught in Japanese. However, we are now in the initial stages of a gradual change. Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has stated that it hopes to increase the number of university courses taught in English (Brown & Iyobe, 2014) and develop more degree programs that are conducted entirely in English (MEXT, 2012). This is related to the government's desire to make tertiary education in Japan more competitive internationally, as well as to its stated aim of greatly increasing the number of exchange students who come to Japan to study. With this in mind, it appears that more and more students in Japan are going to need to acquire good English note-taking skills. For this reason, now is a good time for EFL teachers to begin thinking about how best to develop students' note-taking skills, and along with this, to conduct research that seeks to answer the myriad of questions that have yet to be answered in this important area. Some studies are beginning to emerge (see Crawford, 2015; Lauwereyns, 2015; Siegel, 2015), but clearly more is needed. The four sections that follow take a step in this direction by providing both data and insights from practice on important aspects of note taking. It is hoped that the variety of perspectives offered here, including those of both students and teachers at the university and high school levels, will broaden readers' understanding of key issues and provide a basis for future research and practice.

The Current State of Note Taking at Japanese Universities

Nathan Ducker

As argued above, note taking is an important academic skill that Japanese students will need to become proficient at doing in English as the number of English content courses increases in Japan. However, the amount of research concerning note taking in Japan is limited (Lauwereyns, 2015), and accordingly there are many unanswered questions about this essential academic skill. For example, to what extent is note taking undertaken by students in Japan at the high school and tertiary levels, and do students receive instruction to improve their note-taking skills? Answers to questions such as these would be useful for not only L1 teachers in the country, but also L2 teachers, as in the future more and more students will likely find themselves taking classes in English.

Overview of the Study

In order to gather preliminary data on the current state of note taking at universities in Japan and to provide guidance for further research, a wide ranging survey was developed to address the following research questions:

RQ1. Did current university students have experience with note taking in their high school English or non-English classes, and did they receive instruction on how to take notes in any of those classes?

RQ2. Do students have experience with note taking in their university English or non-English classes, and have they received instruction on how to take notes in any of those classes?

RQ3. What strategies or techniques do students employ when taking notes in their university English or non-English classes?

Method

Data were collected by means of a 39-item questionnaire in three sections completed by 739 university students in three different Japanese universities—two in the Kanto region and one in Kyushu in southern Japan. The questionnaire was written in Japanese. The first section of the survey covered actual experiences with note taking in both high school and university classes. The second section included questions on a 4-point Likert scale about the frequency (*never*, *not usually*, *usually*, *always*) of note-taking behaviors in English and non-English classes at university. Questions in the third section elicited information on students' opinions about note taking in English and non-English classes at university using a 5-point Likert scale (*strongly agree*, *agree*, *no opinion*, *somewhat agree*, *strongly agree*).

Results and Discussion

Concerning students' note-taking experiences and instruction, a pattern of declining note-taking activity was evident between high school and university. First, 91.7% of respondents indicated they took notes in high school English classes; in non-English class-

es this number was slightly higher at 92%. In comparison, in university English classes only 55.6% of students indicated they took notes, and in non-English classes this number was 78.5%. Given that note taking is considered to be an important tool for autonomous study at university (Burns & Sinfield, 2012), this result warrants further investigation to reveal why students are less active note takers at university than at high school.

Concerning instruction in note-taking skills, results also reveal a sharp drop between high school and university in both types of classes. In high school, 55.6% of students reported note-taking instruction in English classes, and 78.5% of students reported receiving some instruction in non-English classes. At the university level these numbers were much lower, with actual instruction at under 14% for both English and non-English classes. Given the prevalence of note taking at university (van de Meer, 2012), the importance of note taking in autonomous university study (Burns & Sinfield, 2012), and the weaknesses in note-taking skills exposed by Kiewra et al. (1995), the low levels of instruction reported here indicate an area where improvement is needed in the curricula of the schools studied.

