A STUDY OF SECOND-YEAR ENGLISH MAJORED STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF FACTORS AFFECTING NOTE-TAKING SKILLS IN LISTENING LESSONS AT A PUBLIC UNIVERSITY IN HANOI, VIETNAM

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***Abstracts**: Note-taking skills have been proven to be a useful skill in many contexts. However, there remained the understudied factors affecting the note-taking process for L2 language learners during the listening lectures. This study aimed at investigating the perceptions of L2 language learners at a Vietnamese tertiary institution of the factors affecting note-taking skills. This study used both survey questionnaires and interviews to explore students' perceptions and insights from their note-taking practices. The findings highlighted inhibiting factors such as the listening speed, lack of background knowledge and insufficient listening comprehension skills. In the end, the study pointed out some recommendations to address these challenges.*

***Key words:** note-taking, listening skills, L2 language learners, listening competence*

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I. INTRODUCTION

English is used increasingly in the countries of expanding circles, according to the model of Kachru. This has led to a larger number of students studying English, at varying levels of education. In under-graduate studies, students either study them as a major or as a medium of instruction.

The teaching and learning of note-taking skill is an important component of these programs due to their various impacts like recalling lecture contents, to prepare for their tests (Carrell, 2007; Dunkel et al., 1989), or to improve attention and avoid distractions (Siegel, 2020; Williams & Eggert, 2002). Realizing the notable impacts of note-taking, learners take notes in different forms, like the conventional way of using pen and paper, or by technological devices. In the context of Teaching English as a foreign language in Vietnam, many institutions adopt listening and note-taking skill as a mandatory component of the course. It is observed that students often have difficulties taking notes while listening. Some notable challenges include: not being able to note down words properly, or unable to understand what they have noted down or understand the content of the recording as a whole. It is, therefore, important that the researcher conduct a study to explore students' perceptions of the benefits and difficulties of note-taking skills while listening.

This study aimed to answer three research questions:

- What are the students' perceived benefits of note-taking skills?
- What are the students' perceived usage of note-taking strategies?
- What are the students' reported frequencies of using note-taking strategies?
- What are the factors affecting students' note-taking process?

The study was conducted on a group of students at English Department of a public university in Hanoi Vietnam to explore their perception regarding these above aspects of note-taking skills. It is expected to provide insight into students' uses and challenges when applying note-taking in listening process.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Note-taking

Note-taking in second language (L2) is defined as the action of noting down the "short condensations of source material that are generated by writing them down while simultaneously listening, studying, or observing" (Piolat et al., 2005, p. 292). Similarly, Zhang (2012) defined note-taking as writing down key points, important information, an outline or a summary of information in the task. Boch and Piolat (2005) in their work also emphasized the rapid speed at which notes are taken. In the context of this study, the condensation of texts can take several forms, from the most common one – words, to pictures, abbreviations (both commonly accepted ways or the note-takers' creations), and symbols (Siegel, 2020).

The act of taking notes consists of several stages, rather than being just one fluid task from beginning to end. These stages include: listening attentively for information, filtering whether or not the information is worth taking notes of, using systematized abbreviations or symbols to

record information, and finally organizing them in a comprehensible and logical manner. These stages happen recursively, in a time-constraint environment, the act of taking notes of one idea happens "simultaneously or near-simultaneously" while writing down the previous idea, the note-taker has to listen closely and prepare to continue the next steps (Siegel, 2020).

2.2. Note-taking strategies

Taking notes is a complex set of tasks that cannot be simply conceived as copying verbatim from what the note-takers heard. Being able to take effective notes, therefore, requires multiple strategies

2.2.1. Cognitive strategies

Listening while taking notes simultaneously is a cognitive-demanding activity, as note-takers are constrained by the lecture's rate of speech, at about 0.2 to 0.3 words per second while the average speaking speed is about 2 to 3 words per second (Piolat et al., 2005). They have to maintain an "active representation" of the content that they are listening to use it for transcription. With no delay, the note-takers also have to continuously update the new information being orally transmitted to them at the time they are recording the content.

