

Lecture Note Taking Driving License: An Effective Programme for Arab University Students

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Abstract

This paper aims to draw teachers' attention to the need to revisit the theories behind the practices of teaching Note Taking (NT) in lectures to Arab university students. It attempts to present an effective approach to teaching note taking that mimics the concept behind the European/International Computer Driving License which provides complete training and a literacy qualification to ensure the successful use of information and communication technology in the workplace. The Lecture Note Taking Driving License is an intensive programme based on a collection of pedagogical advice from the literature concerning proper measures in teaching note taking in lectures. It provides students with the tools they need to take notes within two weeks after joining their universities. The programme has been developed for and tested on Omani students at Sultan Qaboos University in the Sultanate on Oman; it may well fit other Arab learners when instruction in a target language is provided to new university students.

Keywords: Taking Notes in Lectures, Teaching Note Taking, Effective Teaching, Lecture Note Taking for Arab University Students, New Approach to Teaching Study Skills.

Introduction

30 years ago, Broome (1982: 72) made an observation about training in NT at schools that is strikingly still true of what is happening today in many institutions all over the world. He states that in ideal situations, although knowledge about different note taking techniques is introduced to students at school, many school students experience only a limited form of NT; thus, taking notes from dictation or from the board are the most common methods to most high school graduates. This is why many students find the transition to the active role of making their own notes at the university difficult.

Instruction in NT is important for university students because, Drew and Bingham (2001: 33) state, the type and amount of information at university is complex and needs to be looked at more critically than at school, which makes taking accurate and brief notes from such material challenging to even L1 learners. This gives emphasis to the scope of the problem for those learning through L2, who face bigger and more urgent problems. For example, students who study English as a school subject, in which they might not be completely proficient, face the problems of dealing with the language as a medium of instruction at the university.

Teaching NT skills to L2 students is important to help them develop into autonomous learners, who can fully depend on themselves. This can not be achieved through a surface approach to learning which are the causes of formal teaching methods. What learners need is a deep approach which is facilitated when teaching is less formal, such as in discussion and when students feel more independent from their teachers. Hence, teaching NT skills can be taught more effectively through a deep approach. The questions are: how much instruction do L2 students need in NT to make them independent and effective note takers? And more importantly, how much time do students need to become autonomous learners? Can teaching students effective NT be done in a few weeks or must it take longer time and put a big strain on the curriculum?

The Lecture Note Taking Driving License programme suggested in this paper, which follows the concept of the European/International Computer Driving License, will attempt to answer some of these questions. The fundamental theory behind this programme provides intensive tailor-made training in NT skills at the initial stages of the students' transition from school to university rather than following the more common prolonged training using commercial NT and study skills books developed for a more general audience, which in most cases are useful for teachers more than students.

Note Taking and Study Skills Courses

Most of the books about or including NT are pedagogical in nature. Such didactic books provide insights into the teaching of NT and how to take notes. Basically, all these books concentrate on NT as a study skill which is developed in a scientific and gradual manner and in many cases by the learners themselves. One of the most effective models for teaching NT is proposed by Kennedy and Bolitho (1984: 92-93) who suggest the following three stages for NT courses:

- Stage 1: At this stage, NT involves the practice and checking of comprehension skills. The type and level of material presented to the learners may differ according to their purpose and level of understanding. As for the development of the material, it is graded

from word level to sentence level to paragraph level and then to larger texts until they are able to deal with short lectures.

- Stage 2: At this stage, a number of NT strategies and techniques are introduced. To start with, techniques of simplifying language can be practiced, for example, using abbreviations, numbers, and symbols, omitting verb to be and articles, etc. Learners can also be trained to look for and make lists of main and supplementary points. Tables and diagrams should be encouraged as a means to note down information. Learners should also be trained to relate NT to a purpose, i.e. take notes with a purpose. They should learn what to take down and leave out and develop their personal strategies and abbreviations.
- Stage 3: At this stage, learners read back their notes and expand them, making sure they serve their purpose and are clear and unambiguous. This 'feedback system' is important to pinpoint problem areas and evaluate the NT methods used.