Overall, students who had not received any note-taking instruction represented a large part of the students surveyed. In total, 34% of students had received no note-taking instruction whatsoever, 47% had received no note-taking instruction in Japanese, and 53% had received no instruction in English. As we can expect more subject classes to be taught in English at Japanese universities in the future (MEXT, 2012) and the fact that Japanese students are likely to have trouble taking notes from English lectures (Clerehan, 1995), we would like to recommend that curriculum planners in universities try to increase the number of students who receive some note-taking instruction in Japanese, English, or both.

By analyzing the results of students who reported taking notes at university (n = 408), we can also discern that point of contact activity is greater than autonomous or independent use of notes at a later date for both English and non-English classes. For example, 94% of students in English classes and 95% of students in non-English classes reported taking notes from the board, but fewer students noted down teachers' spoken comments (73% and 78%, respectively). Yet, these in-class activities were much more prevalent than post-class activities: 50% and 51% of students reported reviewing notes, and 26% and 30% reported reorganizing or summarizing notes for English classes and non-English classes, respectively. A second aspect of this analysis is that adjusting the information to be noted down by using abbreviations and symbols are skills applied by roughly only half of the survey participants. Abbreviations were used by 58% (English classes) and 57% (non-English classes) of respondents; symbols were used less, with rates of 46% and 43%, respectively. Such results lead to the conclusion that students' interpretations of what is necessary for successful note taking may indeed vary. For example, some students may only be writing down information on the board and not noting down spoken comments. Additionally, far fewer students are actually revisiting notes made in class later. This is an issue that instructors must address in order to improve the quality and efficacy of note taking.

Conclusion

The results indicate several areas for further investigation and areas for improvement in note-taking instruction. Firstly, curriculum planners need to understand why note-taking activity declines steeply at university compared to high school. Secondly, given the apparent need for note taking at university, that large numbers of students receive no note-taking instruction indicates a clear weakness in the curriculum planning. Finally, we can see that students' note-taking activities vary, and relatively few students revisit and reuse notes at home, which may negate a large part of the benefit of note taking.

University Teacher Views and Beliefs on Student Note Taking in Japan

Laura MacGregor

As stated in the previous section, there is only a small body of research into university student note taking in Japan. The same can be said for research on what teachers think about students taking notes in their university classes in Japan and how they address it. The purpose of this study is to tap into the uncharted territory of university teacher beliefs and practices concerning student note taking, and, by doing so, add to the data on student note taking in Japan that is beginning to emerge (Crawford, 2015; Lauwereyns, 2015; Siegel, 2015). The results should be helpful for teachers in English-Medium Instruction (EMI) programs in which lectures given in English are common.

Overview of the Study

This study was based on two research questions:

RQ1. What are university teachers' beliefs, their classroom practices, and their expectations concerning student note taking in their classes? Specifically, the researcher wanted to know:

(i) what teachers thought about student note taking;

(ii) how they addressed it in class;

(iii) what they expected students to do as note takers.

RQ2. How do the data compare between the language the class is conducted in (Japanese or another language) and the type of class (content class vs. foreign language class)?

Method

Eighty-four university teachers in Japan participated in the study, 30 content teachers and 54 language teachers. Of the 84, 38 were Japanese native speakers and 46 were speakers of other languages. They were contacted anonymously by email to respond to a Google form survey or asked in person to complete a paper-based survey. Both surveys were bilingual (Japanese and English) and comprised 14 Likert items, a comment area at the end, and a request for follow-up email contact for further questions. Most participants were foreign-language teachers and teachers from English literature, law, and economics departments. The majority had been teaching for more than 10 years.

Results and Discussion

Based on the types of classes they taught and their first languages, almost all of the content teachers gave classes in Japanese, and almost all of the language teachers conducted their classes in English. Because of the similarities between the two sets, the following discussion is based on the data of the 30 content teacher/54 language teacher set.

When asked about the usefulness of note taking, 87% of content teachers and 100% of language teachers felt it was a useful academic skill. Eighty percent of content teachers and 67% of language teachers thought it helped students concentrate on the class and nearly 90% of all teachers thought note taking helped students study for tests. The differences between language and content teachers on the aspect of student concentration may be due to the very nature of the two types of classes: Taking notes for a 90-minute lecture class in which they are passive listeners can help students stay on task, and various activities requiring student output in language classes can aid their concentration more than taking notes.

