Notetaking in ELT: A Focus on Simplification

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In order to take efficient notes during English for academic purposes (EAP) lectures, students might need to be challenged to move beyond verbatim recording of information. This article describes an innovative approach to notetaking in EAP courses, the Teaching Cycle for Simplification, with a specific focus on simplification strategies used in Swedish high school second language EAP courses. The specific strategies introduced and practiced included word substitution, abbreviation, and the use of symbols and pictures. The article describes the pedagogic steps used in the classroom and shares samples of student work as well as student reactions to the approach.

アカデミック英語(EAP)講義中に効率的なノートをとるために生徒は情報の逐語的な記録以外のことをしなければならなくなる。そこで本稿はEAPコースにおけるノートテーキングに関する革新的指導、特にスウェーデンの高等学校の第二言語EAPコースにおいて使用された簡略化ストラテジーについて論じる。教室内で指導、練習を行なった具体的なストラテジーとして、単語の置換、略語、記号、および絵の使用があげられる。本稿では教室で行われた指導の手順、生徒のノート例、および生徒の反応について述べる。

Research has shown that notetaking enhances active learning, engages students when they are listening, and stimulates recall of information (e.g., Kobayashi, 2006). In Japan, interest in second language (L2) notetaking has been increasing in recent years to help learners succeed in EFL classes, as more and more universities in Japan have begun to offer courses with English as the medium of instruction (EMI). In addition, many Japanese universities offer study abroad preparation and/or academic skills courses that prepare L2 English users for matriculation into university courses abroad taught in English. Notetaking is also beneficial on a range of English proficiency tests which incorporate integrated skills sections that require test takers to listen to a lecture segment, take notes, and then use those notes to write a summary or response (e.g., IELTS, TOEFL). Therefore, many EAP programs offer courses aimed at improving notetaking abilities that students will need for future academic learning.

However, listening to and following a lecture in an L2 can prove to be an arduous undertaking. Listeners might face challenges related to vocabulary, accent, digressions, rate of speech, and cultural references (Sheppard et al., 2015). Moreover, features of naturally spoken output such as false starts, redundancies, and repetitions can be confusing for L2 listeners (Flowerdew & Miller, 1997). Students listening to lectures given in their L2 need strategies that can help them to comprehend lecture content, take notes efficiently and effectively, and continue to scan rapidly incoming input for the next piece of potentially important information.

To help learners gain these skills, previous research suggests that notetaking should be taught explicitly and that notetaking instruction can lead to positive results (Crawford, 2016). Studies that have focused on first language (L1) notetaking (Kiewra, Benton, Kim, Risch, & Christensen, 1995) and L2 notetaking (Siegel, 2016) have demonstrated that students struggle to record appropriate information without specific guidance. Furthermore, explicit notetaking instruction and training has been shown to have positive effects on student performance (Crawford, 2016).

Recently, notetaking strategies and instruction has been used in Sweden, where explicit notetaking instruction is mandated by the government's Ministry of Education (*Skolverket*). For example, in high school English classes, students must learn "different ways of commenting on and taking notes when listening to and reading communications from different sources" (Skolverket, 2011, p. 8). Teachers are also required to instruct students on "strategies to take in and structure information" (p. 11), a statement that implies notetaking.

Therefore, this paper presents a series of techniques used in Sweden that might provide teachers in Japan with explicit classroom practices to help improve students' cognitive processing and efficiency when taking notes during EAP lectures. A number of previous studies have focused on the effects of semester-long training in notetaking but have sometimes not included detailed descriptions of the instructional practices used. This article describes a focused two-week instructional period and provides a step-by-step description of the classroom procedures which were used. The approach described below took place with students in two Swedish high

school classes over two weeks. The students took notes in simplified form while listening to authentic lecture material (*TED Talks*). Rather than taking notes verbatim, students were asked to record the desired information in simpler ways than those the speaker used to deliver it. These simplified forms included abbreviations, pictures, and synonyms. The simplifying practice was part of a larger 10-week pedagogic sequence covering multiple aspects of the notetaking procedure, which also involved teaching notetaking strategies such as chunking information into manageable units, assigning importance to information (i.e., prioritizing the relevance), and understanding common lecture structures (see Siegel, 2018, for a comprehensive description of the 10-week pedagogic sequence).

A Need for Simplifying Strategies

The purpose for simple notetaking is for notetakers to process and record aural input to free up mental and physical resources for comprehending incoming speech. As a notetaker hears something important, they need to decide whether to record the information by writing verbatim what the speaker said or altering that information in some way (e.g., Kiewra et al., 1991). In addition to dealing with the speed and variety of L2 speech forms, simplifying the input into shorter and/or easier words, symbols, and/or pictures can help offset potential difficulties caused by limited handwriting speed, which can also negatively affect the amount of information recorded in notes (Peverly et al., 2012).