Apart from the continual tasks happening in rapid succession, taking notes also requires a good working memory. There are differences in the quantity and quality of notes depending on the working memory skills of the note-takers (Kiewra, 1989). While taking notes, students are, therefore, required to pay attention to the listening audio, identifying which words are content words, and which are functions words, so that they can take concise notes. To have more effective notes, note-takers also have to recognize when there are unconnected words, and to distinguish between main points and supporting details for each point.

2.2.2. Meta-cognitive strategies

Metacognition in the note-taking context includes the following skills, as reported by Siegel (2020): planning, monitoring, and reflecting on the interaction with language. The planning step happens before the actual taking notes. Planning involves the background knowledge of the note-taker about the topic of the lecture or the format or style of the lecture. Moreover, the options of recording and tools are also carefully and strategically chosen in this stage. The monitoring of comprehension and efficacy of the currently employed note-taking method allows the note-taker to cast a vote for the method the next time they take notes or to change to a different one if the current approach does not generate sufficient results. Even though not having enough time to do this, given the nature of listening and note-taking is the constraint in time and the rapid succession of tasks, the meta-cognitive skill of monitoring plays an important role. When one is finished with the note-taking, the reflection of comprehension and the note-taking performance starts. Note-takers can identify the areas that need improving, areas that are their strengths as well as the approaches to enhance their performance in the succeeding times.

2.2.3. Resource management strategies

Resource management strategies, according to Kasalak and Dağyar (2020), enable students to regulate their own learning environment. As reported in Siegel (2020) and Carrell (2007), some strategies that help students to manage their cognition resources include time management, study environment, regulation of effort, or help seeking strategy. While taking notes and after taking notes, students should decide whether or not to record everything said, to review their notes, to summarize, organize, or recopy notes after lectures, etc. The above activities all require students to consider whether it is worth their cognition effort.

2.3. Factors affecting note-taking skils

Note-taking is a multifaced skill, involving many different sub-skills; hence, it is a difficult skill to master. There are several influencing factors to the note-taking process, which can be categorized into – individual factors, the quality of the speakers' or of the recordings, and contextual factors (Siegel, 2022)

2.3.1. Individual factors

According to Siegel (2022), there are two primary personal factors dictating note quality: topic interest and note-taker's self-evaluation and language fluency. First, the higher interest in a topic can boost students' motivation and attention. However, if one has bene familiar with a topic already, this can adversely affect their notes. Secondly, the perceived listening comprehension is critical. In second-language (L2) contexts, a lack of language proficiency can hinder rapid transcription. Students write fewer words and fewer abbreviations in L2 than in their

native language (L1), failing to convert their existing linguistic competence into L2 (Barbier et al., 2006). Ultimately, listening comprehension directly correlates with overall note-taking capacity (Carrell, 2007; Song, 2011).

Another personal factor that affects note-quality is a consistent system of abbreviating, shortening or symbolizing words. Without one, students easily forget the meaning associated with their writings (İpek, 2018), and it can severely impact the outcome of notes (Al-Musalli, 2015).

The listening proficiency of note-takers also affects how they prioritize and categorize information by importance. Disoriented students often struggle with this threshold, either recording insufficient data or cluttering their notes with unnecessary words (İpek, 2018). Unlike reading, which allows self-pacing and features explicit structural cues like headings, live listening offers no opportunity to revisit content and also does not have obvious indicators. Furthermore, spoken discourse is inherently messy, featuring hesitations, redundancies, and digressions that place a heavy strain on a student's ability to isolate main ideas (Boch, 1999; Flowerdew & Miller, 1997; Boch & Piolat, 2005).

2.3.2. Contextual factors

Factors like rate of speech, volume of speech, etc. greatly impact the outcome of the note-taking process. In this study, the speaker factors will be understood as pre-recorded audios and the simulated lectures, as used in actual classes of participants.

When the speaking rate is too fast, it is challenging to parse the flow of speech into meaningful chunks (Siegel, 2022). According to Goh (2000), one of the main challenges for L2 listening comprehension is linking what students hear with the meaning of the words. Often, they cannot immediately connect the perceived sounds with their meaning. Combined with the fast speed, students' comprehension is heavily affected. Additionally, once the speaker speaks faster than the students can comprehend, the amount of information will accumulate and leads to a cognitive overload (Siegel, 2022). This may lead to students skipping valuable contents while struggling between different continuous tasks of the note-taking process.