The majority of all teachers (92%) recommended that students take notes. Some even required it (content: 47%; language: 76%), though fewer teachers spent time grading the notes (only 13% of content teachers and 37% of language teachers did). It is not clear from these figures to what extent or with what frequency teachers recommended note taking, or how note taking figured into their evaluation. In some university departments, students take a required foundation course (i.e., *nyuumon enshuu*, or *kiso enshuu*), in which teachers may spend at least a few minutes on note taking. Some textbooks for this type of class include a short section on how to take notes (i.e., Watanabe & Kawaide, 2014). However, not all students are exposed to this type of instruction and the degree to which note taking is taught or emphasized is not clear.

Teachers supported student note taking by giving advice on how to take notes, and more than two thirds of all teachers gave students handouts. In content classes, the handouts were often lecture outlines with blanks for students to fill in as they listened.

However, some content teachers (n = 8) commented that it was better for students to concentrate on listening to the lecture rather than taking notes, because taking notes prevented them from hearing the next thing the teacher said. Instead, they thought students should write down only key words during the lecture and elaborate on them after class. They therefore expected students to review the lecture outside of class, and in fact, 80% of content teachers thought students should do so, and 59% thought they should summarize their notes at home. The figures are much lower for language teachers (67% and 37%), in whose classes skills development may be the focus over remembering content.

Only half of all teachers expected students to write down what they wrote on the board. This contrasts with student practice: Nearly all respondents to the student survey (reported in the previous section as 95%) did so. Teachers were aware of this, and in their comments felt students seemed to think that taking notes meant writing down what was on the board. Teachers, on the other hand, thought that when taking notes, "Students should note keywords" and write "what makes the content meaningful for them."

Teacher expectations of students to write down what they said were mixed. Sixty-seven percent of content teachers wanted students to do so, but for language teachers, the figure was less than half (30%), possibly because doing so may be considered too difficult or prevent students from participating, an important element of many English classes.

To summarize the main findings in this study, the teachers nearly unanimously agreed that note taking is a useful academic skill and most of them recommended it because it helps students concentrate on the class (content teachers) and study for tests (all teachers). Two thirds or more of the teachers supported students with handouts and some gave note-taking advice, though it was less important for content teachers to do so, possibly because language teachers tend to teach skills, of which note taking may be one.

Perceptions and Expectations of Note-Taking Instruction in High School

Shuji Kojima

Note taking is a skill that is gained through continuous practice. So far there is little research to investigate the perceptions and expectations language learners have towards note-taking instruction in English classes. Furthermore, most of the research in Japan has focused on university students and little is known about high school students (Kobayashi, 2006). Several studies have investigated high school students' note taking, but they were about math or other subjects (Shigematsu & Nishibe, 2006). In that sense, the results in this report can fill some missing pieces in the research field on students in Japan.

This was an exploratory study that investigated students' (a) experience of note-taking instruction in English class and other classes, (b) note-taking styles, (c) perceptions about note-taking skills, and (d) expectations of note-taking skill instruction. Four research questions were set:

RQ1. What experience do students have with note taking?

RQ2. What note-taking styles do students employ?

RQ3. What perceptions of note taking do students have?

RQ4. What types of note-taking skill instruction do students want to learn in class?

Method

Participants were 47 Japanese high school students (males = 12 [25%], females = 35 [74.5%]). They were highly motivated, advanced learners for their age group (15-18 years old, TOEIC mean score = 553). They were given explicit note-taking instruction (30 minutes a week) and practiced taking notes in class over one year. In the last class, they completed a questionnaire in Japanese about note taking consisting of 51 four- or 6-point Likert scale items and one open-ended question. The sections that were not sensitive enough to be gauged by a 6-point Likert scale, such as the one on note-taking experience, used a 4-point scale. After the survey, which was anonymous, the participants and the researcher had an open discussion about the questionnaire and note taking.

Results

Research Question 1

Seven out of 47 participants (14.9%) reported they had learned how to take notes before the experiment. Three of them had learned it at cram school in elementary school and two had learned it in an *Eiken* (a popular standardized English test in Japan) remedial class in high school.