The above stages is an ideal way of looking at the steps needed in NT training; therefore, we will attempt to present the quick-fix that the Lecture Note Taking Driving License programme presents in line with these stages, supporting each step with literature.

As for the duration of the proposed programme, the training takes the maximum of two weeks, which is considerably shorter than most NT programmes that use commercial NT and study skills books. The reliance on short-duration training is supported through research done by Al-Musalli (2008) who gave a sample of L2 students moving from school to university education an intensive tailor-made two-hour workshop on lecture NT techniques and tips. After the workshop, a dramatic change in students NT techniques as well as the quality of the information units written down from a live lecture was observed as compared to a control group that was not given the workshop. Students who received training were given the means and freedom to go beyond taking outline notes which were the prevailing form practiced in their course books. This supports the effectiveness of a quick-fix rather than a prolonged course using ineffective books or others written for different target audience.

Lecture Note Taking Driving License Programme Components

Before discussing the three stages in this proposed programme, it is important to discuss where and on whom it was tested. This programme was developed at Sultan Qaboos University for students making the transition from high school to university education. The students were all Omani Arab learners at the Language Center, who were involved in different English foundation courses before joining their colleges at the university, where the language of instruction is English. The programme was tested in the academic year of 2010-2011 on three groups of students in the first two weeks of a listening/speaking course, during which taped lectures provided with the course textbook were used to practice listening and NT. The students had had very little or no instruction in NT at school. Instead of following the course book which gave practice in one technique of NT, i.e. outline notes, the students were given specific information about NT and introduced to different NT techniques which they were given freedom to use and combine after practicing them with the teacher.

The focal aspect of the Lecture Note Taking Driving License is the teacher's involvement in developing the learners' NT skills in a quick fashion with emphasis on learners' autonomy. The teacher's role is not traditional. Instead of simply lecturing on NT and how to take effective notes, the teacher is involved in the actual writing and shaping of notes through providing

demonstrations on how to take notes. Such demonstrations involve: (a) sharing and discussing sets of ready made notes on the topic of the lecture with the students, (b) taking notes with the students from a recorded lecture on the board, and (c) taking notes from a recorded lecture on the board while the students are busy taking notes and discussing the different notes.

The common advantages of these three activities are: to give students examples of how notes on the same material can look and stress certain points in the material that they might have not picked. The advantage of the latter two activities is to show students that NT requires a lot of effort and imagination. All three activities are recommended in this programme, but the activity that provides the most benefit to students is the last one. When the teacher takes notes while the students are writing down their own notes, the students are asked not to look at the teacher's notes but focus on taking their own notes. After taking notes, students first look at their notes for a minute to complete them, then swap compare notes, and later compare their notes with the teacher's notes on the board.

The teacher's involvement in the process goes beyond merely training the students; it requires a more active approach to giving NT advice, an approach that shows the teacher's NT skills through which students learn to improve theirs. But before this active involvement in teaching NT skills, the teacher should first help students tune into their lectures by developing their listening skills as will be discussed below.

Stage 1: developing lecture listening skills

Introducing the difference between lessons and lectures is the most important step in the process of teaching lecture NT, for it sets the basis on which students build what they learn about how to listen and take notes in lectures. Also, aspects such as lecture duration and lecturing styles are of priority in the minds of the newcomers; hence, a general open discussion of these issues is favorable in the very first meeting with the students. L2 students, who might not have had much instruction in most school subjects in English, may manifest a lower linguistic ability than those who have had more contact with the target language. Therefore, teachers would have to deal with these needs by introducing these students to university lectures on a lower level than their more advanced colleagues.