Another speakers' factor is the speakers' accent. According to Major et al. (2002), the accentedness of speakers can negatively affect the comprehension of students and the familiarity with a certain accent, preferably the accent of speakers from their own language, facilitates the listening comprehension of students. Therefore, if the note-takers are familiar with certain accents, it will facilitate them to take notes much more efficiently.

One of the contextual factors that will be discussed in this study is the instruction from teachers. Many schools or universities do not teach this skill explicitly or have little or no formal instruction for their students (Boch & Piolat, 2005; Siegel, 2019). Often the teachers simply just command the students to "take notes" without realizing this is actually a series of skills and that without breaking down into smaller subskills and steps, it would be nearly impossible for students to have a good note. The ability to take good notes depends a lot on the amount of instruction they receive from their teachers. In the study of Dunkel and Davy (1989), the two researchers indicated that since international students to the US reported to have difficulties in taking notes, they should receive more instructions regarding this area. Students are often perplexed by the strategies they need to employ, like the organizational hierarchy, the key words or content words identification, strategies to shorten words (abbreviating, truncating, etc.). Moreover, some did not receive formal instructions in previous studying level of secondary or high school. Therefore, when entering university, students are not equal in note-taking experience.

Results from Dunkel and Davy (1989) also showed that students wished to have more time and chances to train essential note-taking strategies such as organization, efficiency (meaning to abbreviate, truncate, symbolize, paraphrase, or omit not necessary words), or even neat handwriting (Murakami, 2014).

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research design

This research is going to be conducted with a mixed method approach, following the model of explanatory sequential mixed method design which is among the core mixed method designs as proposed by Creswell and Creswell (2017). The explanatory sequential mixed method design involves a two-phase procedure, with the first phase being the quantitative data collection, analysis, result presentation, and the second phase being the

qualitative phase. The idea behind this design is the qualitative data helps explain the quantitative data in the first stage. Typically, in a procedure of explanatory sequential design, the qualitative data collection, analysis, and result presentation is followed by the quantitative interviews for the purpose of explaining any confusions in the qualitative part (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

The rationale for choosing the explanatory sequential mixed method design is that the quantitative and the following data analysis offer an overall understanding of the research problem. Furthermore, the qualitative data and the subsequent analysis are expected to help give an explanation to the statistical results by exploring the participants' views in more detail (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). With the current research on exploring students' perceptions of listening and note-taking skills, this research design is expected to provide a different perspective in this area of research, as most of the previous studies applied mostly quantitative research designs. The explanatory sequential mixed method design also has the benefits of straightforwardness and providing opportunities for exploration of the quantitative data in more depth, which is especially helpful when there are unexpected results arise from the first phase of quantitative data (Morse, 1991)

3.2. Research setting

The context of this research is in classes of the English language department at a language training institution in Vietnam. Students here are trained in two orientations, to be future interpreters or teachers. For the particular job of being an interpreter which involves shorthand note-taking and also for other lines of jobs, practicing note-taking while listening is believed to offer hints for note-takers to recall the content and structure of the delivered speech (Naseri, 2017). Given its importance, the note-taking lessons taught at this department are integrated in the Listening block which comprises 8 credits in total of 32 credits in the two years of foundation training in language skills. The note-taking tests are taken as a midterm test before students take the final test, which focuses on overall listening comprehension skills.

The research was conducted on a group of about 2 classes with approximately 60 second-year students. These students are in the second term in which note-taking is taught in the curriculum. Students have already been instructed some basic note-taking strategies in course books like Listening and Note-taking skills and contemporary topics, both as official course books and reference books. Their instructors also take recorded lectures for them to practice taking notes from many authentic sources, namely TED talks or other medium-length speeches available on the Internet.

3.3. Data collection

For the two stages of the research, the researcher used the survey questionnaire for the first phase, and interviews for the second phase. The questionnaire used in this study is adapted from the questionnaires used in two studies by Carrell (2007) on "Note-taking strategies and their relationship to performance on Listening comprehension and Communicative Assessment Tasks", and Siegel (2020) about note-taking from L2 students' perspective. After conducting the survey, a group of volunteers was invited to participate in a further interview to collect their opinions regarding the usefulness of taking notes, the perception of using note-taking strategies as well as the difficulties they encounter while taking notes in a more comprehensive manner. Finally, quantitative data sourced from the students' responses to questionnaires were examined using SPSS to ascertain general statistical insights and the data derived from the second phase of the research – interviews were analyzed with a thematic analysis approach, using the steps as described in Braun and Clarke (2013).