Research Question 2

The questions about note-taking styles (six items) revealed that students were less active note takers in English classes than in other classes. About 70% of the participants paraphrased what a teacher writes or says in other classes; around 50% did so in English classes.

Research Question 3

In order to investigate students' perceptions about note taking clearly and deeply, three subcategories were constructed: perceptions of note taking (eight items), perceptions of causes that make note taking difficult (four items), and perceptions of note-taking skill instruction (three items). Almost all the participants exhibited very positive opinions on almost all the items except one. They felt note taking was a very important academic skill and should be taught in school. However, one exception was the item: *Note taking helps me concentrate on the listening*. This item functioned differently from the others. More than half the students (57%) thought they were not able to concentrate on listening because of note taking.

The results of the second subcategory about perceptions showed that approximately 80% of participants felt listening speed made note taking difficult. Even though it seemed slightly higher than other factors, such as the length or difficulty level of the listening, the differences among the three were not significant, calculated using Friedman's ANOVA for nonparametric data analysis (χ^2 (2) = .40, $p > .05$). However, when the item *Anxiety about spelling makes note taking difficult* was included in the analysis, the test statistics showed significant differences (χ^2 (3) = 9.16, $p < .05$) and Wilcoxon Test, as a post hoc test, showed anxiety of spelling had less impact as a cause of note taking difficulty compared to the other three items.

The third category of perceptions was instruction, and there were two nominal response categories: *agree* or *disagree*. A one-tailed binominal test was conducted on two items: *I feel my note-taking skill improved after this class* and *This class changed my outlook*

on note taking. The observed proportion for both items, .87 for agree and .13 for disagree, differed significantly ($p < .01$).

Research Question 4

There were seven items regarding expectations of note-taking skill instruction in class (see Table 1). Students' expectations were high. A Freidman test was conducted to evaluate the differences in the items. The test was significant, χ^2 (6, 47) = 58.34, $p < .001$, and the Kendall coefficient of concordance of .21 indicated fairly strong differences among the items. Follow-up pairwise comparisons were conducted using a Wilcoxon test. Item 36 was significantly different from all the others ($p < .05$). Item 37 differed significantly from all the other items ($p < .01$).

Table 1: Expectations of Note-Taking Skill Instruction in Class (*N* = 47)

Item	Agree	Disagree	Mean
31. I wanted to have more practice time	33 (70%)	14 (30%)	4.09
32. I wanted to learn more abbreviations	30 (64%)	17 (36%)	3.89
33. I wanted to learn more symbols	30 (64%)	17 (36%)	3.91
34. I wanted the teacher to show more model notes	38 (81%)	9 (19%)	4.40
35. I wanted the teacher to correct my notes more	41 (87%)	6 (13%)	4.57
36. I wanted to have more advice on my notes	45 (96%)	2 (4%)	4.83
37. I wanted to discuss note taking with classmates	22 (47%)	25 (53%)	3.53

Note. Responses on a 6-point Likert scale: 6 = *strongly agree*, 5 = *agree,* 4 = *somewhat agree*, 3 = *somewhat disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 1 = *strongly disagree*.

Conclusion

This study found that even among highly motivated and advanced high school English learners, only a small number had experienced note-taking instruction. The note-taking styles they employed appeared to be passive because most of them only wrote what the teacher wrote on the board or said in class. The results for perceptions of note taking showed that the learners recognized the importance of note taking and felt that it should be taught in high school. Most of them appreciated receiving note-taking instruction in class and felt that their skills improved as a result of instruction. Participants wanted more interaction with the instructor rather than just learning information. The interaction they wanted to have was not with their classmates but with their teacher. Specifically, they would prefer individual instruction from the teacher to check to see if they took accurate and sufficient notes. This is something that teachers should keep in mind as part of the note-taking instruction they provide to their learners.

Future Considerations for Note Taking in EFL Teaching

Joseph Siegel

The data and findings presented in the previous sections help to shed light on the current situations related to and the potential need for further teaching of note taking at the high school and tertiary contexts in Japan. In an effort to stimulate additional research avenues and pedagogic concepts, in this final section I will propose and reflect on various aspects of note taking and related instruction that, if addressed, would benefit the field.