An ideal way to introduce university lectures is through short demonstration lectures. Heaton (1975:19) states, it is useful to practice identifying salient points in short lectures or talks by distinguishing the relevant point from the irrelevant or less relevant points. Practice in picking out such points helps in developing students' ability to listen and tune into lectures. Wallace (1980: 30-31) states that weak students can be helped in picking out important points by allowing them to read the transcript of the lectures as they listen to the first reading, then they could take notes during the second reading. Teachers can also give students practice in listening for main and subordinate points by discussing a few points before they listen to the text (see also McIlroy, 2003: 28). Adkins and McKean (1983: vi-vii) suggest allowing students to listen to important sections of the lecture more than once. Teachers' support can also include practice in the recognition of structural items and discourse markers. Students should be made to realize the structure of the paragraph as a unit of meaning in order to improve their understanding of the material they deal with more effectively. Also, students need to know why they need to take notes to help them filter the information they listen to (Kennedy and Bolitho, 1984: 92-93; and

Tabberer, 1987: 10). Therefore, in the first stage of teaching lecture NT, students should be familiarized with the parts of a lecture and how to listen to each part effectively to write down what will serve their NT purpose.

Stage 2: introducing note taking techniques

There are different types of NT techniques that students should be introduced to in order to help them make use of the first stage and write down good notes. Good NT involves ‘listening, comprehending, and writing during the lecture’ (Salimbene, 1985: 82) which save time and promote learning since ‘Learning is a product of effective note taking’ (see also Turner, 2002: 56-57). Badger et al. (2001: 412) report students defining ‘good notes’ as tidy, legible, and include the important points of the lecture. Many NT and study skills books provide information on these techniques and advice students to devise their own, suitable for their way of thinking and studying.

Heaton (1975: 24), Martin et al. (1977: 205-206), Barrass (1984: 45), Palmer and Pope (1984: 78), Howe (1986: 80; 83), Casey (1993: 43), Fairbairn and Winch (1996: 28), Chambers and Northedge (1997: 59; 84-85) and Turner (2002: 62) all assert that there is no one best way to take notes in any given situation. Students who attend the same lecture take different notes for they select different points and arrange them in different ways. ‘Good note-taking combines the recording of useful information with alert thinking’ (Palmer and Pope, 1984: 87) explain; therefore, students should be advised to liberate themselves to use the NT techniques which are lively and amusing. “Making notes is more a ‘strategy’ than a skill” (Chambers and Northedge, 1997: 59) argue. It requires flexibility and creativity on the part of the note taker. They (ibid: 84-85) add that NT not only depends on the purpose of attending the lectures and the kind lectures they are but also the way the student learns best. If the student needs to write a lot of notes to reduce his anxiety and stay alert, then this is the right approach for him (see also Marshall and Rowland, 1998: 155).

Mace (1968: 49-50) and Heaton (1975: 108-109) state that when attending lectures, students do either one of the following three NT activities: at one extreme, one gives complete attention to grasping what is said without taking any notes, at the other extreme, one writes down every word that is said, and the intermediate method is to note down only the important information. Some of these methods are recommended more than others depending on two main factors. Barrass (1984: 49) and Rowntree (1988: 129-130) state that the NT purpose that students have in mind decides the amount and type of notes they should make (See also Heaton, 1975: 108; and Drew and Bingham, 2001: 35).

From the above, we understand that students should be made aware of the fact that the way notes are written in lectures depends on why they are taken as well as the source from which they are taken. In addition, students need to be advised to use the technique that works for them; they can devise whatever format they find suitable by improving on what is generally used. Rowntree (1988: 132-133) states that although there are only three ways to take notes, NT techniques can be combined in several ways. For example, a note taker may draw a diagram and add explanations to it. Thus, teachers should stress that there is no perfect way to take notes, for as long as the notes achieve the purpose for which they were written down, these notes are good.

One of the most important arguments to support the active involvement of teachers in students' notes suggested in the proposed programme in this paper is given by Wallace (1980). He (ibid: 31) states that introducing NT techniques is best achieved through presenting modals of these techniques. Such modals, however, should not be presented as the only correct way of presenting the information. He suggests that for any NT practice, it is very useful for the students to watch the teacher build up model notes on the board of OHP while a tape recorder is playing the tape a second time. They would use these notes to improve their own notes already taken in the first reading (ibid: 41). Hamblin (1981: 88) agrees adding that students should discuss what they find useful in the model notes and are encouraged to modify or improve them as they think best. The following is an account of the three most common NT techniques found in the literature that should be introduced to students as models and practiced in any NT course:

Outline Notes Nearly all the available advice about NT asks students not to take down too many notes by concentrating on the essentials. This is why we chose to begin the discussion of NT techniques with outline notes which is the method most recommended in the literature. Heaton (1975: 108-109), and Howe (1986: 82) assert that this technique is the most satisfactory method to take selective notes of what is important and reflect on the relationship between the different ideas expressed in lectures. Carman and Adams (1972: 31) call this technique 'logical outline' arguing that it is a powerful tool for thinking, for the analysis it involves to discover the organization of the material helps note takers arrange the material in a logical form, making learning faster and remembering easier.