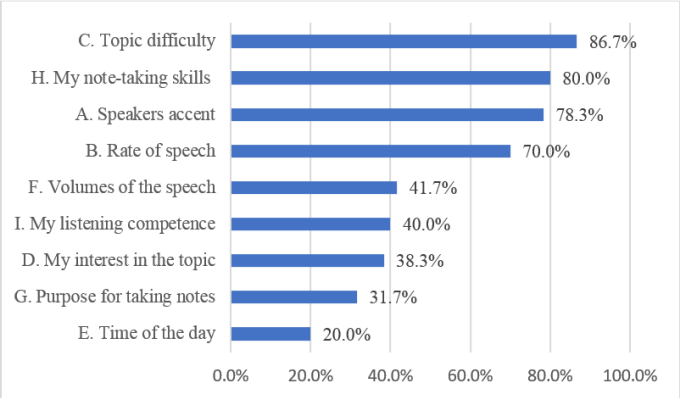
IV. FINDINGS

4.1. Findings from quantitative data

The last section of the questionnaire aimed at exploring students' perception of factors that affect their note-taking. According to the report, the factor that most students viewed as a challenge for them while taking notes is the topic difficulty, accounting for 86.7% of all the respondents. Topic difficulty is followed by students' own note-taking skills (80%) and the speakers' accents (78.3%). The rate of the speech is another factor that ranks among the highest, with 70% of the respondents agreed as a challenge. The rest of the items mentioned received (E,F,G,I) were all lower than 50% of the total participants' agreement.

In the open question that followed, asking for further issues that students consider as affecting factors, there are many listed. Some of the most prominent ones include: lack of lexical resources, short attention span, the surrounding environment (distracting noises), speed of writing and background knowledge.

Figure 1. Factors affecting students' note-taking



4.2. Findings from qualitative data

4.2.1. Personal factors

Subthemes: writing speed, familiarity with the topic, listening comprehension ability

The analysis from the interviews of volunteered students shows that note-taking was a difficult skill for students for the reasons that it requires students to write quickly, using a multitude of sub-skill for fast transcription of words they previously listened to or the summary of general understanding of the lecture. If not able to quickly note down those, students are easily lost, not knowing which main point they were listening to, hence lose track of the lecture's organization or flow of content organization.

My writing speed is not as fast as the audio's speaking speed, so if I miss information when taking notes, I tend to be very confused. (Student 1)

Once I have missed the information, it seems impossible for me to guess what the next point would be. Therefore, I would say having a fast writing speed is more critical than knowing how to identify main ideas from supporting ideas. (Student 4)

Personal factors seemed to cause certain difficulties for students in comprehending the lectures. One of the factors mentioned by the interviewees was their familiarity with the topic. Students confided that they have a more limited repertoire of academic words or theme vocabulary in relation to the topic of the lecture. Often the topics that are regarded as "difficult" or "not familiar" are ones related to different disciplines of science. Some examples mentioned include Biology (genetics), Anthropology, Linguistics, etc. On the other hand, topics that have been mentioned on repeat at lower levels of linguistic competency like Work, Study, or Music were more popular among the interviewees.

Among the topics that I have listened to in class, I would say Media was easy enough for me to take notes while Anthropology was quite difficult. In general, any lectures that discuss a deeper aspect of theories or conceptions are of great difficulty for me. (Student 3)

The listening comprehension ability is also a defining factor in the completion and the notes' intelligibility. Students shared that the elision of sounds and words with pronunciation they cannot associate with words have created challenges for them in understanding the text before taking notes. These features of speech can also slow them down as the students are not at an automated level of transferring sounds to words or symbols.

Linguistic factors have some influence. That is, sometimes the audios are British or American accent. There will be some types of swallowing sounds or omitting sounds. Sometimes we can't hear the swallowing sound or can't hear that sound connection. (Student 2)

4.2.2. Contextual factors

Sub-themes: audio speed, speaking rate, lecture length, speaker accents

Contextual factors have been reported by students, specifically interviewees, to be affecting factors to their note taking. In detail, all student interviewees regarded audio speed as a hindering factor. This is because the audio speed predetermined the amount of notes taken down.

