Improving ESL Students' Note-taking Skills
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Although recent advances in technology mean that course content is delivered in a wider range of modes and media than a few years ago, note-taking remains an important skill for the college-bound student. The professorial lecture is still an important vehicle for disseminating content in many courses. As instructors expand, simplify, and explain course-related topics, students' note taking skills are essential for identifying and retaining the insights and concepts being presented. And whether formal lectures are a feature of a course or not, most instructors provide important information, discuss course requirements, give instructions, and modify assignments in spontaneous, informal, unscripted remarks during class. It is the students' responsibility to somehow capture this information—to take effective notes. Taking good notes can also improve students' listening and writing skills and help reinforce, prioritize, and rephrase information in a personal way contributing to better long-term comprehension.

The note-taking skills needed to succeed in an English medium college or university level course can present cultural as well as linguistic challenges for the second language learner. For example, in settings where course content is mostly delivered from professor to students, taking notes frequently means copying the professor's words from the blackboard into a notebook to be read later. This practice is unlikely to be sufficient or effective in most English-medium lectures.

The three suggestions described below can help address both the linguistic and cultural aspects of academic note-taking skills in your ESL or EFL students.

Suggestion 1: Customizing Input

In addition to the recorded lectures that accompany many course books, it is easier now than ever to customize aural input to meet the specific needs and interests of a particular group of students. Many teachers have been making their own video recordings of televised shows and excerpts of actual lectures for a number of years, but if you teach in a classroom equipped with computer or Internet access, or if you have access to a mini video recorder, you can do much more to create effective customized materials to give your students meaningful practice in improving note-taking skills. For example, you can ask colleagues, who teach courses of general interest or utility to your ESL students, to present live mini lectures in your class or to video record a five-to-ten minute excerpt from one of their lectures that you can use again and again. Other sources of viable excerpted lectures are television or Internet broadcasts of current topics of

interest such as news, sports, or documentaries. *YouTube* is an obvious potential source of appealing, short, authentic material packaged in classroom-ready chunks. Finally you can encourage your students to suggest topics, search Internet video libraries, or even videotape their own material that they would like to study, share, and understand. Giving them this opportunity or responsibility often helps them buy into the process and get more out of an activity than when it is the teacher's choice alone. As an example, one group of my students requested a mini lecture on questions related to the state motor-vehicle licensing examination.

Suggestion 2: Showing, Not Just Telling

With technology like smart boards or data projectors in many classrooms, you can show your students how an efficient note-taker works. Instead of simply *telling* them to use abbreviations, focus on the main ideas, and ignore the minor details, you can *show* them how to do this. You can also discuss why you chose to include or underscore some information in your notes and to ignore other information. In other words, students can hear and see what is in the mind of a fluent speaker as you write and discuss your notes. A variation on this idea is to take notes on a computer at the same time that your students are listening and taking notes but with your projector turned off. After hearing the lecture, students can interact in small peer groups, compare notes, and discuss among themselves which information, facts, or concepts were key points in the lecture. Individual students may volunteer to share their notes with the entire class. Finally, you can reveal your notes and use them to provide feedback and address additional points of concern as needed.

Suggestion 3: Using Teachable Moments to Discuss Note-taking

Note-taking practice need not always be part of a formal lecture-like activity. At other points during your lesson, soon after presenting new information, you can call on students to read their notes aloud to the class. Such immediate, on-the-spot attention to essential information can help students see how note-taking strategies can be applied in contexts other than formal lectures. It can also help you monitor student comprehension of classroom discourse and identify words, phrases, or concepts that may require further explanation. Finally, pausing over such teachable moments can help you evaluate the overall effectiveness of your lesson.

Incorporating these suggestions in your ESL class can make a difference in students' note taking skills as well as enhance their listening, speaking, and comprehension skills. As always, there are caveats. For example, you must be mindful of topics or content that could create social or cultural discomfort for some of your students. Thus, it is important to preview materials before using them in class. Another reason to preview materials is to ensure that they are at an appropriate level of comprehensibility for your students. Finally, be sure to educate yourself about rules governing the use of copyrighted material and broadcasts.

About the Author

Dr. Emilio G. Cortez received a doctoral degree from Temple University. He retired after thirty years of teaching ESL in the Philadelphia School District. Dr. Cortez served on the TESL Reporter *Editorial Review Board and several of his articles have appeared in past issues of the journal.*