In addition to taking detailed outline notes, students should also be introduced and trained in 'skeleton' outlines. Palmer and Pope (1984: 78) call skeleton outline notes 'key word noting', arguing that this technique is best explained with the metaphor that considers a text a living body that has a basic structure similar to a skeleton with its main points resembling the vital organs. In order to focus on the central words or phrases, the skeleton and the major organs must be isolated. The advantage of this technique is that it saves time and provides quick access to the material. It can also, they (ibid: 85) add, promote both knowledge and confidence if the note taker stays alert, thinks while he takes notes, and does not attempt to learn everything right away. However, the problem in NT from lectures using the skeleton technique is that key words are not easy to isolate, so the note taker may end up writing too many notes (See also Rowntree, 1988: 137).

Whether students are interested in detailed or skeleton notes, proper indentation of the ideas noted down is an important element that they need be trained on as it helps them group ideas under headings and sub-headings hierarchically into levels (Heaton, 1975: 24; and Salimbene, 1985: 98). Students should not be forced to use one outline form rather than the other but trained on both equally and given the tools to select the right technique for them or combining different techniques together.

Linear Notes While note takers are selective in outline notes, they write everything down they hear in linear notes. In linear notes, or 'sequential notes', as Barrass (1984: 47) calls them, students need to record not only the main points and as much as possible of the details, but to record them in the exact order in which the lecturer puts them. Maddox (1963: 101-102) states that only students who can catch up with the lecturers' speed of delivery can take such notes, but they usually make these notes 'as a kind of safety measure' when they have a problem understanding the lecture fully and discriminating between the essential and the redundant.

The fact that students need to be quick writers to be able to make linear notes is a disadvantage of these notes. Making these notes allows students little time to think and select; hence, it does not allow critical interest in lectures. Revision can also be difficult since it is hard to organize pages of details. The note taker can also panic when he misses things (Burns and Sinfield, 2003: 124-125). Turner (2002: 58) adds that linear notes are not as creative and easily memorable as mind maps, which are associated with right brain functions. In spite of the many disadvantages of this type of notes, training students to use it and discussing its advantages and disadvantages can help shape the students' understanding of what technique suits them in lectures and give them freedom to rely on any technique they choose even if it as selective-free as linear notes.

Pattern Notes Another NT technique that teachers should introduce and encourage is pattern notes. These notes are brief words and phrases used instead of full sentences to write down the essential key point of the material; thus, it is similar to skeleton outline notes but with a different format or layout. This NT technique goes by various names one of which is 'branching', for the result looks somewhat like a tree diagram. Other known terms for it are: 'spray-diagrams', 'mind maps' or 'spider diagrams' (Chambers and Northedge, 1997: 57). Turner (2002: 58) prefers to use the last term, for the result to him looks like a spider, and Marshall and Rowland (1998: 154) use the term 'explosion charts', but we have chosen to call them 'pattern notes' to acknowledge Buzan's effort to advocate them.

Buzan (1974) devised this technique to take notes from both lectures and books. It is a creative pattern in which the main idea in the form of a word or phrase is put in the center of the page; then, related facts, also in single words and phrases, are placed around it. These sub-points are connected to the main idea by lines that show their relationships; the more important ideas are placed nearer to the main idea in the center of the page (Parsons, 1976: 38 & Howe, 1986: 85).