The following simplification strategies can help notetakers to record more information and help them to demonstrate that they have processed and reproduced information. These strategies include the use of word substitution (e.g., *sad* for *devastated*), abbreviation (e.g., *sit* for *situation*), symbols (e.g., = for *equal*), and pictures (e.g., drawing a square to mean *magazine*). Combinations are also possible, such as word substitution and abbreviation (e.g., *bad sit* for *horrible situation*). Any of these approaches, or a combination thereof, can decrease demand on cognitive resources and save listeners strokes of the pen.

The Teaching Cycle for Simplification

The teaching cycle consists of three stages: a warm up stage to introduce the notion of simplifying notes to students and to draw on their existing vocabulary and strategies; a transition stage where students retroactively apply simplification strategies; and a real-time stage where students try to use

simplification strategies while listening. I developed the Teaching Cycle for Simplification in 2017 to help high school teachers in Sweden teach simplification strategies for notetaking to their students. The procedure draws on the three-stage approach of skill acquisition theory, in which a student gradually learns a skill from a teacher or expert (DeKeyser, 2007).

Context

This procedure was used in two English classes in the Fall of 2017 at a high school (upper secondary school) in central Sweden. The class included 49 first-year high school students. The teacher designated 30 minutes of class time once a week for two weeks for the simplifying activities. Each week, the students worked with a different *TED Talk* video in conjunction with the simplifying activity sequence.

Warm Up

The teacher introduced the simplifying activity by saying a word aloud, and students wrote down and then discussed possible ways to simplify it (e.g., *horrible* was simplified as *bad*, *difficult* was reduced to *hard*, etc). The teacher then extended this concept to phrases and utterances. For example, "felt extremely depressed after failing the history examination" was simplified as "was sad about bad grade." In pairs, students discussed their choices and which ones were more or less time consuming and required greater effort. The warm-up stage was meant to encourage learners to focus on writing efficiently and quickly when taking notes (e.g., to not merely write what they heard verbatim).

At this stage, the teacher focused on guiding students to make increasingly more efficient and appropriate choices for simplification. For instance, if a student were to hear *horrible* and write *terrible*, the essence of the word would be recorded but the length of the word and the time spent writing it would be essentially the same. Thus, a more efficient choice would be *bad* or *v. bad* (v. = very). It is important for learners to be aware of the time-saving aspect of this activity and the need to search for ways to save, not increase, pen strokes. In some cases, a key item (e.g., a proper name or technical term) should probably be written in its original form and not simplified because the act of simplifying such a piece of information could make recall more difficult later, particularly if it is the first time the name or term is heard. The teacher also can provide feedback as to which words should be recorded verbatim and which should be simplified.

Transition Phase

This phase began with students listening to short excerpts from the *TED Talks* that were 30 seconds to one minute in length. Students listened and took notes of key words and concepts verbatim. Next, they worked individually to modify their notes by using the simplification strategies suggested by the teacher (the use of word substitutions, abbreviation, symbols, and/or pictures). During this phase they went back through their notes, looking for places where they could integrate the strategies and use them in the future. This phase was meant to stimulate learners' awareness of how they might record notes in simple ways and provided a less intensive and scaffolded stage in which students could apply the simplification strategies on short bursts of language without intense time constraints.

Real-Time Phase

Students listened to slightly longer segments (one-to-two minutes), writing verbatim notes when necessary but also trying to write notes in simplified forms. This phase was meant to challenge students to apply the simplification strategies quickly, as often as possible, and for a sustained period of time. The aim of this phase was to help learners to develop cognitive endurance for listening to an authentic lecture and to take notes efficiently.

The following figures illustrate the ways that some students simplified content from one of the *TED Talks* used in class on the topic of space exploration (Shields, 2015). Selected utterances from the transcripts of the *TED Talks* are also provided so that the relationship between the original utterances and the student notes can be understood. The specific information from the *TED Talk* noted by students is represented in the notes in italics.
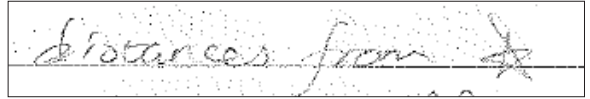
Sample Figures A-E

A Samples
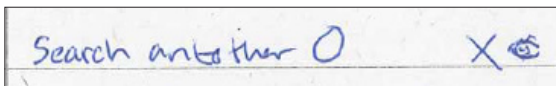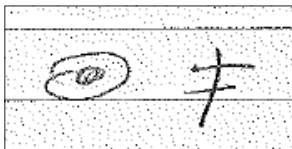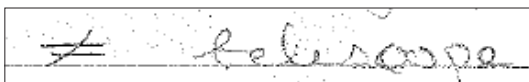
Transcript:

I am in *search of another planet* in the universe where life exists. *I can't see this planet with my naked eyes* or *even with the most powerful telescopes* we currently possess.
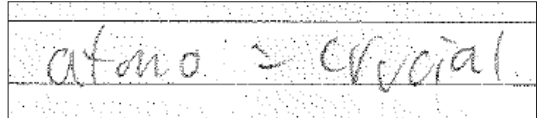
B Sample

Transcript:

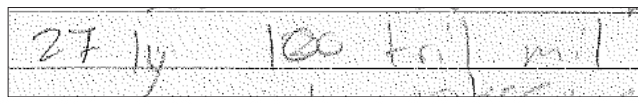So we look for planets that orbit at just the right *distance from their stars*.

C Sample

Transcript:

From these lessons from our own solar system, we've learned that a planet's *atmosphere is crucial* to its climate and potential to host life.
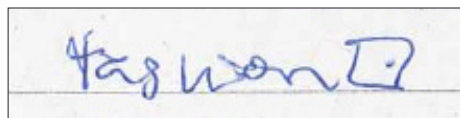
D Sample

Transcript:

It's 23* *light years* away. So that's more than *100 trillion miles*.

(*Note: The student recorded "27" in their notes, but the speaker said "23.")

E Sample

Transcript:

I'm an African-American female astronomer and a classically trained actor who loves to wear makeup and *read fashion magazines.*

Following the 10-week pedagogic intervention sequence, the 49 students responded to a survey. According to the results, the simplifying activity:

- helped them understand what notetaking is (82% strongly or somewhat agreed);
- helped improve their notetaking ability (69%);
- will positively impact their notetaking in the future (76%).

Although these survey results indicate that students recognized that simplifying strategies as potentially beneficial, notetaking is a highly individual activity. Notes are meaningful to the person taking them, and as long as notetakers can stimulate recall using their notes, it is difficult to prescribe precisely how they should do so. Furthermore, it is possible that some of the students involved in the intervention were already using simplifying strategies with which they were familiar. If that was the case, then some parts of this process might have been redundant. Regardless, given the challenges of taking notes while listening to an authentic lecture in one's L2, it is beneficial for learners to have several strategies at their disposal. Following this intervention, students were aware of and had practiced a variety of options for simplifying notes that they could use at their discretion.

Reflections and Future Directions

I have described a process to help students to record information in simple ways that conserve time and cognitive energy. Based on the student surveys and samples of student work demonstrating the simplification strategies, the approach seems to have generally benefitted them. This claim is tentative, however, because no pre-post test design was used to establish the effectiveness of the general protocol. In addition, not all students consistently used the simplifying techniques as often as they could have, nor is simplification always appropriate or optimal. Furthermore, it is unrealistic to expect students to use simplification at all times, as even proficient English users sometimes take notes verbatim depending on circumstances. Finally, it is important to note that only 69% of the participants in this study reported that the techniques helped them to improve their abilities, leaving some 30% unsure of how effective this approach was. This might have been because this project did not include a test of usefulness of the simplification activities.

It is difficult to determine exactly which pieces of information should be recorded in a simplified form or verbatim, and teachers might wish to offer suggestions. For example, technical terms, definitions, and quotations that are particularly well-worded might be more valuable in verbatim form rather than recorded with a simplification strategy. To emphasize this point, teachers could familiarize learners with certain phrases (e.g., "Now this is very important..." or "This is a key point...") that could signal that verbatim recording might be preferable to paraphrasing.

Furthermore, the instruction in this study involved several simplification strategies. It is not clear which of these strategies was used most frequently. Still, it is likely beneficial for students to be aware of and practice a range of simplification techniques so that they can select how and when to use them. In future studies, teachers might consider whether the strategies should be introduced in a specific order. Finally, aspects of pedagogic sequencing might be affected by learners' individual preferences, proficiency, age, and/or cultural background, along with other factors.

Based on the initial use of this sequence of activities, future iterations could be improved in several ways. First, more careful choices about which *TED Talk* videos and which segments are used in conjunction with the simplifying strategies should be made. In this first attempt, the content of the segments was overlooked, and one improvement would be to choose segments that lend themselves to specific strategies. A good candidate is a *TED Talk* presentation given by the President of Mauritius, because she uses several technical terms and lengthy explanations (Gurib-Fakim, 2014). Another improvement would be to select several samples of student work to display to the class. A plenary discussion could then follow, where students and the teacher discuss how the same information could be recorded using different strategies. Students could also, for example, rank the different simplification options based on how efficient they believe each one is.

Conclusion

Notetaking will likely always be an important part of EAP and IEP courses that expose students to authentic lecture input. The approach described here is intended to help stimulate more thought for the development of scaffolded pedagogic techniques that can help L2 students learn how to take notes effectively.

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