If the speaker speaks slowly, then I have time to take proper notes and the notes will be clearer and more complete. If the speaker speaks faster, the notes part will be less effective. (Student 1)

This perspective is also shared among other interviewees, often regarding that the fast speed

of the audio recording has caused them many difficulties in following the lecture.

When the speed of the audio is fast, I tend to be under a lot of pressure to catch all the information. And once under pressure, I am underperformed. If I miss certain information and leave a gap there, when coming back to that part, I have to imagine the content that may fit in that gap. This is sometimes impossible for me. (Student 2)

Sometimes I feel like the lecture speed is too fast. When I am not warmed up enough my hands are still stiff, and so is my brain. I am not able to catch up with the speed of the lecture or even comprehend the lecture totally for a better note of the lecture (Student 3)

A student interviewee had a different perspective when it comes to speaking rate. She stated that some higher-speed lecture forces her to pay a higher level of attention than slower ones.

I found myself sometimes still managed to have time to wander in different thoughts while listening to a lecture that is slower in speed. The faster ones tend to keep me focused more. I also feel that other students sitting around me had the same opinion. (Student 4)

The other element that the interviewees considered as a hinder is the lecture length. As reported by the participants, if the lecture is longer than 10 to 15 minutes, and also depending on the speaking rate, it may become a hassle for students to listen to. Some parts become confusing since students do not have a sustained concentration until the end of the lecture.

Actually, the length of the lecture considered to be too long or not is also related to the topic of the lecture. With difficult topics for me, such as about different ancient civilizations, I can only focus until the 5th or 6th minute, however, with easier topics like the one we listened to recently, about the workforce, I can listen nearly to the end. (Student 1)

Another student sseems to have a different viewpoint, explaining that if the speaker has a consistent speaking rate, then there is not a significant difference between a 15-minute lecture and a 25-minute one.

For me, taking more notes for a longer lecture does not make me feel tired or affected mentally or physically. It's like when you are already in a flow, it just happens effortlessly. (Student 3)

Accents also contribute to difficulties in the note-taking process of students. With all four students reported to face challenges when they have to listen to accents that they are not familiar with (namely Irish, Indian, or British). The different features of speech in each type of accent make it more difficult to associate sounds with words, take longer to note down words, and slow down the whole process. Some of the features mentioned include: sound elision, ending sound, word stress.

V. IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1. Implications and recommendations

The findings suggest that note-taking should be explicitly taught in EFL classes because it enhances memory, comprehension, organization of lecture content, and concentration (Mueller & Oppenheimer, 2014; Polio, 2006).

When teaching note-taking, instructors should use listening materials that gradually increase in difficulty. Beginners should work with slower speech, familiar accents, and common topics before progressing to faster speech, less familiar accents, and more complex topics. Supplementary classroom materials should follow the same progression to ensure consistency in topic and difficulty.

The study also found that students face challenges in applying note-taking strategies such as indentation, bullet points, symbols, and abbreviations. Although these techniques improve efficiency, insufficient practice often limits their effective use. Therefore, teachers should provide more systematic and targeted practice to help students develop these strategies.

5.2. Limitations of the study

One of the limitations of the current study is the small sample size of respondents to the questionnaire (N=55). Therefore, the generalizability of the study should be approached with caution. The small sample size can only represent a section of the population rather than the whole department of research interest. Further studies, hence, are recommended to have a larger sample to get a more accurate representation.

Another limitation of the study lies in the fact that due to the lack of resources, no correlation between students' perceptions and their actual performance is presented. A more collated study would bring more intriguing results to the knowledge pool. Action research that can keep record of students' improvement over time

using the suggested strategies is another possible direction for future studies.

VI. CONCLUSION

In the context of knowledge growing exponentially over time and human's attention level becoming more limited, the ability to listen and take notes continues to be regarded as more and more critical. The act of teaching and learning this skill in EFL classes is highly encouraged and should be invested more resources to be more effective.

Being acknowledged of the challenges students face while learning this skill helps both instructors and learners to be aware of the situation and to strive for approaches of enhancing this skill. If applied and given proper attention, this skill would generate more benefits for learners.

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