Turner (2002: 21-22) states that mind maps can help integrate different ideas on one topic together. Marshall and Rowland (1998: 155) report Buzan's (1974) advantages of these notes over the linear notes. First, the relative importance of the ideas in the notes are more clearly defined. Second, the links between the main concepts are easily recognizable which makes recall and review more effective and quick. Third, the structure of the notes allows additions of new information without having to scratch out or squeeze in information. And finally, each pattern looks different from the other which aids recall. Parsons (1976: 39) adds that these notes are quicker to write and read because of the use of words and phrases, and students can save paper for the notes are brief (See also Casey, 1993: 40-42). Burns and Sinfield (2003: 128-129) stress the active and interactive feature of pattern notes arguing that the practice of selecting the essence of what is said and arranging it in a pattern keeps the note taker 'actively engaged' with the information being noted which ultimately facilitates learning.

Stage 3: critiquing notes

The final stage that teachers should focus on in NT training is involving students in a review, comparison and a discussion of their notes. Revision is best started in class. Wallace (1980: 36-39) advises teachers to check students' notes in class and allow them to check or improve them while they listen to a taped version of the lecture. But more revision can be done after lectures. Mace (1968: 51), Langan (1989: 248), Drew and Bingham (2001: 45), Casey (1993: 39),

Marshall and Rowland (1998: 158), and McIlroy (2003: 30) express the urgency of reviewing notes 'as soon as possible' after lectures while the information and ideas are still fresh in the learners' minds to improve the notes as well as learn the information better.

Williams and Eggert (2002: 177) state that one of the most important characteristics of effective notes is the clarity of the relationship between the main and minor ideas; thus, a good test of the effectiveness of a set of notes is whether or not a person who is unfamiliar with them can easily follow the links between the ideas. Therefore, comparing notes is another way to improve them. When notes are improved through comparing, students are advised to clarify them by making a distinction between main and sub-points, adding more information which they remember but did not write down during the lecture, adding comments and examples, filling in details, or restating ideas (Langan, 1989: 248; and Casey, 1993: 39).

After reviewing and studying their notes, Drew and Bingham (2001: 33-34) state, students should be able to: evaluate the effectiveness of their NT styles to improve the way they take notes, identify their purpose of taking notes and how it influences the type of notes they take, and check and improve the clarity of their notes. Although this is generally the responsibility of the learners' themselves, teachers can start such review and discussion of NT techniques in class and ask the learners to finalize their decisions and reflections afterwards.

Recommendations and Conclusion

When L2 students start their university education, they are expected to have had some training in NT at school to enable them to deal with the type and amount of information in university lectures. However, when little or no such training is provided and when the language of instruction at the university is different than that at school, teachers can teach NT skills effectively through the aspects of the programme suggested in this paper by:

1. providing an intensive tailor-made training that fits their students' needs rather than depending on commercial books developed for a more general audience. This training would have to depend on the results of needs analysis and material development rather than a religious use of a commercial NT and study skills course book written for a wide audience.
2. training students to tune into and listen to lectures as a basis to teach NT skills rather than as an aim in itself since comprehension is a sub-skill of NT. During this training, teachers can help students practice filtering material and listening for a purpose.
3. explaining the usefulness of notes as a means of comprehending as well as recording information and discussing the purposes of taking notes.
4. presenting and practicing the three main NT techniques available in the literature and discussing the advantages and disadvantages of each. This would give teachers and students the opportunity to move away from the more restricted forms of NT presented in NT and study skills books, i.e. outline notes.
5. providing demonstration model notes using the three main types of NT techniques and a combination of them through: sharing notes with the students, taking notes from a recorded lecture on the board with the students, and/or taking notes on the board while students take notes, all of which can help students understand the process of NT and learn through their teachers' skills. This requires a lot of preparation from the teachers and confidence in their own NT skills.

6. helping students review their NT strategies and discussing the strengths and weaknesses of their notes. The teachers' involvement here is crucial as students might skip this step and not reflect on the way they are reproducing the lectures when they are asked to review their strategies on their own.

In conclusion, although NT and study skills books are crucial, a complete dependence on them can provide limited benefits if teachers do not take the students' needs and backgrounds into account and tailor the training they provide accordingly. The Lecture Note Taking Driving License programme presented in this paper, which is based on some of the major theories on best practices in teaching NT, provides teachers with an example of such tailoring. However, this programme is only effective if teachers are willing to play an active role by being model note takers through practicing and experimenting with NT skills with students.

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