The first point that needs to be considered is adoption of a commonly accepted definition of note taking. From a pedagogic perspective, it is important to be able to outline and specify a target for teaching and learning. In other words, such a common understanding would help teachers know what to teach and would aid learners in identifying the precise skills, abilities, and competencies that they need to acquire. Over the years, researchers in the field of EFL have increasingly been able to explicitly detail various language skills by identifying necessary subskills and components. For example, in writing, one begins with letters, which combine into words, which form sentences, paragraphs, and essays. Each of these components can receive explicit, targeted attention in EFL classrooms. Conversation analysis has allowed researchers to establish and label various patterns in spoken interaction, which again can be directly taught in classrooms. However, note taking has not received the same type of scrutiny and remains somewhat of a catchall term. That is, the individual substages of this very complex and multifaceted process have not been explicitly identified. Until they are, teachers and learners may be left wondering what exactly it is that they need to teach and learn. Siegel's (2015) pedagogic plan for EFL note-taking instruction has presented preliminary ideas about teaching decision-making processes (about what, when, and how) for note taking, but more research involving control and experimental groups is needed to determine the effectiveness of different approaches to note-taking instruction.

A second issue relates to the current state of classroom practice for note taking. Much of this may be tied to textbooks that either feature or include listening and note-taking activities. Teachers may also use authentic or semiauthentic audio and video material and instruct students to "take notes" or "write key words." However, the use of this type

of activity seems to assume that learners already have adequate note-taking skills and merely need opportunities to practice them. Through practice, the thinking may be, note-taking skills will develop naturally without explicit guidance. Yet, in an educational situation, one typically receives some instruction or guidance first, followed by scaffolded learning. Only then is a student considered ready for autonomous practice.

EFL teachers who include note taking in their classrooms may wish to consider the amount of teaching, learning, and practicing of note taking that they are facilitating. Judging from commercially available textbooks and reports from teachers, an abundance of practicing seems to be currently happening. The teaching and learning of note taking, in contrast, may be less prevalent. This issue also relates to the first point made above: If the substages that contribute to note taking can be stressed, this could help focus classroom activities on teaching and learning earlier, which could subsequently lead to autonomous practice.

A further issue with note-taking materials relates to textbook content. It would be an arduous task for any teacher to create listening and note-taking materials for one semester, let alone an entire academic year. As such, commercial options provide both in relatively convenient formats. However, some textbook content may have drawbacks when it comes to note taking. For instance, many books cover concepts like abbreviations, with which students are likely already familiar. Coursebooks also include activities that indicate learners can listen multiple times to the same dialogue or lecture, which is normally not possible in the real world. Furthermore, one of the biggest drawbacks exhibited by note-taking textbooks is the inclusion of "gap-fill" exercises that only appear to be note-taking practice. Often, these include a word-choice box and a handwritten outline of notes. Learners are expected to listen and fill in gaps in the notes with words from the word-choice box. What this practice overlooks is the fact that, when taking notes, it is the listener or note taker who needs to decide what information is important enough to record in writing. In an exercise like the one described, this crucial decision-making opportunity is withheld from the note taker. A final point related to textbook content is that, in ordinary life, people only record notes about things they view as important or about previously unknown information. As such, the act of note taking is closely tied to a person's background knowledge, life experience, and personal preferences about information organization. When a textbook directs students to take notes on certain information, it may be overlooking these considerations for how notes are recorded in the course of everyday life.

Beyond these considerations, several avenues for future research concerning note taking are worth exploring. One is whether learners should be forced to take notes in a second language. If one listens and comprehends the second language, but prefers to record notes in the first language, should EFL teachers object? A second avenue is the role of electronic recording devices in information storage. If students can either record audio or video of speech in order to listen later or take photos of presentation slides or the chalkboard, do they really need to spend time learning how to take notes? Finally, what role does multimodal presentation of information play in note taking? Do slides help or hinder note takers? With answers to questions like these, both teachers and students will be better informed to address and advance teaching and learning in academic settings.

Bio Data

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